

Gender Unplugged in the SA Executive Boardroom

The Paradigm Shift

The research sets out to understand why, despite the fact that the laws have changed and access to equal opportunities are available, there are not more women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa. The representation of women in the public sector, in general, is an indicator of a significant paradigm shift over the last decade—however, there is little to no evidence of the same level of commitment and transformation in the corporate sector at the highest levels. Our qualitative research indicates that it is not appropriate to think of any one theoretical approach in isolation and sheds light on the challenges facing women in executive positions in South Africa, and expands the empowerment, glass ceiling, queen bee and sacrifice dialogue.

The empowerment of executive women is a complex issue that is not only gaining attention globally, but is of particular relevance

in South Africa given that the Employment Equity Act 1988 has provided a platform from which access to opportunities in the workplace has been

tipped in favor of previously disadvantaged individuals. Companies are under pressure to meet EE quotas (Booyesen, 2007b). No longer can the advancement of women to executive positions be seen as an option, it is a requirement.

On the one hand, there is evidence (BWA, 2007) indicating a continued, albeit nominal, increase in the number of women holding executive positions on JSE-listed companies. Executive positions are defined as: Senior Managers, Directorships, Board Members and CEOs. These figures indicate that companies are moving at a consistently steady pace. However, it would be expected that, by now, businesses (with women in 19.2% of executive management positions of JSE-listed companies) would be gaining ground on the efforts being made by the government, e.g., over 30% of all Parliamentary seats are held by women, the majority being Black women (Myakayaka-Manzini, 2002).

On the other hand, the force resistant to change, is pushing back. Career-orientated women, who have the desire for executive leadership, are still finding themselves battling to the top through an entrenched patriarchal minefield. Conventional wisdom suggests that “barriers to entry”, at different levels and in various guises, are preventing women from taking up leadership positions in greater numbers (Thompson, 2006). However, the fact that a number of women have made it all the way to the top, i.e., 6.6% of CEO positions and Board Chairs are held by women (BWA, 2007:16), suggests that barriers are surmountable.



Research Questions

Previous research on the interventionist approach toward employment equity in Canada (Gunderson, 1994a; 1994b), where the emphasis was more proactively on the equality of outcomes as opposed to the UK's equality of opportunity and level playing field approach (Webb, 1997), has shown that countries employing interventionist approaches reap better rewards in terms of facilitating women's career progress. Bearing in mind South Africa's interventionist strategy by way of legal intent and imperative, it struck us as odd that transformation has not been swifter. We therefore sought to research the following question: "Why are there not more women in executive positions in corporate South Africa?" It occurred to us that two possible explanations might exist, which also influenced our research focus:

- Formal national policy and formalization of procedures within organizations are not guarantees of their implementation (Liff, 1989) as they can be evaded by neglect or design (Collinson et al., 1990), and even when implemented are no guarantee of substantive change because other structural and cultural factors act as barriers (Gitlow, 1992). In fact, barriers such as a traditionally patriarchal society, the glass ceiling and the queen bee syndrome are in play, thus preventing more women from reaching "the top". Previous research in both Canada (Burke, 1994) and the UK (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003; Maddock & Parkin, 1994) has highlighted the detrimental effects of attitudinal and cultural barriers such as negative stereotypes and old boys networking for women's careers. The assumption behind our hypothesis is that the same is true in South Africa, and all businesswomen want to take up executive positions and are not able to do so because "barriers to entry" are preventing them from doing so. Alternatively,
- The barriers to entry serve as stumbling blocks that hinder the progress of women to executive



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positions, but they are surmountable. The fact that a number of women have made it to “the top” is an indication of momentum possibility. However, the “extreme price” and “extreme demands” (Hewlett, 2007) that accompanies an executive corporate career in South Africa is too high and most women are not willing to “pay the price”, nor are they prepared to invest the time and effort in establishing the necessary connectedness from informal networking with powerful others. The assumption underlying the null hypothesis is that, the women who are prepared to “pay the price” and develop appropriate informal networks (Cannings & Montmarquette, 1991) for executive honor (Hewlett, 2007) are the few ones (Nelson & Burke, 2000) who “go all the way”.

Literature Review

Empowerment

Underlying the principles of equal opportunity is empowerment. A perfect correlation exists between leadership and empowerment, with Badaracco (2006) claiming that one cannot lead unless sufficiently empowered. Empowerment, as a concept though, is contested (Shetty, in Kabeer, 1994), however Muiruri-Mwagiry (2006:7) asserts that “it is rooted in the notion of power and its reverse, powerlessness or the abuse of power”. Empowerment has a different meaning for each person, but essentially “being empowered” can be defined as having “knowledge, income and decision-making power” (Karl, 1994:10). It is apparent that the two dimensions that make empowerment possible are: “the right to” and “being able to”.

Gender Empowerment

In the past, political, economic and social restrictions have hampered the advancement of women to leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Now, as restrictions are being lifted, women are able to fulfil both the capacity and desire for leadership. Despite the fact

Exhibit I						
Increase in Number of Executive Positions held by Women, 2004-07						
Year	Executive Managers	% Increase	Directors	% Increase	CEO's and Board Chairs	% Increase
2007	19.2%	13.97%	13.1%	13.91%	6.6%	3.12%
2006	16.85%	9.06%	11.50%	7.38%	6.40%	1.59%
2005	15.45%	5.10%	10.71%	50.85%	6.30%	
2004	14.70%		7.10%			

Source: Businesswoman's Association Census 2007

that women either have to, or want to work, they are still underrepresented in the workplace. Women represent 51.0% of the South African population, but only hold 42.9% of all jobs (BWA, 2007:16) and higher up “women corporate leaders are a minority in a minority” (Thompson, 2006:15). Women hold 19.2% of executive management positions, 13.1% of directorships and only 6.6% of CEO positions and board chairs (BWA, 2007:16). Since 2004, there has been a steady percentage increase in the number of women holding executive positions (Exhibit I).

In stark contrast, the government's commitment to gender transformation is clearly evident when considering that over 30% of Parliamentary seats are held by women (Pile, 2004a). Two of the reasons cited for the increase in

the number of women appointed to the government are that women, particularly Black women, have been actively engaged in the liberation struggle for decades and, secondly, that affirmative action policies are having a positive effect (Myakayaka-Manzini, 2002:1). Niven Postma, ex-CEO BWASA, asserts that while there is a focus on changing the balance of power, “it's all eyes on racial transformation, and gender transformation is a bit of a poor relation” and that as a result, “where women are being advanced, it's because of regulatory requirements and not because it is seen as a competitive advantage” (Pile, 2004a:2). However, although change is happening at a measured pace, the fact is that organizations are beginning to capture elements of a progressive societal change.



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leadership that is being called for is more collaborate, she believes that women have at their disposal an innate cache of skills and abilities that will enable organizations to make the transition from what has traditionally been a patriarchal paradigm. As a woman in business, Sam is dedicated to the advancement of women and intends to continue to write, research and publish on the issue. She can be reached at sam@iafrica.com

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Challenges

Equal opportunities in organizations suggest to women that “there’s room at the top” (Cockburn, 1991:46) and is supposed to mean “breaking down the barriers that prevent the horizontal movement by women into non-traditional jobs, removing those barriers that confine women to the meanest jobs and prevent their vertical progress to different levels and locations in the hierarchy”. Research (Thompson, 2006; BWA, 2006, BWA, 2007; van der Boom, 2003) suggests a host of stumbling blocks to the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership:

➤ **Education**

The need to enhance personal attributes, such as education or management skills, as a way to attain equality and enhance career progress is, according to Simpson *et al.* (2004), rooted in liberal feminist assumptions. The entry to equal opportunities in leadership begins with access to education by raising awareness through gender reflective curricula (Muiruri-Mwagiry, 2006), competence-stepping skills (Burke & McKeen, 1994) and right-qualification acquisition (Still, 1992)—a person-centred approach which, when buttressed by a commitment to equal opportunities in the workplace, i.e., a corporate practices approach (Simpson *et al.*, 2004), will lead to career progress enhancement of women. Although it was beyond the scope of the research to explore the dynamics of “access to education in South Africa”, it is apparent that without embarking on an appropriate person-centred approach, access to an executive career is not even going to get out the starting blocks and/or women will stay locked in traditional organizational roles. This is in line with Simpson, Sturges, Woods & Altman’s (2004) suggestion that women in the UK may lack certain key skills or have inappropriate educational backgrounds.

➤ **Societal Perceptions**

In a recent Accenture study, US and UK executive women felt that the greatest entrenched barriers to entry they

face are from society at large—e.g., that women are not cut out for executive management (Adkins, 2006), the perception that women in the New South Africa have more opportunities, therefore more economic power, available to them than their male counterparts do (Booyesen, 2007a), and the perception by others that women have been appointed to executive positions as part of affirmative action initiatives, as opposed to qualifications (Cummings, 2004). Additionally, the timing and patterns of career path expectations, and therefore the assumptions about an “ideal worker” within an organization, can have a differential impact on men and women. According to Williams (2000), the predominant view of the “ideal worker” is someone who enters a career immediately upon attaining the appropriate credentials, and then works his/her way up the corporate ladder, with no career interruptions and making substantial time commitments to the organization—leaving their familial contributions to be primarily financial. When this becomes the “accepted norm/ideal” in the organization, it has important implications for women who aspire to executive roles. In South Africa, many women take breaks in their careers, work reduced hours, or otherwise contribute large amounts of time to caring for children and responding to family needs—they often do this mid-career, at precisely the time when the ideal worker is climbing the career ladder. Such breaks can prevent women as being seen as “ideal workers” and candidates for top positions.

➤ **Glass Ceiling**

Even though there is an increasing number of women who have entered the workplace, Stelter (2002) claims that the vast majority of top leadership positions throughout the world are held by men, while others (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Oakley, 2000; Black & Rothman, 1998) assert that even though women are entering management positions in increasing numbers, access to senior leadership positions remain limited. The glass ceiling constitutes for many (Weyer, 2007; Ridgeway, 2001; Carli & Eagly, 2001) an invisible barrier for

women, preventing them from moving up the corporate ladder. Mavin (2000 in van der Boom, 2003:132) describes it as, “the frustrations of working women at every level who can see where they want to go but find themselves blocked by an invisible barrier”. Oakley (2000) lists three categories to explain the barriers that result in a glass ceiling:

1. Corporate practices such as recruitment, retention and promotion,
2. Behavioural and cultural causes such as stereotyping and preferred leadership style, and
3. Structural and cultural explanations rooted in feminist theory.

Some (Townsend, 1997: 6), though, argue that “obstacles to women’s advancement are not intentional”, while Lueptow *et al* (2001) claim three theories account for gender-related behavior in organizations and the subsequent creation of the glass ceiling:

1. Biological explanations, resulting from psychological predispositions (Wood & Eagly, 2002)
2. Socialization explanations linking gender identity and differences with life-stage developmental processes, e.g., schooling and work life (Bartol *et al.*, 2003) or young women treated as high-flyers and agendered in the early part of their careers (Simpson & Altman, 2000), and
3. Social and cultural structures, systems and roles that channel gender differences into stable patterns due to discrepancies in status and power (Deaux & Major, 1987).

➤ **Queen Bee Syndrome**

Solidarity theory (Korabik & Abbondanza, 2004; Mavin, 2006) would have us believe that women view, and have expectations of, other women as their natural allies regardless of hierarchical differences, and that senior women should take a personal responsibility for the self-confidence and interpersonal concerns of other women through mentoring and role modelling (Okurame, 2007; Rains & Cotton, 1999; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003) and modify organizational policies for advancing more feminine and acceptable behaviors for future senior roles

Exhibit II: Full List of Respondents

Code	Name	Company/Organization	Position
P 1	Lize Booysen (Prof.)	UNISA SBL	Professor
P 2	Michelle Buthelezi	Businesswoman's Association	Ex-COO
P 3	Wendy Graaf	Piggs Peak Online	Marketing Manager
P 4	Roz Sandham	MacDonalds	Director
P 5	Melissa Steyn	UCT	Associate Professor
P 6	Sue Clague	iSoft	Director
P 7	Nicolette Jacobs	PricewaterhouseCoopers	Senior Manager
P 8	Alan Maguire	Consultant	Consultant
P 9	Caroline Engelke	Metropolitan Holdings	Executive GM HR & Training
P 10	Michael Cerfontyne	Human Alchemy	Consultant
P 11	Colin Hall	Learning to Lead	CEO
P 12	Steve Roberts	Val Spar	Manager
P 13	Brian Finch	BAT South Africa	Director
P 14	Daniel Malatji	Moyo Spier	General Manager
P 15	Fay Kajee	BAT South Africa	Director
P 16	Mandi Dicks	Microgen	Marketing Manager
P 17	Anneline Rhoda	Old Mutual	Manager
P 18	Greta Henley	Private	Entrepreneur
P 19	Mert Black	Deutsche Securities	Director
P 20	Anet Ahern	Sanlam Multi-Manager	CEO
P 21	Gail Daniel	Investec	Portfolio Manager
P 22	Mo Kajee	Sekunjalo Investments	CFO

(McKeen & Burke, 2003). There are, however, tensions in the way that women perceive senior women in management and the expectations they hold of them (Abramson, 1975), demonstrated by the contradictions of solidarity behavior versus the queen bee syndrome—first proposed by Staines, Tavis & Hayagrante (1973), who identified an attitude exhibited by executive women who were reluctant to risk their own careers by promoting other women. The queen bee can also be described as an executive woman who is “unhelpful to other women, partly because of a desire to remain unique in an organization” (Davidson & Cooper, 1992:110). It would seem that this syndrome is most prevalent where access to opportunities is limited, thus being driven by a fear of competition (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). In acknowledgement of previous research on negative relations of women in organizations (Nicolson, 1996; Legge, 1987; Goldberg, 1968), Mavin (2006) argues that, historically, solidarity theorists have covered up the real negative relations between women in management.

➤ **Work-Life Balance**

In addition to breaking through the barriers to entry, one of the biggest challenges that South African women executives face (Booyesen, 2007a; Pile, 2004a), as well as American women CFO's (Stuart, 2006), is maintaining a balance between career and family because ultimately one or the other is short-changed. Where most male executives have partners who play a primary role in managing the family and home, many executive women by contrast have partners who are career-driven. Griffith, MacBride-King & Townsend (1998) revealed critical factors prompting Canadian executive women to leave their employers: inhospitable organizational culture, incompatibility of culture and values, and insufficient support for personal and family commitments—leading Orser (1998) to claim that Canadian executive women see work-life balance as one of the top five characteristics they look for in determining “first in class” employers, while McLean, Brady & Bachmann (2003:3-4) link work-life balance to retention of women, and diversity enhancement. In a UK survey of private sector CEOs, 31% said they

had a high level of stress in their lives, 19% said the mental and physical demands of the job had compromised their health, and 16% had considered changing jobs in the previous six months to reduce stress or sacrifices made in their personal lives (McLean, Brady & Bachman: 2003). In an Ontario-based study (Nelson, 2000), women executives reported greater overall job satisfaction than did women in six other job categories, yet, they also reported greater time demands, more work-family stress, and more overall life stress. The demand for high-potential women is increasing, but with the challenges faced by executive women, the issue of retention can only be addressed if companies endeavour to consider in earnest, how the needs of executive women can be met (Cummings, 2004:2).

Research Methodology

An explorative qualitative methodology was employed, seeking multiple insider-experiences and perceptions by way of 22 one-on-one semi-structured interviews—men and women who held senior executive positions in corporate South Africa, were independent consultants who had firsthand knowledge about the corporate sector, and academics who specialized in the fields of gender and diversity in South Africa.(See Exhibit II)

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and then coding of the transcripts was done using Atlas.ti.

The coded quotes were then grouped into themes and sub-themes, and used as bases for the discussion development. Although care was taken to ensure that the participants were representatives of the country's demographics, a greater number of white (10) than black women (4) were interviewed, and no Indian respondents were included in the study. An equal number of black (4) and white men (4) were interviewed. It could be expected that the greater number of white than black participants would influence the outcome of the research given their dominant positions in the economic strata, however, no significant differences were found between the perceptions of black and white respondents.

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Findings

Empowerment Re-defined

The fundamental balance required in order to foster a culture of real empowerment comprises, on the one hand, a commitment from the organization to address the “impediments and challenges” faced by the individual (M. Kaje.txt – 22:3 (182:184)), which in turn will enable the individual to compete equally (Maguire.txt – 8:8 (73:89)). On the other hand, the individual has to recognize that they are ultimately responsible and accountable for their own lives (Cerfontyne.txt – 10:47 (172:181)). Essentially, empowerment needs to come from individual choice; first and foremost it is about a “willingness and able-ness; you cannot be empowered if you don’t want to be empowered” (Engelke.txt – 9:34 (628:637)). Once an individual is able to recognize that they are responsible for themselves and accountable for their own choices, they have “total power at their disposal, which will enable them to take things in any direction” (Finch.txt – 13:1 (5:9)).

Organizations which are heeding the Employment Equity call, are finding that appointing previously disadvantaged individuals does not automatically ensure a culture of empowerment. For empowerment to take place at an organizational level, four dimensions are required: “structure” is required in order to support the “empowerment piece”, “position” defines the parameters of what is possible, “authority” enables an individual to make decisions and “accountability” ensures that the individual is able to take responsibility for decisions (Booyesen.txt – 1:2 (29:31); 1:4 (37:39)).

Our research has revealed that the issue of empowering women cannot be addressed without considering the holistic empowerment of men, and restructuring traditional family scenarios (Stoner & Hartman, 2001). Conventional wisdom suggests that men are empowered because they have always been in positions of political, societal and economic power. However, “nowadays because women are more confident in the workplace than they have

been previously, there is a suggestion that men are feeling disempowered” (Clague.txt – 6:11 (128:138)). Not only there is a perception that the “boys clubs” make it difficult for women to join the executive ranks of an organization, but also the fact that, as women are starting to exceed their spouses’ career advancement, women are finding resistance at home. Expectation states theory (Ridgeway, 2001) proposes that it is the lower status of women in society, in general, which causes bias in such evaluation. In addition, most men in executive positions either have a wife, partner or professional service at home to take care of everyday necessities, such as plumbers, payments, banks, children, etc.—very few executive women, though, enjoy the same support structure at home, and are therefore required to be executives while still being the primary support in the home. One of the greatest restrainers cited for women wanting to advance their careers, is their situation at home; “there are husbands that will not allow their wives to take up management positions” (Engelke.txt –9:2 (15:18); 9:43 (776:784)) and families who still see women’s primary role in the home, in support of their husbands/partners (Buthelezi.txt – 2:19 (811:812)). To this end, Alan Maguire asserts, “women will never be empowered in the boardroom unless men are empowered in the home” (Maguire.txt – 8:48 (721:724)). This is in line with Hewlett’s (2007) conclusion that we are on a journey of change, of which a big part of the journey’s success is transforming the lives of men as well.

Gender Empowerment in South Africa

Although women, particularly black women, have been engaged in the liberation struggle for decades, the battle for empowerment first and foremost in South Africa has been racial equality, gender was secondary. With the advent of democracy however, a separate focus has been placed on gender empowerment. The passing of the Employment Equity Act in 1998 has created an institutionalized structure that says to women: “There is a space for you, it’s yours, you are entitled to it; thereby

bridging the gap between what men have historically constructed for women and what women are doing for themselves” (Steyn.txt –5:27 (763:771)).

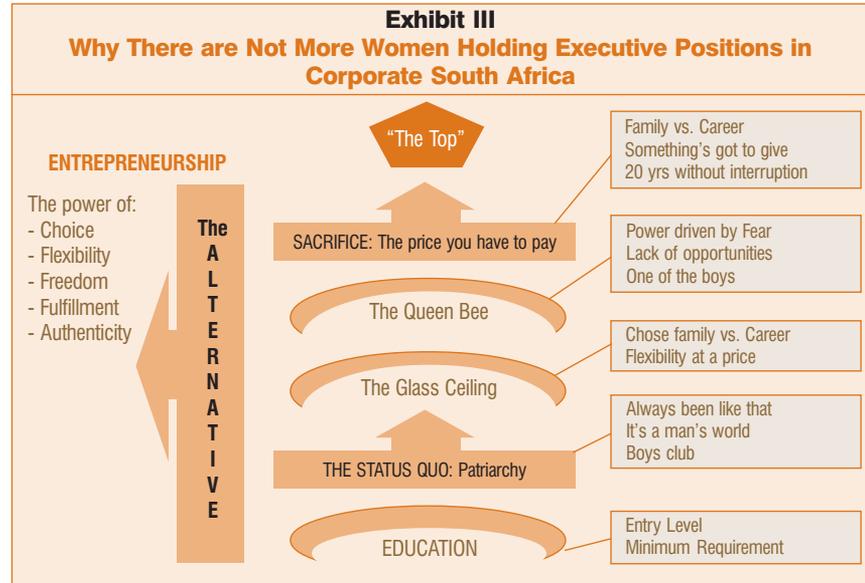
The fact that black women have grown up fighting for equality is one of the main reasons that there is a greater representation of black than white women in the government (Buthelezi.txt – 2:20 (815:816)). Similarly, because white women have historically had theoretical access to the corporate world, there is a greater representation of white women at executive corporate level. However, with the power-pie being sliced up under Employment Equity legislation, black women are the big scorers and white women have now found themselves almost at the back of the queue (Sandham.txt – 4:6 (197:200)). On face value it would appear that for black women “the world is their oyster”; this, however, is not the case. Black African culture is traditionally patriarchal, and black women who are career-driven are being challenged for defying their cultural role of wife and mother and, as such, carry an enormous personal burden. Vice President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka was cited as an example: “They are not proud of her, they are angry with her for defying her role” (Steyn.txt –5:22 (626:627)). As a black African man, Daniel Malatji provided a deeper insight the cultural mindset of black African men: “Men are head of the family and theirs is the last word. That’s what women have to deal with when they get home. When a black woman gets married, she subjects herself to that contract” (Malatji.txt – 14:4 (603:609)). Malatji’s perspective possibly provides an insight into why there are not more black women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa, and the cultural challenge that career-orientated black women are facing.

Taking a broader perspective when it comes to advancing empowerment for women, it would seem that a unified, more collaborative stance, where black and white women stand together on the issue, could prove to be most effective (Buthelezi.txt – 2:21 (816:817)).

Token Appointments

Token appointments have been one of the unintended consequences of Employment Equity legislation, and as such, the very individuals that the legislation was designed to empower, are paying a heavy price. With the emphasis being placed on empowering previously disadvantaged individuals, organizations are clambering to make affirmative action appointments. Subsequently, individuals who do not have the requisite qualifications, networks, or experience are being appointed to executive positions, often without any genuine support. As a result, people are being set up to fail (Sandham.txt – 4:7 (231:233)), “not because they are incompetent, but probably because they have been denied access to education and the accompanying networks of further education” (Black.txt – 19:16 (682:703)). This highlights two burning issues: access to education, and its complementary social networks and support, are at the heart of the first issue given that there is a severe shortage of skilled black men and all women in South Africa and, secondly, organizations have a major role to play in ensuring that the skills gap is closed by placing emphasis on leadership development for Employment Equity candidates (Sandham.txt – 4:7 (231:233)).

Tokenism has been responsible for creating a stigma that all previously disadvantaged people are judged by, especially women (Maddock, 1999). Irrespective of whether a black man or woman has the required skills, qualifications and experience or not, they are judged from the default position that they have been given the job because of the color of their skin; this is equally true for women, white and black. The consequence is that these executives have to work twice as hard to prove their credibility (Engelke.txt – 9:53 (1041:1056))—Mavin’s (2006) and Maier’s (1999) research bears this out, where token women experience particular strains and pressures not felt by dominant members of the same organizational status. There was overwhelming agreement that tokenism helps nobody, and fosters a lose-lose environment in which those not affirmed psy-



chologically withdraw, and those who were affirmed feel that they were being “viewed” by colleagues and employees as receiving the job based on their EE status, and not competence. Our respondents highlighted the fact that affirmed women either do their best to lose their exaggerated visibility to win the dominant group’s acceptance, or become mavericks with high levels of visibility, but then embrace growing levels of isolation. Simpson’s (2000) refers similarly the predicament which all tokens face regarding their assimilation and disassociation. Because it lacks the dimensions of true empowerment, tokenism ultimately undermines the individual’s ability to participate meaningfully in the economy (Maguire.txt – 8:58 (975:977)).

Challenges: Barriers and Stumbling Blocks

It would seem that, despite the facts, Employment Equity legislation has opened the door to equal opportunity in the workplace, agreement that women have leadership styles that is conducive to the changing needs of organizations, agreement that women can add value to organizations, there is still a conspicuous absence of women at executive level. The question that still needs to be answered is: Why? In further exploring the challenges that

corporate women face, further light is shed on an explanation.

The research showed that although the barriers to entry do play a role in hampering the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership, the barriers alone are not the reason why there are fewer women than expected at executive level. Exhibit III illustrates the hierarchy of barriers that need to be overcome in order for women to reach positions of executive leadership (“the top”) in corporate South Africa.

> The Status Quo: Patriarchy and The Boys Club

One of the major shifts required in order for more women to take up executive positions has to come from “a stand-off” with the status quo. Despite the legislative changes, today’s business landscape is still reflective of outdated attitudes and practices that mirror men’s lives and values, rather than being reflective of women’s lives, needs and values (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). For instance, previous research (Laufer, 1998; Davidson & Cooper, 1992) has emphasized the detrimental impact of family responsibilities on careers, supporting Beechey’s (1977) view that a major factor behind women’s disadvantage in the labor market lies in the traditional domestic responsibilities. Additionally, Hewlett (2007) recently

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considered the male competitive model of employment and the resulting predominant corporate culture, as working against those in “outgroups” (not male and white, in the South African context) as well as those who have traversed less traditional, even though enriching, career paths (such as women who have to take off for family responsibilities and/or people of color who are often accused of job-hopping in the South African context). There is however a growing acknowledgement within South Africa that it is difficult for women to operate within these confines (Black.txt – 19:17 (768:776)). Although organizations are making it possible for women to move up the ranks, few organizations have examined their conscious and unconscious working practices, values, and assumptions, to ensure that they are reflective of the changing needs of all of their employees. Top level business has always been the domain of men, particularly white men and, as such, “there are a lot of practices that are entrenched in business that lead to significant barriers” (M. Kajee.txt – 22:8 (287:329)). Traditionally business deals were concluded in “gentlemen’s clubs” and sports-fields, and the boardroom was a mere formality; this practice and its accompanying attitudes are still very much in place today (Maguire.txt – 8:41 (577:582)) and poses a challenge for women not only because they are not part of the inner circle, but also because it is difficult for them to get in (M. Kajee.txt – 22:8 (287:329)).

By and large, the South African working environment is not suited to the needs of working women at all levels of the organization—not just those in executive positions (M. Kajee.txt – 22:11 (425:442)). Despite the evidence that women have a leadership style conducive to the changing needs of 21st century organizations, and the fact that they can increase the value of an organization, the inclusion of women at executive level is seen as a legislative requirement rather than an opportunity for an organization to capture a competitive advantage. “Women are not seen as equal because the thrust of business is a man’s place and not a woman’s place”

(Clague.txt - 6:27 (427:431)). What may be required in South Africa is what has been outlined in Hewlett (2007) by Carolyn Buck Luce, Chair of the Hidden Brain Trust in the USA, presenting a compelling case for what she terms a “second generation of policy” designed to clear the pathways for women’s success in business.

➤ **The Glass Ceiling**

Typically, women who have reached middle management and find that they are not able to advance their careers to senior management, within their current organizations, have hit the glass ceiling (Cannings, 1988). Both social role theory and expectation states theory suggest that elements of the social structure are causes for the continued existence of the glass ceiling, which keeps women from advancing to top-level leadership positions (Weyer, 2007). Our research bear this out and showed evidence that gender is a salient status characteristic, leading to inequalities as indicated by:

1. More favourable executive leadership traits being associated with men than women, as described by Berger *et al.* (1980), and
2. Men being more favourably evaluated, as described by Forsyth *et al.* (1997).

Additionally, the glass ceiling seems to come into play under three sets of circumstances:

- There are more people (females and males) wanting senior management positions, than positions that are available (Henley.txt – 18:6 (180:212))
- Middle managers who have increased their scope of responsibility are perceived by their organization as having more power, and therefore it is not deemed necessary to promote them to a more senior management position (Graaf.txt – 3:4 (193:194))
- Working mothers find that middle management enables them to have both a substantial career, whilst having a degree of flexibility (Dicks.txt – 16:9 (159:187)), as such this is not a barrier, but rather a point at which women have to make a choice: career or family.

Such thinking, unfortunately, is still linked to social role theory (Eagly *et al.*, 2003) in which specific expectations are held towards individuals occupying specific social categories.

On the other hand, there are women who claim that they had never experienced the glass ceiling, and as such cannot say first hand whether this barrier is not self-induced or not in South Africa ((Sandham.txt – 4:13 (586:586)); (Jacobs.txt – 7:29 (521:522)). These women believe that, because of the type of people they are, if they want something, their perspective-filters, resilience and tenacity almost always sees them able to achieve what they put their minds to. In their careers, they have not allowed “barriers” to stand in their way: “A barrier is only a barrier until you find a way around it” (Engelke.txt – 9:16 (114:155)).

Critiques of liberal feminism focus on its assumptions of gender-neutral bureaucratic structures, and its ability to explain the underlying causes of disadvantage. Radical feminists, for instance, would disagree with our respondents above and direct our attention to the patriarchal forms of power that are embedded in the bureaucratic organization (e.g., Ferguson, 1984), in gender-based power dynamics (e.g., Cockburn, 1991) and in norms and values that prescribe women’s subordination (e.g., Marshall, 1984). The focus is therefore on women’s oppression and exclusion within systems of male power and advantage (Walby, 1990). This, according to Simpson *et al.* (2004), forms the basis of the cultural explanation of factors behind the glass ceiling.

It is apparent that the glass ceiling may be more relevant for some practitioner women than for others depending not only on the mindset of both the organization and the individual, but also on the individuals’ personal circumstances. For the glass ceiling to crack, even shatter, it would then seem that a shift needs to come from both sides: organizations need to commit to creating empowered environments that sees the advancement of women to senior positions, and women who have the desire to advance their careers need

to be resolute and tenacious to get to where they want to be (Graaf.txt – 3:11 (1010:1012)).

➤ **Barriers to Entry: Education**

The biggest reported threat posed to the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership in South Africa is lack of access to a quality high school and tertiary education. Melamed (1996) points out that qualification levels are objective merits which are likely to enhance credibility, which may be more beneficial to women than to men who have less difficulty assuming a managerial role and, according to Leeming & Baruch (1998) can be a vehicle for helping women break through the glass ceiling. It is taken as “given” that access to executive opportunities is heavily dependent on an individual’s level of education (Still, 1992; Burke & McKeen, 1994). Historically in South Africa, access to both tertiary and high school education has been the domain of the privileged minority. Consequently, our respondents concur the fact that the selection pool of potential management and executive candidates today is a result of who was educated 10-15 years ago. Twenty years ago, only a handful of women saw themselves entering the corporate world. Today this is changing, however, the fruits from this will only be realized in 10-15 years time. In the meantime, organizations are faced with the challenge of meeting EE requirements with a limited number of people to choose from. “The biggest problem is that we are not getting sufficient numbers of people coming through” (Daniel.txt – 21:14 (302:314)). With predications from economists and historians that women will continue to gain economic power the world over, there is growing awareness that the most effective way for countries to boost their economies is to educate women, and give them greater access to the business world (Alsfine, 2006).

The person-centred approach described above is challenged by researchers such as Cassell & Walsh (1994) who claim that cultural factors (such as power in organizational bureaucracy, gender-based power dynamics and men’s dominant norms and values) form the bases for restrictive struc-

tures and barriers within organizations, particularly within the informal context. And these, they claim, far outweigh any individual differences in attributes and, hence, the power of education alone to affect career progress and overcome career barriers can be neutralized by structural factors. Simpson *et al.* (2004) therefore claim that hidden organizational barriers may override individual characteristics such as qualifications and skill, so that education alone may not be effective in securing career success for women.

➤ **The Queen Bee Syndrome**

Conventional wisdom suggests that the queen bee does not want any other women to have the same opportunities as she does, because she enjoys the power, prestige and being “special/specially-talented”, which come with being the only woman on the Board of Directors, thereby making it difficult for other women to have access to the same opportunities. By and large, the perceptions of the respondents were aligned with what is conventionally understood of the concept. Additionally though, they added that women executives make it especially hard for up-and-coming women, as they “don’t want them to let down the side because if they fail, they then fail for all women not just themselves” (Engelke.txt – 9:23 (305:310)) and therefore “increase the hurdles that other women have to jump, just to ensure competence” (Clague.txt – 9:46 (799:800)). Wacjman (1998), in describing the pressure and loneliness of occupying such a position, went as far as describing the successful women as exiles from their own sex.

Delving deeper into the concept, it became apparent that two opposing dimensions, “fear and power”, were at play, and the main dynamics that drive and perpetuate this syndrome are:

- Limited opportunities for women at the top, manifesting in a need to hold onto power for fear of sharing the power-pie (Clague.txt – 6:45 (797:806)). Wacjman (1998) concurs by stating that there is not much room for women at the top.
- The expectation that women who have reached executive status will pave the way for other women to

reach the top (Buthelezi.txt –2:14 (280:282). Abramson (1975) describes women who have actually gained prominence in management, but who tend to deny that there is systematic discrimination against women.

- Unsympathetic stance, almost malicious envy and derogation (Nieva & Gutek, 1981), towards working mothers by executive women who have chosen a career over a family (Dicks.txt – 16:18 (407:434)).

We found it interesting that our respondents mainly focused on “one woman responsibility” or “executive women responsibility” without naming or deconstructing the gendered context and structures within which such fear and power exhibited itself. Mavin (2006) claims that this is a short-coming which lead women to blame each other, and for men to abdicate their responsibility.

Our research highlighted two stances resulting from successful traversing by women of the corporate ladder:

1. Celebration of their femininity, thereby enhancing their own “specialness” for having made it through, and
2. Suppression of their individuality and femininity.

Although there was awareness that lack of executive opportunities gives rise to women feeling “special” because they are the only woman on the Board of Directors (Engelke.txt – 9:24 (306:313)), it is possible that the reason why they are not necessarily the ones who will make the difference for other women, is not because they want the power for themselves, but rather because “they themselves are often quite male-identified in the way that they go about things” (Steyn.txt – 5:11 (331:334)). Such thinking is in line with claims of Gini (2001) who blame women for becoming honorary men and becoming overly combative and ruthless, Maier’s (1999) male internalization, Coates’ (1998) femininity suppression, and O’Leary & Ryan’s (1994) argument that women in senior management are role-deviant and when they encounter other women at work, their normative expectations of one an-

other illustrate sex-role spill over at its worst. Powell & Butterfield (2003) attribute this to incongruity between the managerial role (requiring dominant masculine characteristics) and senior women's gender role (requiring deference to the authority of men)—again, highlighting the important role of context for us.

There was a general consensus between the respondents that, in their experiences, this syndrome is not as prevalent in South Africa as it may be in other countries, and that as more opportunities open up for women and greater representation ensues, such as Moss-Kanter claimed in 1977, there will be less women who have to fight their way to the top, thus perpetuating a position of power underpinned by fear and insecurity (Clague.txt – 6:46 (815:820)).

➤ **Sacrifice: The Price You Have To Pay**

• **Work-Life Balance**

Work-life balance has been consistently cited as one of the biggest challenges faced by corporate executives, particularly executive women (Booyesen, 2007a; Myakayaka-Manzini, 2002; Stuart, 2006) because over and above their level of responsibility in the workplace, they are the primary “caregivers in the home” to both children and ageing parents and often have spouses who are also corporate executives (F. Kajee.txt – 15:10 (180:194)). Conventional wisdom suggests that women who want to have executive careers have to sacrifice having a family; however, policies of statutory maternity leave and other family-friendly policies have benefited some women by enabling them to maintain continuous employment (Waldfofel, 1998), and our research respondents all believe that it is possible to have both (Engelke.txt – 9:15 (106:112)). However, there is also the awareness that balancing family-time with the demands of a corporate career, means that some sacrifices will have to be made; the respondents agreed—inevitably this means less family-time (Rhoda.txt – 17:21 (766:813)), (Booyesen.txt – 1:31 (746:749)); (Black.txt – 19:31

(1360:1364)); (Daniel.txt – 21:23 (482:492)); (Ahern.txt – 20:17 (418:435)). Fifteen percent of our respondents claimed that employers view workers who use personal or family-support benefits less favourably than those who do not, with accompanying wage differentials (Evans, 2001) and with little improvement in the terms on which the average mother enters the workplace (Joshi, Paci & Waldfofel, 1999). The above is in line with Hewlett's (2007) claims regarding the stigma associated with undertaking flexible work arrangements, and the real reasons why men and women leave their careers, and how and why they might choose to reenter. She presents a case to explain why the current pipeline model of careers does not work for either women or policy-makers, because of the losses that occur on reentry (on-ramping), and the penalties incurred for taking time out of careers (off-ramping) at different stages of women's careers. Sirianni & Negrey (2000) argue for alternative working arrangements to foster gender equality, e.g., by calling for payment of a social wage for working mothers in order to internalize the roles women play, external to the organization. Our research shows that deep-rooted definitions within a culture of what it means to be “serious” about the job, why one is motivated to do it, and committed to it and the organization, reflect assumptions about the “ideal worker”. Daniel (18:10 (312:320)) stated that the “implicit gendered-definitions of ‘seriousness on the job’ and ‘ideal worker’, have significant impacts on the use, and frequency of use, of work-life programs and initiatives by executive women”. Additionally, the “use-dilemma” is exacerbated if executive men do not, or infrequently, make use of work-life programs and initiatives. Women who have made it up the ranks in their organizations rely heavily on a home support structure: au pairs, full-time domestic help, husbands/

partners who play a major home roles, and involvement from extended families—these people all make it possible for executive women to focus on their careers in “serious ways”, and they acknowledge that without these support structures, they “could not have done what [they are] doing” (Sandham.txt – 4:16 (612:613)). What this highlights is that “getting to the top” takes more than qualifications, experience and tenacity. Without the right support structure in place and men/husbands/partners not being empowered in the home, women who are also mothers will find it seemingly impossible to succeed at the very top of business. There is an urgent call for organizations that are serious about attracting and retaining high-potential executive women, to creatively and thoughtfully address the issue of flexibility and support in the workplace, in earnest (F. Kajee.txt – 15:18 (292:295)); (Buthelezi.txt – 2:11 (248:249)); (Engelke.txt – 9:46 (825:829)). Although an executive position cannot easily be done part-time: “When you get into an executive position, whether you're male or female, the job requires you to deliver irrespective if it takes you until 8 o'clock at night” (Engelke.txt – 9:3 (19:21)), organizations that are willing to create flexible and supportive working environments—in the office and at home—may find that their efforts are well rewarded. Women who are secure and fulfilled in their careers are less inclined to job-hop (Clague.txt – 6:12 (152:153)). Improving the work-life effectiveness of individual executives is a joint responsibility of the individual and the organization. In the end, individuals who assess their own situations and implement negotiated, appropriate actions enjoy more meaningful work lives, while organizations which create the individual contracts, practices and workplace environment that will allow individuals' actions to be successful will be rewarded with loyalty, an increase in

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staff retention, as well as a reputation for being a great company to work for, thereby attracting and retaining top talent.

• **The Long Haul**

The adage, “it takes 20 years for an overnight success” applies as much to achieving executive status as it would to mastering any other highly-skilled craft. The first question that any aspiring CEO, male or female, needs to answer is: “Are you in it for the long haul?” All our research respondents who had reached executive level, have “done their time” and in doing so, have paid the price: “There is no doubt that if you want to achieve executive status, you have to put in the blood hours” (Black.txt – 19:31 (1360:1374)). Even if fast-tracked based on identified competence, or given an opportunity because of employment equity, women, once in, still have to put their heads down, sacrifice personal time, develop valuable social networks, connect to powerful others, and demonstrate consistent competence for extended periods of time, in order to qualify and then sustainably succeed in the very top positions. One explanation noting differences in men and women social networks (Petersen *et al.*, 2000; Seidel *et al.*, 2000) highlight the fact that women face continued disadvantages because of their lack of ties with influential personnel, and therefore lack important information and influence for career progress. There was agreement between the respondents that “to get on to the Board of a company, you have to have a track record, you need to have 20 years of experience” (F. Kajee.txt –15:8 (141:153)). Simpson *et al.* (2004: 469) claim that many UK women manager’s track records unfortunately become concentrated in functional chimneys and traditional function areas such as HR, training and education, thereby inflicting a severe disadvantage both in terms of acquiring general management skills necessary for more senior positions

(Woodall *et al.*, 1997) and in terms of reducing their visibility and power (Sheridan *et al.*, 1990). This view is no different from those held in South African corporates. Although the journey to the top requires hard work, intelligent career planning and sacrifice, the price an individual is required to pay does not stop once they have reached executive level. “To have an executive career, you must be prepared to travel, work long hours and there is also a certain amount of being ‘on call’ that needs to be factored in. If you can’t meet these requirements, then an executive career is not for you” (Daniel.txt – 21:11 (257:267)). It is the researchers’ central assertion that the price an individual is required to pay to have an executive career, is in the fact the reason why there not more women represented at executive level. If all the afore-mentioned barriers were miraculously removed, aspiring executives who were not prepared to make this level of commitment to a process that is going to take, at least, 20 years, would still in fact not have access to an executive position. It would be comforting to think that an executive position is available to everyone, however, it would seem that “the brass ring” is only for the taking by those who are prepared to pay the (high) price. It would appear that the extreme demands, and huge personal toll, of extended work weeks, unrelenting responsibilities and the expectations of continuous availability through modern technology is currently part and parcel of succeeding at the top (Hewlett, 2007). To this end, Ahern (20:36 (1168:1171)), CEO of Sanlam Multi-Managers asserts, “the legislation is not going to get you an executive career; first you have to understand what sacrifices you are going to have to make, and then you can decide if it’s really what you want”.

An Alternative: Entrepreneurship

Hewlett (2007) presents, by way of academic research results and case study

analysis, a personal and engaging account of alternative career paths for women in America, which has lots of parallels with professional women in South Africa. Our research indicates that many South African women are turning their backs on corporate careers in favor of entrepreneurship. “The other problem is that while women are getting to [senior and executive levels], they are not staying there, simply because the environment is not conducive” (Buthelezi.txt – 2:8 (234:234)). Eagly *et al.* (2000) and Wigfield *et al.* (2000) suggest that women have different aspirations from men, and may be less likely to have senior executive roles as a goal—this, though, has been contested by Powell & Butterfield (2003) who suggest fewer gender differences in this respect. One of the primary motivations, that emerged from our research, for women who chose entrepreneurship over a corporate career, is that “they would rather have quality of life; to women the money is just not enough in itself, the work hours, what goes into being a top executive. They don’t think the sacrifice and price you have to pay is worth it” (Buthelezi.txt – 2:9 (238:239)).

This option offers women opportunity to be empowered, to find fulfilment and meaning through their work, and it enables them to have the flexibility they need. In essence this means that career-orientated women can still pursue their careers, but not at the expense of their families or their health (Henley.txt – 18:4 (102:146)), and that they can do it with a leadership style that is authentic (Buthelezi.txt – 2:9 (238:239)). Entrepreneurship offers women the opportunity to use their skills and experience, but allows them to opt out of the rat race (Ahern.txt –20:24 (820:823)).

Conclusion

The research set out to understand why, despite the fact that the laws have changed and access to equal opportunities are available, there are not more women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa. This is by no means a “cut and dry issue”, and remains complex and challenging. There

appear to have been some progress made in public sector environments, but, on the whole, there has not been the same level of embodied commitment from the corporate sector. Clearly, women have a valuable and important role to play at the most senior levels in rebuilding our country, but in order for organizations to harness the full potential of this vast human capital pool, a paradigm shift is required and new understanding needs to be laid bare. Despite the challenges, it seems that an executive career is currently available for those (a few) who are resilient, are willing to work extreme jobs, are willing to develop appropriate informal connectedness, and who really want an executive career, albeit at a price.

However, for the majority of women in organizations, the greater social significance and general competence attributed to men are still everyday realities in modern South African organizational life—thereby reinforcing evaluation bias of women and embedding the glass ceiling. Our research highlighted the fact that social structures need to change, including the nature of work and what it means to be a “good employee”, both inside and outside the workplace, in order for the glass ceiling to be shattered. In particular status and power differentials between men and women employees and leaders have to be reduced. We would encourage further research into the ways in which new social structures can be enhanced and embedded, in which women and the ways in which they choose to work are assigned greater social significance and general competence.

Our research has also shown the continued prevalence of allocated roles in modern South African society due to gender. In particular we noticed that the family and occupation settings contribute and set expectations relating to the allocation of roles defined solely on the basis of gender. Organizations are therefore encouraged to make explicit, deconstruct, and allow their employees and stakeholders to collectively interrogate the assumptions and consensual beliefs relating to possessive qualities that ideally predispose men and women for the different roles they typically occupy.

Our research findings have led us to recommend that organizations specifically design development—and mentoring programs for women that honours their stage of career and life. That such programs explore issues relating to self-fulfilment, self worth, identity, habitual behavior, motivation, ambition, power, influence, legacy, balance and personal resilience. Program mentors, who could act to stimulate, challenge and support, may be drawn from individuals, such as our research respondent group, who have faced the frontiers of executive lifestyles, albeit through diverse and different lenses.

The findings of our research additionally suggest that we need to reconceptualize the role of ambition, as well as the nature of motivation, as the diversity of workers means that females when compared to males may be driven by very different factors. Moreover, among women themselves, ambition and motivation vary, depending of life phases and individual choice. We therefore suggest that organizations seriously consider a move away from job-level-only contracts with employees, to individual contracts/flexible work arrangements which acknowledge the idiosyncratic ambition and life-phase motivation of individuals.

We recommend that organizations widen their view on, and the reasons for, work-life balance. Initially, to not only view the need for “time off work” as necessary for tending children, but understand that single, married and partnered employees have care responsibilities throughout their careers that could vary from children, to elderly parents and other family members. However, organizations also have to recognize that work-life balance goes beyond the nexus between children and work, and could include community work, interests, pets, environmental concerns, as well as other, varied priorities for employees. Work-life balance should also be extended to enable employees to off-ramp and on-ramp (Hewlett, 2007) from their careers, as and when appropriate and needed, without negative impact. However, we have to bear in mind Shapiro, Ingols & Blake-Beard’s (2007: 188) caution that

some women who negotiate flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and flexhours, are not off-ramping or opting out, but rather are rejecting the outdated “work is primary” mould in favour of the “career self-agency” paradigm that fits 21st century realities. We believe that more research is needed to further understand the new career self-agency model in which employees manage their own careers and determine their own terms of employment.

It would appear that while research assumptions of solidarity behavior among women are presented as positive and proactive in nature, there appears to be little space in which to raise the context within which the woman-inferiority consciousness and the complex issue of negative relations between women in management persists. Further research is clearly needed to problematize the context and ensuing relations within which solidarity behavior, sisterhood and the queen bee syndrome exists among women in senior management positions, so as not to deteriorate into “fix the woman” thinking and negative labeling of individual women, or the collective behavior of women in such positions. Our research has highlighted the need for renewed action aimed at manifestations of organizational gendered systems, and the accompanying misogynistic cultures and behaviors (Mavin, 2006) which continue to impact upon all women in organizations.

We conclude by suggesting that the male competitive model may also not be working for men either—as is the case with talented women, this is particularly true for talented men, who are “drawn into” extreme jobs that have extreme demands associated with them. Ultimately, the workplace contract and working model is becoming unsustainable for all, and organizations need to collectively rethink the very fundamentals of the nature of work. This too is a ripe area for timely further research. 📌

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