



Exploring the barriers and challenges that women face in the quest for leadership positions: The case of the mining sector in Gauteng

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically investigates the barriers, challenges, and interventions shaping the advancement of women into executive directorships within Gauteng's mining sector. Despite South Africa's progressive legislative frameworks, including the Employment Equity Act and the Mining Charter, women remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership. The study deliberately focuses on executive directors, who exercise day-to-day strategic and operational authority, as opposed to non-executive directors, whose roles are limited to governance and oversight. This distinction is central because executive directors embody substantive decision-making power and, therefore, encounter more entrenched resistance, scrutiny, and systemic exclusion.

The problem statement is rooted in the paradox between formal equity policies and women's lived experiences in mining organisations. Globally, women comprise fewer than 15% of executive roles in extractive industries. In South Africa, women account for less than 5% of mining executive directors despite representing over half of the economically active population. Gauteng, as the country's economic and administrative hub of mining activity, exemplifies this disparity, where patriarchal organisational cultures, tokenism, and intersectional discrimination converge to entrench inequality.

A review of literature highlights that earlier studies have examined women's leadership pathways but often treated individual, organisational, or cultural barriers in isolation. This research integrates these dimensions to demonstrate how intrapersonal factors (such as confidence, assertiveness, and resilience), interpersonal barriers (mentorship deficits and network exclusion), structural obstacles (bias, tokenism, and hostile work environments), and socio-cultural and religious expectations intersect to undermine women's authority. A multi-theoretical framework anchors the analysis, drawing from Human Capital Theory, Social Role and Role Congruity Theory, the Glass Ceiling and Glass Cliff concepts, Feminist Organisational Theory, and Intersectionality. Together, these perspectives provide a layered understanding of how systemic exclusion persists.

The research methodology employed a qualitative design within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm to foreground the lived experiences of women in leadership. Data were collected from 25 purposively selected female executive directors in Gauteng's mining firms, using open-ended survey questionnaires distributed via HR gatekeepers. Thematic analysis with reflexive coding was applied to identify recurring barriers and coping strategies. Rigour was achieved through purposive sampling, data saturation, and adherence to ethical standards (NWU-0061-22-A4).

The findings confirm that women's underrepresentation in executive mining leadership is not the outcome of individual deficits but of systemic and mutually reinforcing barriers. Intrapersonal strategies such as resilience, self-awareness, and assertiveness enabled women to survive within hypermasculine spaces, yet they imposed significant psychological costs. Organisational barriers, including tokenistic appointments, exclusion from influential networks, and a lack of mentorship, restricted women's influence even after

appointment. Cultural and religious norms reinforced patriarchal narratives that delegitimised female leadership, while intersectionality revealed compounded disadvantages for Black women. Notably, initiatives like training, mentorship, and networking offered some support, but they proved insufficient without a more profound structural transformation.

The contribution of the thesis is the development of the *Contextually Embedded Empowerment Framework (CEEF)*, which integrates structural accountability, contextual specificity, and collective agency. This framework demonstrates that meaningful transformation requires redefining leadership norms, embedding accountability tools such as leadership equity scorecards and cultural audits, and fostering inclusive mentorship and sponsorship practices. By advancing feminist, critical, and organisational theory, the study not only enriches academic discourse but also offers actionable strategies for mining organisations seeking to embed genuine gender equity.

Keywords: executive directorship; gender inequality; mining sector; feminist organisational theory; leadership development; organisational transformation; organisational culture

PREFACE

This thesis has been prepared in an article-based format, in line with the requirements of the North-West University for PhD research. I chose this format because it provided the opportunity to develop the study as a coherent set of publishable articles, each of which stands on its own while contributing to the broader theme of women's leadership in the mining sector. This approach allowed me to build a structured body of work that not only advances academic debates but also speaks to the pressing realities of gender transformation in industry.

The three articles that form the core of this thesis were developed under the supervision of my co-author, Professor L.T.B. Jackson, whose role was central in providing guidance, critical feedback, and mentorship throughout the process. While Professor Jackson's contribution as a supervisor and co-author was invaluable, the primary responsibility for the research rested with me. I was responsible for the conceptualisation of the research problem, the design and execution of the methodology, data collection and analysis, as well as the drafting and revision of all manuscripts. The intellectual and practical contribution presented in this thesis is therefore the product of my independent PhD research.

The articles have been submitted, or are in the process of submission, to internationally recognised peer-reviewed journals. Specifically:

Article 1: Barriers to Entry into Directorship Positions for Women in the Mining Sector – submitted to Gender, Work & Organisation.

Article 2: Challenges Faced by Executive Female Directors in Gauteng's Mining Sector – submitted to the South African Journal of Human Resource Management.

Article 3: Interventions to Advance Women's Representation in Directorship Roles within the Mining Sector – submitted to the Journal of African Business.

I have obtained permission from my co-author, Professor L.T.B. Jackson, for the inclusion of these manuscripts in this thesis for degree purposes.

The article-based format adopted here reflects both the collaborative spirit of academic research and the independent scholarship expected at PhD level. I hope that the insights presented in this body of work will not only contribute meaningfully to the scholarly discourse on gender and leadership but also inform policy and practice aimed at fostering genuine transformation in South Africa's mining sector.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The persistent underrepresentation of women in executive directorships within the mining sector remains a pressing global and national challenge, despite decades of gender equity advocacy and legislative interventions. Mining, historically defined by hypermasculine organisational cultures and exclusionary leadership structures, continues to privilege male-dominated hierarchies (Connell, 2005; Acker, 1990). Globally, women occupy only 14.2% of executive roles and less than 5% of CEO positions in the mining industry (PwC, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). In South Africa, where women constitute 53% of the economically active population, they represent just 17% of the national mining workforce, with less than 5% of executive director roles in mining companies (Minerals Council South Africa, 2023; DMRE, 2024).

These figures reveal that legislative advances including the Mining Charter and the Employment Equity Act have created entry points but failed to dismantle the institutional and cultural barriers limiting women's upward mobility (Mashele & Alagidede, 2023). While women's participation in South Africa's mining workforce grew from 11,400 in 2002 to over 54,000 by 2018, their presence remains concentrated in administrative and support functions, with minimal representation in operational or strategic decision-making roles (DMRE, 2022). Comparatively, South Africa trails other major mining economies: women hold 16.1% of core mining roles in Australia, 16% in Canada, and only 13.2% in South Africa, with far fewer in leadership positions (Kansake et al., 2021).

The South African mining sector, particularly in Gauteng the economic hub of mining corporate headquarters continues to reflect entrenched gendered leadership patterns. Even when women access directorships, they frequently face symbolic inclusion without substantive authority, exclusion from strategic networks, and heightened performance scrutiny (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Dube & Mahlangu, 2024). These challenges are compounded for Black South African women, who experience intersectional marginalisation at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1991; Nkosi, 2024).

This study, therefore, moves beyond documenting representation gaps to interrogate why gendered leadership disparities persist despite decades of reform. Drawing on a multi-theoretical framework including Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison et al., 1987), Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Carli, 2002), and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) it examines how individual, structural, socio-cultural, and religious barriers interact to restrict women's advancement in mining leadership. Furthermore, it applies a critical feminist lens to question whether entrenched patriarchal norms and organisational gatekeeping, rather than women's individual deficits, are the root causes of persistent exclusion.

Problem statement

The mining industry remains one of the most male-dominated economic sectors globally, despite its significant contribution to national and regional economies. In South Africa, mining accounts for 7.3% of GDP and approximately 60% of export revenue (Bernard, 2018). Yet, the sector continues to mirror deeply embedded gender inequalities, particularly at the executive level. Women hold less than 5% of board and executive director positions in South African mining companies, far below the 50% target set by the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (Nkosi, 2024).

The failure to achieve gender parity in mining leadership persists despite targeted initiatives such as the Minerals Council South Africa's Women in Mining programme, which advocates for recruitment, retention, and leadership development strategies (Minerals Council SA, 2023). Instead, systemic barriers including masculine workplace cultures, exclusionary networks, limited mentorship opportunities, rigid working hours, and discriminatory evaluation practices—continue to undermine women's career trajectories (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

This leadership disparity is not solely structural; it is also socio-cultural and historically rooted. The South African mining industry's legacy of patriarchal exclusion has shaped leadership norms that continue to privilege male-coded traits such as dominance and assertiveness, while penalising women for adopting similar behaviours (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, religious and cultural norms still position women as primary caregivers, reinforcing work-family conflicts and further limiting leadership mobility (Adisa et al., 2019; Areneke et al., 2023).

The problem is exacerbated by intersectional inequalities: Black South African women, particularly in Gauteng, navigate a dual burden of race and gender discrimination, facing symbolic inclusion without real authority and heightened performance scrutiny (Crenshaw, 1991; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). This results in a leadership pipeline where women must consistently “do more to be considered equal”, creating a psychologically taxing environment characterised by imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and leadership isolation (Settles et al., 2006; Gustafsson & Unander, 2024).

Despite widespread acknowledgement of these challenges, existing studies often treat barriers in isolation, failing to explain their interconnected and mutually reinforcing nature. This study addresses this gap by adopting a critical feminist and intersectional lens to ask: Why do the same individual and organisational barriers repeatedly emerge in mining leadership research, and how do cultural and religious norms operate as root causes of gendered leadership exclusion in Gauteng's mining sector?

By answering this question, the study seeks to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and propose evidence-based strategies to dismantle entrenched structural and cultural barriers, contributing to systemic gender transformation in mining leadership.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The persistent underrepresentation of women in executive directorship positions within South Africa's mining sector remains one of the most deeply entrenched gendered inequities in the corporate landscape. Mining, both globally and nationally, continues to reflect hypermasculine organisational cultures, patriarchal leadership norms, and exclusionary structural practices that systematically limit women's progression into senior decision-making roles (Connell, 2005; Acker, 1990; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). While legislative and policy interventions, including the Mining Charter and the Employment Equity Act, have sought to redress these disparities, their impact has been largely superficial, creating pathways for entry into the workforce without dismantling the institutional and cultural barriers that govern access to leadership. Women's participation in the South African mining workforce has grown substantially, from approximately 11,400 in 2002 to over 54,000 by 2018 (DMRE, 2022), yet their presence remains concentrated in administrative and support functions, with less than five percent occupying executive directorships (Minerals Council South Africa, 2023; DMRE, 2024). This starkly contrasts with the national gender equity targets outlined in the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill and underscores the limited success of current transformation frameworks.

The rationale for this study lies in addressing a significant gap in both theory and practice concerning women's leadership in male-dominated sectors. Existing scholarship on women in leadership has primarily focused on managerial roles in general, with limited emphasis on the lived experiences of women who occupy, or aspire to occupy, executive directorships in industries historically defined by male dominance, such as mining. Moreover, previous studies have often treated barriers to women's advancement as isolated phenomena, failing to interrogate how intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, and socio-cultural obstacles interact and mutually reinforce one another (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). By adopting an integrated, multi-theoretical lens, this study provides a more comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics that sustain gendered leadership inequality. Drawing on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison et al., 1987), Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Carli, 2002), and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the research interrogates why these disparities persist despite decades of policy reform, placing particular emphasis on the socio-political and historical context of South Africa's mining sector.

The significance of this research is threefold. First, it contributes theoretically by moving beyond deficit-based narratives that attribute women's underrepresentation to individual shortcomings such as low confidence or lack of ambition. Instead, it adopts a critical feminist perspective to expose how patriarchal ideologies, masculine organisational cultures, and cultural and religious norms act as root causes of systemic exclusion. This intersectional approach highlights how gendered power relations operate not only within formal organisational structures but also through informal networks, social expectations, and cultural values that continue to privilege male leadership traits while penalising women for demonstrating similar behaviours (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Areneke et al., 2023). It also interrogates the compounded disadvantage

experienced by Black South African women, who face multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination based on race, gender, and class, particularly in Gauteng, the economic heart of the mining industry (Crenshaw, 1991; Nkosi, 2024).

Second, the study offers an integrated analysis of barriers, mapping the interconnectedness of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural challenges. Intrapersonal factors such as self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and stereotype threat are understood not as inherent female deficiencies but as outcomes of prolonged exposure to exclusionary cultures that demand hyper-competence from women while systematically undermining their authority (Settles et al., 2006; Gustafsson & Unander, 2024). Interpersonal challenges, including exclusion from strategic networks, tokenism, and lack of mentorship, are analysed through Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Homosocial Reproduction Theory (Kanter, 1977), revealing how male-dominated leadership hierarchies reproduce themselves. Structural barriers, including discriminatory recruitment practices, rigid working arrangements, and the absence of succession pipelines, are critically examined through Gendered Organisations Theory (Acker, 1990), which highlights the gendered logic embedded in workplace structures.

Third, the study makes a practical contribution by proposing context-specific, evidence-based strategies for advancing women into mining leadership, drawing on the Contextually Embedded Empowerment Framework (CEEFF) developed in Article 3. This framework integrates individual empowerment initiatives, such as leadership training and mentorship, with structural interventions, including gender-sensitive recruitment, equity scorecards, and male allyship programmes, to address both personal agency and organisational transformation (Sithole, 2024; Simmons & Carter, 2023). Such recommendations respond directly to the call for systemic change articulated by feminist organisational theorists, who argue that gender equity cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or tokenistic representation, but requires fundamental shifts in organisational culture, leadership norms, and power dynamics (Connell, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Beyond its theoretical and organisational implications, this research has broader socio-economic relevance. Global evidence increasingly links gender-diverse leadership to improved organisational performance, innovation, and decision-making (Catalyst, 2024; PwC, 2023). The World Bank (2022) has underscored the economic and social benefits of enhancing women's representation in leadership, particularly in industries characterised by historically low female participation. In the South African context, increasing women's representation in mining leadership has the potential not only to enhance organisational competitiveness but also to contribute to national development goals by leveraging the full spectrum of available human capital.

This study is further significant for its strategic adoption of an article-based thesis format. By structuring the research into three interrelated articles, it enables a nuanced exploration of distinct yet interconnected dimensions of the problem. The first article critically analyses barriers to women's entry into executive directorships, the second interrogates the challenges faced by women once in these roles, and the third proposes actionable strategies for transforming leadership pathways. Together, these articles provide a

coherent, multi-layered understanding of the persistent gendered leadership gap in mining, offering both theoretical refinement and practical solutions. The synthesis of findings in the concluding chapter will consolidate these insights, advancing both academic scholarship and practical interventions aimed at achieving gender transformation in South Africa's mining sector.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the barriers that hinder women's entry into directorship positions within the mining sector.
- To examine the challenges encountered by female directors in the mining sector.
- To evaluate the organisational and individual initiatives that can enhance female representation in directorship positions in the mining sector.

Research Questions

In alignment with the stated objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the barriers to entry into directorship positions for women in the mining sector?
- What challenges do female directors face in the mining sector?
- What organisational and individual initiatives can increase female representation in directorship positions within the mining sector?

Definition of Key Concepts

Executive Director

An executive director is a full-time member of the board who simultaneously holds a senior managerial position within the organisation, exercising day-to-day operational and strategic responsibilities (Madzivhandila & Mofolo, 2022). Executive directors are directly involved in implementing policies, managing resources, and driving the company's vision and performance, thereby occupying dual roles as both strategists and operational leaders (Chikwe, Molebatsi & Moyo, 2024). By contrast, a non-executive director (NED) is not part of the organisation's daily management; rather, their role is to provide independent oversight, governance, and fiduciary accountability, ensuring that management decisions align with stakeholder interests and ethical standards (Mallin, 2019; Tricker, 2021). While organisational performance outcomes often judge executive directors, non-executive directors play a critical monitoring and advisory role, contributing external expertise and safeguarding against managerial dominance (Solomon, 2020). The distinction is therefore not only structural but also functional: executive directors drive operations and strategy from within, whereas non-executive directors maintain independence to hold the executive team accountable.

Feminist Organisational Theory

The theory examines how organisational structures and practices are shaped by gendered power relations rather than being neutral or objective. Acker (1990) demonstrates that organisations reproduce inequality through everyday processes such as recruitment, promotion, and evaluation, which privilege masculine norms. Connell (2005) argues that hegemonic masculinity is embedded in institutional cultures, establishing leadership ideals that marginalise women and devalue their contributions. Calás and Smircich (2006) emphasise that feminist perspectives do not only critique these dynamics but also propose alternative ways of organising that centre inclusivity and justice. Within the mining sector, this theoretical lens highlights how patriarchal cultures and rigid institutional logics sustain women's exclusion from executive directorships, despite formal equity policies. By applying feminist organisational theory, the study interrogates how power and gender intersect in corporate mining leadership and provides a foundation for reimagining organisational transformation through equity-driven frameworks.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality, in the context of South Africa's mining sector, refers to the unequal distribution of power, resources, and opportunities between men and women that restricts women's advancement into executive leadership roles. Acker (1990) shows that organisational processes, such as hiring and promotion, are structured in ways that reinforce men's dominance, while Ely and Meyerson (2000) highlight how workplace cultures normalise masculine behaviours and marginalise women's leadership contributions. Connell (2005) further explains that hegemonic masculinity entrenches leadership ideals that privilege male-coded traits such as authority and toughness, creating barriers for women whose leadership styles are often undervalued. Within the mining industry, these dynamics are reinforced by patriarchal legacies and structural rigidity, meaning that even with equity policies in place, women remain underrepresented at decision-making levels (Booyesen, 2007; Mkhize & Rampele, 2023). In this study, gender inequality is therefore understood not only as women's numerical underrepresentation but as a systemic process that delegitimises their authority, compels them to adapt to masculine norms, and sustains cultures resistant to transformation.

Barriers

Barriers, in the context of this study, are the interlocking personal, organisational, and cultural constraints that hinder women's advancement into executive directorships in South Africa's mining sector. Eagly and Carli (2007) describe women's career progression as a "labyrinth," shaped by multiple obstacles such as biased evaluations, limited access to networks, and restricted sponsorship opportunities. Acker (1990) argues that organisational practices are not neutral but gendered, embedding disadvantage into everyday processes like recruitment, promotion, and pay structures. Within mining, these barriers are reinforced by entrenched patriarchal cultures and rigid hierarchies that privilege masculine-coded leadership behaviours (Booyesen, 2007; Mkhize & Rampele, 2023). Research also points to phenomena such as the "glass ceiling" and the "glass cliff," which limit women's upward mobility or place them in precarious leadership roles (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Added to this are cultural stereotypes that undermine women's legitimacy as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and intersectional disadvantages, where race and class amplify exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991).

In this study, barriers are therefore not seen as isolated challenges but as systemic and mutually reinforcing dynamics that sustain women's underrepresentation in mining leadership and constrain efforts at transformation.

Challenges

Challenges refer to the multidimensional constraints that women encounter in attempting to sustain executive leadership roles. These include structural barriers embedded in gendered organisational processes (Acker, 1990), cultural stereotypes that delegitimise women's authority (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and the persistent "labyrinth" of obstacles that complicate career progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Within mining, such challenges are intensified by entrenched patriarchal workplace cultures and limited institutional support for gender transformation (Booyesen, 2007; Mkhize & Rampele, 2023), making women's leadership journeys both demanding and structurally constrained.

Leadership

Leadership, in this study, is understood as the capacity of directors to shape organisational strategy, influence decision-making, and set the cultural tone within companies. In the mining sector, leadership has historically been defined through masculine ideals that valorise toughness, control, and dominance (Connell, 2005), leaving little space for alternative approaches. Research by Eagly and Carli (2007) shows that women leaders often adopt more collaborative and relational styles, which remain undervalued in male-dominated contexts despite their proven effectiveness in fostering inclusive governance. For women in executive director roles, leadership is therefore not only about contributing to strategic direction but also about negotiating legitimacy in environments where their authority is questioned (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Research Paradigm, Methods and Methodologies

1.7.1 Research Paradigm

The researcher will use an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm because it offers the most suitable lens for examining how women experience and make sense of leadership within South Africa's mining sector. A research paradigm is essentially the worldview that shapes how reality is understood, how knowledge is generated, and how meaning is interpreted in research. Chafe (2024) explains it as a shared belief system that guides inquiry, while Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) describe it as the conceptual framework through which phenomena are examined. This study aligns with the interpretivist/constructivist position advanced by Lim (2023), which views reality as socially constructed and shaped by lived experiences. Such a perspective is critical for gender and leadership studies, where the focus is on uncovering how women interpret and navigate their roles in organisational contexts often dominated by masculine norms. As Creswell (2003) notes, interpretivism places value on subjective experiences within specific socio-cultural settings, enabling a deeper understanding of meaning-making processes. By working within this paradigm, the study is able to privilege women's voices and reveal the nuanced, context-bound ways in which female executive directors negotiate power, legitimacy, and identity in mining leadership.

1.7.2 Research Methodology

The researcher will use a qualitative research methodology, as it offers the most suitable means of capturing the lived realities and complex meanings attached to the experiences of female executive directors in South Africa's mining sector. Methodology, as Creswell and Poth (2018) remind us, is not simply a technical toolkit but a philosophical and procedural framework that guides the alignment of research questions with data collection and analysis. In this study, a qualitative design is epistemologically anchored in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, which assume that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences (Lincoln et al., 2018; Lim, 2023). This orientation is particularly advantageous for leadership and gender research, where power relations, organisational cultures, and structural inequalities shape and constrain women's participation (Morley, 2023; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). By adopting this approach, the study privileges depth, context, and participant voice over statistical abstraction, allowing for nuanced insights into the barriers and initiatives that define women's leadership pathways.

The researcher's choice of a qualitative methodology is further justified by the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study's objectives. Quantitative measures alone cannot reveal how women negotiate confidence, resilience, and legitimacy in male-dominated leadership environments, nor can they adequately expose the subtle cultural and structural practices that reproduce exclusion (Sutton & Austin, 2023). Instead, qualitative methods enable the exploration of intersectional dynamics, where factors such as gender, race, and class interact to shape experiences in ways that resist generalisation (Crenshaw, 1991; Nkosi, 2024). This makes qualitative inquiry particularly advantageous in uncovering not only what barriers exist, but also how they are felt, contested, and navigated in practice. Furthermore, it allows for reflexivity, enabling the researcher to remain sensitive to emergent themes and the voices of participants, which is vital in feminist organisational studies (Nowell et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2024).

Although qualitative studies typically rely on smaller, purposive samples, this is not a limitation but a deliberate strength. As Saunders et al. (2019) argue, the value of qualitative research lies not in statistical generalisability but in achieving thematic saturation and interpretive richness. In this regard, the narratives of female directors provide textured, context-specific evidence that can challenge dominant assumptions about leadership and equity in mining. The flexibility of qualitative methods also makes them well-suited to interrogating power-laden organisational environments, where lived experiences often deviate from formal policy prescriptions (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Ultimately, the qualitative methodology equips this study with the analytical depth and adaptability required to interrogate the intersectional and systemic nature of gender inequality in executive leadership. It provides not only a methodological fit but also a transformative lens through which the study contributes to theory, policy, and practice in advancing gender-inclusive leadership in South Africa's mining industry.

1.7.3 Research Design

The researcher will use a qualitative research design to investigate the lived experiences of female executive directors in South Africa's mining sector. A research design serves as the blueprint for connecting philosophical assumptions, methodological choices, and data collection strategies into a coherent framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). This design is anchored in an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and best understood by engaging directly with participants' subjective meanings (Lincoln et al., 2018; Lim, 2023). Such a design is particularly well-suited to exploring how women interpret, negotiate, and respond to organisational and cultural barriers within male-dominated environments, allowing the study to capture both intrapersonal strategies and interpersonal dynamics that shape leadership trajectories.

The qualitative research design further enables the researcher to gather rich, context-specific data through in-depth engagement, which is essential for uncovering the intersectional challenges women face in executive leadership roles. Unlike quantitative designs that prioritise breadth and generalisability, the qualitative design privileges depth, reflexivity, and thematic interpretation (Nowell et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2024). This makes it especially valuable in feminist organisational research, where power relations, structural inequalities, and lived experiences cannot be reduced to numerical indicators (Morley, 2023). By adopting this design, the study is positioned to illuminate how individual agency interacts with systemic barriers, producing findings that are both theoretically robust and practically significant for advancing gender-inclusive leadership in South Africa's mining industry.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is grounded in a feminist organisational theory framework, which argues that organisations are not neutral spaces but are deeply structured by gendered power relations. Acker's (1990) foundational work on gendered organisations demonstrates that everyday practices, hierarchies, and workplace cultures are infused with assumptions that privilege men while marginalising women. In South Africa's mining sector, such dynamics are particularly entrenched due to the historical association of mining leadership with masculine ideals of strength, endurance, and authority (Booyesen, 2007). By drawing on feminist organisational theory, the study seeks to interrogate how these implicit norms shape executive directorships, systematically restricting women's advancement while legitimising male dominance as the default mode of leadership.

This framework also provides a basis for analysing how women's agency interacts with structural and cultural conditions. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory shows that women leaders are often penalised when their behaviours are perceived to conflict with traditional gender expectations. Intersectional feminist scholarship further underscores that women's experiences are not uniform but shaped by the interplay of race, class, and culture, which intersect to produce differentiated outcomes in leadership opportunities (Crenshaw, 1991; Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010). In the mining sector, these intersections magnify inequality by reproducing not only gender bias but also racialised and class-based exclusions. Adopting a

feminist organisational lens, therefore, allows the study to capture these layered barriers and to reveal how structural norms are reinforced through everyday organisational practices.

Finally, situating the study within feminist organisational theory makes it possible to move beyond narrow “fix the woman” approaches, which emphasise individual skills training or mentorship, and instead to examine the deeper cultural and institutional reforms required to transform leadership pathways. Scholars such as Ely and Meyerson (2000) and Booysen (2021) highlight that lasting change requires rethinking leadership as a relational and inclusive practice, embedded in organisational accountability rather than left to individual resilience. By applying this framework, the study not only illuminates the lived realities of women navigating mining leadership but also lays the theoretical foundation for reimagining equity-driven organisational models. This enables the development of practical strategies, such as equity accountability mechanisms and cultural audits, that aim to disrupt entrenched masculinities and reconstitute leadership in more inclusive and sustainable ways.

Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

1.9.1 Theoretical Gap

Although studies on women’s leadership have increasingly engaged with frameworks such as Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, and the Glass Ceiling metaphor, these remain insufficient to explain the persistence of inequality in highly masculinised industries like mining. For instance, Human Capital approaches (Becker, 1993; Mincer & Polachek, 1974) frame women’s underrepresentation as a product of skills, education, or work–family trade-offs, yet they overlook the systemic cultures that continually devalue women’s contributions. Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) helps explain stereotypes that position women as less suited for leadership, but it under-theorises how these stereotypes are institutionally reproduced through organisational practices. Similarly, the “glass ceiling” concept (Morrison et al., 1987; Cotter et al., 2001) captures structural barriers but often presents them as static rather than dynamically reinforced by everyday workplace norms. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Booysen & Nkomo, 2010) has been pivotal in exposing the layered disadvantages faced by women of colour in South Africa, but its application in mining leadership research remains thin, often treated as an abstract add-on rather than a central analytical tool. As Acker (2006) and Ely & Meyerson (2000) argue, organisations themselves are gendered, yet feminist organisational theory has rarely been systematically applied to the mining sector. The result is a fragmented theoretical field, oscillating between deficit models that “fix the woman” and structural critiques that stop short of providing integrated explanations of persistent exclusion.

1.9.2 Empirical Gap

Empirically, most South African studies on gender in mining have been compliance-oriented, focusing narrowly on the implementation of the Mining Charter and numeric representation (Department of Mineral Resources, 2018; Botha, 2020). While such research demonstrates whether targets are met, it neglects the lived realities of women who must navigate hostile cultures and masculine norms. Empirical work has

identified barriers such as discrimination, lack of mentorship, and exclusion from networks (Booyesen, 2007; Mathur-Helm, 2011), but these studies typically stop at description, offering limited insight into how women actively resist, adapt, or reshape organisational practices. Internationally, research has shown how women adopt resilience, ambition, and confidence strategies to advance (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013), but there is little empirical exploration of how these strategies are constrained in sectors where systemic cultures remain resistant to change. Furthermore, existing South African research has disproportionately focused on entry- and mid-level experiences, with limited empirical engagement with women at executive or board level in mining (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). This neglects a critical site of power and influence where transformation should be most visible.

Significance of Addressing the Gap

The persistence of these gaps undermines both theory and practice. Despite decades of equity legislation and mining charters, women remain severely underrepresented at the executive level (Botha, 2020; DMR, 2018), indicating that barriers are more deeply rooted than current research frameworks can capture. As Ely & Meyerson (2000) argue, transformation fails when diversity efforts are compliance-driven rather than embedded in the cultural and structural fabric of organisations. The current study therefore addresses a dual gap: theoretically, by grounding the analysis in feminist organisational theory and intersectionality to capture the gendered nature of mining institutions (Acker, 2006; Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010); and empirically, by foregrounding the lived experiences of women executive directors, whose voices have been marginalised in both South African and global scholarship. This positioning not only advances knowledge but also provides mining organisations and policymakers with sector-specific, evidence-based insights into why current interventions are insufficient. In doing so, the study responds to the urgent call for research that moves beyond counting women to critically interrogating how leadership pathways are legitimised, resisted, or denied in one of the most gendered sectors of the economy.

Delimitations of the Study

This research is deliberately delimited to focus exclusively on female executive directors directly involved in the operational and strategic management of mining companies in Gauteng, rather than on non-executive or board-level directors. This distinction is critical, as executive directors engage daily with the entrenched masculine organisational cultures, hierarchical power relations, and operational decision-making processes that directly shape gendered leadership experiences. By contrast, non-executive directors, whose primary role is governance and oversight, experience different forms of gendered exclusion that are outside the scope of this study.

Geographically, the study is confined to Gauteng Province, South Africa's economic and mining corporate hub. Gauteng hosts the headquarters of major mining houses and is the locus of strategic decision-making in the industry, making it a suitable context for examining gendered leadership dynamics. Sectorally, the research is limited to companies operating in gold and mineral mining, as these subsectors have historically

been the most male-dominated and thus provide a compelling context for investigating persistent gendered barriers.

The study is further delimited by its disciplinary orientation. It is situated within the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, focusing on the interaction between individuals and organisational structures. Accordingly, it interrogates themes such as organisational culture, leadership dynamics, psychological wellbeing, and career progression, rather than legal, economic, or purely technical aspects of mining operations.

Research Population

The research population comprises female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector, specifically those responsible for day-to-day organisational leadership, operational decision-making, and strategic implementation. These women occupy positions at the highest level of executive management, where they are accountable for driving organisational performance and transformation agendas.

The severe under-representation of women in executive roles in South African mining justifies the choice of this population. Although women's participation in the mining workforce has grown from approximately 3% in 2002 to 15% by 2018 following the introduction of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) (Minerals Council South Africa, 2018; Botha, 2017), their representation in executive directorship remains disproportionately low, with recent estimates placing it at less than 5% (Minerals Council SA, 2023; Nkosi, 2024). Furthermore, studies have consistently reported that women in mining continue to face barriers such as gender stereotyping, exclusion from influential networks, and limited access to leadership development opportunities, despite policy reforms intended to advance gender equity (Chamber of Mines of South Africa, 2017; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

By concentrating on this specific population, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the few women who have managed to attain executive leadership in this highly gendered sector. Their narratives are expected to illuminate not only the barriers they face but also the strategies and organisational interventions that could be scaled to support more equitable leadership pipelines in mining.

The study will use the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to select the participants for data collection:

The researcher will apply clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the study sample is both contextually appropriate and analytically robust. The inclusion criteria specify that only female executive directors who are actively engaged in the day-to-day operations of mining organisations will be eligible to participate. This focus ensures that the research captures the lived realities of women directly involved in operational leadership and decision-making processes, rather than those whose roles are primarily advisory or governance oriented. Furthermore, participants must have held executive leadership positions for a minimum of two years, a requirement that safeguards against superficial accounts by ensuring that participants have acquired sufficient experiential depth in navigating organisational and structural

leadership challenges. In addition, the study is geographically delimited to Gauteng province, reflecting its strategic centrality to South Africa's mining economy, and restricted to women working specifically within the mineral and gold mining subsectors, given their dominance in shaping the industry's leadership and governance structures.

In contrast, the exclusion criteria prevent the inclusion of participants whose experiences fall outside the scope of the research objectives. Women in junior or middle-management roles are excluded, as the study is focused on executive leadership rather than managerial pathways. Female directors with less than two years of experience in executive roles are also excluded to maintain a level of analytical maturity in the data. Non-executive directors are excluded since their responsibilities are largely oversight and governance-based, rather than being embedded in the operational and strategic execution of mining organisations. Male directors and employees are excluded, as the study is concerned explicitly with gendered barriers to women's leadership. Likewise, female directors based outside Gauteng or employed in mining sectors beyond minerals and gold are excluded to preserve contextual coherence and sectoral relevance.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

The study employed a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy, which was deemed most appropriate given the precise nature of the research population. Non-probability sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants based on predetermined inclusion criteria rather than random selection, ensuring that the chosen sample accurately reflects the targeted group relevant to the research questions (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020; Pandey & Pandey, 2021). This approach is particularly suitable for qualitative research aimed at exploring context-specific, in-depth experiences, rather than achieving statistical generalisability (Sutton & Austin, 2023). In this case, the population of interest comprises female executive directors actively involved in the day-to-day operational and strategic leadership of mining companies in Gauteng, rather than board-level or non-executive directors. The focus on this specific group ensures that the data collected directly speaks to the lived realities of women navigating the operational and leadership challenges of executive roles in a highly gendered industry.

1.13.1 Purposive Sampling

The study specifically utilised purposive sampling, which is widely recognised as the most suitable strategy for exploratory qualitative research where participants must possess unique and contextually relevant knowledge (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Taherdoost, 2021). Purposive sampling allows for the deliberate selection of information-rich cases, enabling the researcher to obtain detailed and nuanced insights into the barriers, challenges, and organisational dynamics faced by women in executive mining leadership (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). This is particularly important in research seeking to understand complex social phenomena, such as gendered power dynamics and organisational exclusion, which are best explored through the perspectives of those with direct experiential knowledge (Nowell et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2024).

1.13.2 Sample Size and Data Saturation

The researcher aims to include between 15 and 20 participants, though this number may extend beyond if required, as the guiding principle is data saturation rather than numerical representativeness. In qualitative research, sample size is not predetermined by statistical formulas but instead by the point at which additional data collection no longer generates new themes or significant insights (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2022). Data saturation ensures that the findings are both credible and sufficiently rich to support methodological rigour, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morse, 2015).

This approach is particularly appropriate given the highly specialised and underrepresented population under investigation—female executive directors directly involved in the day-to-day leadership of mining companies in Gauteng, who account for less than 5% of executive roles in South Africa’s mining sector (Minerals Council South Africa, 2023; Nkosi, 2024). Because this group is small and contextually unique, purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with the depth of experiential knowledge required to illuminate gendered barriers and organisational dynamics (Etikan & Bala, 2017). While previous studies suggest that saturation is often achieved with 12–15 participants in relatively homogenous groups (Vasileiou et al., 2018; Guest et al., 2020), this study anticipates extending up to 25 participants if needed, to account for variations shaped by race, tenure, company size, and ownership structure (Crenshaw, 1989). By relying on saturation as a marker of adequacy rather than fixed numbers, the design ensures that the diversity and complexity of participants lived experiences are fully captured, thereby enhancing both the depth and validity of the findings.

Data collection instruments

The research will employ open-ended questions and utilise Google Forms as the primary tool for data collection. This approach is well established in contemporary scholarship, as the integration of online platforms has proven effective in reaching specialised or hard-to-access populations (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). Cater (2011) further demonstrates that digital tools are not limited to quantitative surveys but have been effectively adapted for qualitative interviews and focus groups, offering flexibility for both participants and researchers. Google Forms, in particular, has been identified as a reliable and credible instrument for capturing detailed qualitative data, with Iqbal et al. (2018) showing that it enables participants to provide thoughtful, reflective responses at their convenience. Haddad and Kalaani (2014) similarly note that although once considered unconventional, Google Forms has been successfully employed in formative research, exceptionally where professional participants’ time is constrained.

The research will specifically benefit from Google Forms because it accommodates the demanding schedules of female executive directors in South Africa’s mining sector, allowing them to engage with the study asynchronously without the logistical burden of scheduling face-to-face sessions. This ensures both accessibility and inclusivity while preserving data quality. Moreover, as Revilla and Couper (2019) argue, web-based surveys reduce transcription errors and enhance data accuracy by allowing responses to be

exported directly into analytical software. Open-ended formats in such platforms are especially valuable in leadership and gender studies, as they provide richer narratives and unanticipated insights that structured questions often overlook (Singer & Couper, 2017). In addition, Schonlau and Couper (2016) highlight that digital survey tools enable efficient handling of large qualitative datasets, enhancing both rigour and credibility. Thus, the use of Google Forms in this study reflects a deliberate methodological choice that combines convenience, validity, and depth, ensuring a robust platform for exploring the lived experiences of women in executive mining leadership.

1.14.1 Open-Ended Questions aligned with the Objectives

The research will utilise open-ended interview questions designed to elicit rich, in-depth narratives that capture the lived experiences of female executive directors in the South African mining sector. These questions are directly aligned with the study's objectives and are framed to encourage participants to share personal insights, contextual reflections, and practical recommendations. Open-ended questions are particularly valuable in qualitative research, as they provide participants with the freedom to shape their responses in ways that reflect their realities, thereby uncovering perspectives and themes that might otherwise remain hidden (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kallio et al., 2016). The questions are organised according to the three overarching objectives of the study: barriers to entry, challenges encountered in leadership, and organisational as well as individual initiatives for advancing gender-inclusive leadership.

Table 1.1: Research Questions and Objectives

Research Objective	Research Question	Interview Questions
1. To explore the barriers to entry to directorship positions for women in the mining sector.	What are the barriers to entry to directorship positions for women in the mining sector?	- What are the reasons behind the lack of female representation in directorship positions? Please explain these reasons and indicate which you consider most detrimental. - What advice would you share with aspiring women seeking promotion into directorship roles?
2. To investigate the challenges female directors face in the mining sector.	What challenges do female directors face in the mining sector?	- What challenges do you experience as a woman in a directorship position, and how do you manage them? - How many women and men currently hold directorship roles in your organisation?
3. To explore organisational and individual initiatives that can increase female representation in directorship positions in the mining sector.	What organisational and individual initiatives can increase female representation in directorship positions in the mining sector?	- Are there any organisational policies specifically supporting female directors in your company? - What retention strategies exist for female directors? - In your opinion, are there barriers within your unit that limit the empowerment of women? Please provide an example. - What can women themselves do to enhance their chances of success in directorship roles? - What personal strategies or initiatives have you employed to strengthen female representation in your leadership journey?

1.14.2 Gatekeeper Engagement and Access Strategy

The researcher will employ a structured and ethically sensitive strategy to engage organisational gatekeepers, particularly human resource managers and senior administrative officers, who hold the authority to permit access to female executive directors within mining companies. Gatekeepers are not passive intermediaries; rather, they are active actors whose decisions can significantly influence the boundaries of fieldwork, access to participants, and the overall quality of the research (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007; Wanat, 2008). Recognising this, engagement with gatekeepers will be grounded in transparency, respect, and strict adherence to internationally accepted research ethics principles.

The research process began with a formal request to the identified gatekeepers, supported by the researcher's institutional letter of introduction and the ethical clearance certificate issued by North-West University (Ethical Clearance Number: NW-00611-22-A4). These documents established the legitimacy of the study, outlined its objectives, and highlighted the voluntary nature of participation, while assuring confidentiality and anonymity. Their inclusion demonstrated adherence to ethical standards, safeguarding institutional protocols and providing participants with confidence in the integrity of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). This approach reflects the principles of the Belmont Report (1979) respect for persons, beneficence, and justice by ensuring that participants were fully informed of the risks, benefits, and voluntary nature of their involvement, thereby operationalising respect for autonomy (Faden et al., 2013).

Once access is facilitated, the researcher will ensure that gatekeeper endorsement does not override individual autonomy. Each potential participant will be approached directly and provided with informed consent documentation, consistent with ethical scholarship emphasising that institutional approval cannot substitute for personal consent (Farrimond, 2013; Wiles et al., 2008). Only those who indicate a clear willingness to participate will be granted access to a secure Google Forms link, through which they may complete the study's open-ended questions at their own convenience. Participants will also be assured that their responses will remain fully anonymous, that no identifying details will be collected, and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point without negative repercussions. This design aligns with the Belmont principle of beneficence, which requires that risks are minimised while benefits to participants and broader society are maximised (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1979; Emanuel et al., 2000).

Finally, in cases where gatekeepers decline access or express reservations, the researcher will respect such decisions without attempting undue persuasion, acknowledging the organisational sensitivities that accompany executive-level research. By following this approach, the study adheres not only to local institutional guidelines but also to broader international ethical frameworks, ensuring credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness in the research process. This deliberate combination of formal documentation, transparent communication, and rigorous attention to participant autonomy safeguards both

the integrity of the study and the rights of the individuals involved, thereby strengthening its ethical and scholarly legitimacy.

Ethical Framework and Voluntary Participation

The research was underpinned by a robust ethical framework, grounded in both international standards such as the Belmont Report (1979) and local guidelines from the South African Department of Health (2015) on ethical research conduct. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were fully informed of their rights, the study's purpose, and the procedures involved. A secure online consent form clearly outlined the scope of the study, anonymity of responses, and the right to withdraw at any stage without prejudice. No personal identifiers were collected, and responses were anonymised through a secure coding system, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with best practices in qualitative research ethics (Wiles et al., 2008; Resnik, 2023). In recognition of the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, participants were advised that referral support would be available should any emotional discomfort arise, thereby upholding the principle of non-maleficence. This design emphasised respect for autonomy, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that participants' dignity, privacy, and well-being were prioritised throughout the research process.

Data Analysis and Thematic Interpretation

The researcher will use thematic analysis to interpret the data, guided by the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process will begin with familiarisation, where the researcher will read and re-read all Google Form responses to gain a deep understanding of the narratives and to note initial impressions. Reflexive journaling will accompany this stage to capture emerging ideas and maintain awareness of the researcher's positionality, an important practice in ensuring transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research (Patton, 2022).

In the next phase, the researcher will generate initial codes using both inductive and deductive approaches. Deductive coding will be informed by the study's research questions and feminist organisational framework, while inductive codes will emerge directly from participants' lived experiences. These codes will then be collated into potential themes that represent recurring patterns in the data, particularly around gendered leadership, structural barriers, and organisational culture. As Saunders et al. (2023) note, this hybrid approach strengthens the analysis by balancing theoretical alignment with openness to unexpected insights.

The researcher will then review, refine, and define the final themes to ensure they capture the richness and complexity of participants' experiences. To ensure rigour, validation strategies such as maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing will be used, enhancing dependability and confirmability (Riazi et al., 2023). Credibility will be further supported by presenting thick descriptions of context and participant narratives, allowing readers to assess the transferability of findings (Bingham, 2023). In this way, thematic analysis will provide a systematic yet flexible approach to uncovering the barriers and enablers of women's executive leadership in the mining sector.

Limitations of the Study

This study will not be without limitations and acknowledging them will be vital for situating the findings responsibly. A key restriction will relate to the geographical and industrial focus. The study will be confined to Gauteng province and will concentrate primarily on gold mining organisations. While this will allow for a rich, context-specific exploration of women's lived experiences at the executive director level, it will inevitably limit the transferability of the findings to other provinces, such as Limpopo or the North West, or to other subsectors like coal, platinum, or junior mining, where leadership structures and gender dynamics may differ. To address this, the researcher will employ purposive sampling to ensure that only participants who actively hold executive director roles in mining companies are included. Data collection will continue until thematic saturation is reached, thereby strengthening the validity of insights. While the study will not aim for statistical generalisability, the methodological rigour applied will provide a credible foundation for analytical transferability to similar contexts.

A second limitation will concern the data collection method. Using Google Forms with open-ended questions will provide participants with flexibility, anonymity, and accessibility, particularly valuable for executive directors with demanding schedules. Still, it may constrain opportunities for in-depth probing and the capture of non-verbal cues that in-person interviews could offer. This potential shortcoming will be mitigated by piloting and refining the questions to ensure they encourage rich, reflective responses aligned with the research objectives. Furthermore, the absence of an interviewer will reduce the risk of social desirability bias, enabling participants to share more candidly. Resource constraints may also restrict the use of additional methods such as focus groups or field observations. To compensate, the researcher will embed the analysis within well-established theoretical frameworks, maintain a transparent audit trail of analytic decisions, and employ reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to strengthen the trustworthiness and confirmability of the findings.

Conclusion

This study sets out to critically examine the structural, institutional, and individual barriers that continue to impede women's access to, and progression within, executive directorship positions in South Africa's mining sector. Despite policy commitments to gender transformation, the sector remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, and women who ascend to leadership often encounter systemic discrimination, cultural biases, and limited organisational support. By grounding the inquiry in multi-theoretical frameworks including Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, Intersectionality, and Glass Ceiling Theory the research will provide a nuanced understanding of the forces that sustain gender inequities in mining leadership. Importantly, this study not only interrogates the barriers but also aims to identify potential pathways for transformation, thereby contributing to both academic scholarship and practical organisational reform.

The chapters that follow are structured as article-based submissions, each addressing a distinct dimension of the research problem while collectively forming a coherent and rigorous narrative. Chapter 2 presents the

first article, which explores the barriers to women's entry into directorship positions in the mining sector, laying the foundation for the study by identifying the structural and cultural factors behind persistent under-representation. Chapter 3 advances the inquiry by focusing on the lived realities of female directors, investigating the everyday challenges they confront in exercising leadership. Chapter 4 builds on these insights by examining both organisational practices and individual strategies that could foster greater inclusion, offering evidence-based initiatives for change. Finally, Chapter 5 synthesises the findings across the articles, drawing together theoretical and practical insights into a set of conclusions and recommendations aimed at informing policy, practice, and future research.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 2: Article 1

Purpose/Objective: To explore the barriers to entry to directorship positions for women in the mining sector.

Focus: Examines the reasons behind the under-representation of women in directorship positions, with attention to structural and cultural barriers.

Chapter 3: Article 2

Purpose/Objective: To investigate the challenges female mining directors confront.

Focus: Analyses the lived experiences of women directors, highlighting interpersonal, organisational, and systemic challenges in navigating leadership roles.

Chapter 4: Article 3

Purpose/Objective: To explore what organisational and individual initiatives can increase female representation in directorship positions in the mining sector.

Focus: Identifies transformative practices, interventions, and strategies that can be adopted by both women and mining organisations to enhance gender inclusion at executive level.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Focus: Synthesises the findings across all articles, drawing out implications for theory, practice, and policy, and providing actionable recommendations for advancing women's leadership in the mining sector.

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CHAPTER 2: BARRIERS TO ENTRY INTO DIRECTORSHIP POSITIONS FOR WOMEN IN THE MINING SECTOR

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Abstract

Orientation: This study examines the barriers hindering women's advancement to female directorships in South Africa's mining sector. It highlights how intrapersonal, structural, and socio-cultural factors intersect to sustain gender inequality in leadership. The research applies a multi-theoretical feminist and organisational lens to unpack these challenges.

Research purpose: The study aims to explore the individual, organisational, and cultural barriers that limit women's access to executive roles in the Gauteng mining sector. It seeks to provide insights for developing strategies to enhance female leadership representation.

Motivation for the study: Despite gender equity policies, women remain underrepresented in mining executive roles. The study examines how entrenched masculine norms and cultural expectations sustain this exclusion while refining theoretical models that explain it.

Research approach, design and method: An interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative method, and an explanatory cross-sectional design with open-ended questions were used. Thematic analysis and reflexive coding were applied to identify recurring barriers.

Main findings: Findings reveal and confirm that women face intertwined intrapersonal, structural, and socio-cultural barriers. These barriers are systemic, mutually reinforcing, and sustained by organisational cultures favouring masculine leadership norms.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations must institutionalise mentorship, succession planning and cultural audits to dismantle gender bias. Leadership norms need redefining to value the inclusive traits of females.

Contribution: Grounded in critical feminist theory, the study advances the Gendered Legitimacy in Organisational Cultures and the Spiritual Legitimacy Deficit Model to show how structural, cultural, and ideological systems delegitimise women's leadership. It offers a transformative framework for challenging patriarchal norms and promoting inclusive leadership in mining.

Keywords: Gendered leadership inequality, Intersectional barriers, Female directorships, Inclusive leadership, Feminist organisational theory

Introduction

This research study explores women's obstacles to obtaining and holding directorship positions, specifically in the mining industry. According to O'Brien et al. (2023), most of the highest-ranking positions are occupied by male executives. Globally, only a handful of women have managed to overcome these barriers, and this trend is also reflected in South Africa (Herbst, 2020). These obstacles hinder women's career advancement and prevent them from moving beyond a certain point. Globally, women face several obstacles that prevent them from obtaining executive directorship positions. This article attempts to examine the barriers women face as they access executive directorship within the mining sector. Unlike the generalised broad studies of leadership, this looks into the executive level of decision-making peculiar to executive directorship.

Theories converge here to give birth to an integrated theoretical framework, which sublimely uses feminism and organisation theory to explain women's hindrances to executive directorship in the mining sector. Most important is role congruity theory from Eagly and Carli (2002), which states that leadership is culture-bound in masculine traits, and this causes a contradiction when evaluating potential candidates for directorship: Eagly and Carli (2002) propose role congruence theory, which indicates that leadership is culturally associated with masculine characteristics, thereby conflicting with women's evaluation for executive directorship. In addition, feminist organisational theory (Connell, 2005; Botha, 2014) provides an analytical framework to understand how structurally patriarchal frameworks in organisations systematically disadvantage women. In this theoretical light, undetermined ones have fallen into the net of shared responsibility for these hindrances, notwithstanding the existence of well-laid policies to address diversity issues.

Building on these theoretical positions, the article proceeds to identify specific barriers to executive directorship. One of the critical questions explored is the reasons behind the ongoing difficulty women face in entering and succeeding in directorial positions. In theoretical terms, these barriers arise from individual deficiencies and organisational cultures resistant to change. Mashele and Alagidede (2022) speak about a lack of mentors and role models, gendered expectations, and discriminatory practices, which have combined to create a situation in which women and their capabilities continue to be undervalued. Contextual factors in the South African mining sector, including historical legacies and local cultural norms, compound this problem (Herbst, 2020; Nkosi, 2024; Makama, 2013). This study thus not only pinpoints the barriers but also ventures into a critical discussion of existing theoretical explanations, making contributions that refine extant models and guide future interventions.

Problem statement

The mining sector remains one of the most economically significant yet persistently gendered industries in South Africa. It contributes significantly to the national GDP, provide employment, attraction foreign investment, and fosters regional development, particularly in provinces like Gauteng. The mining industry acts as the economic engine of the country (Hilson, 2020; Antin, 2013). However, despite these positive aspects, the sector is clouded persistent gender imbalances, especially in leadership positions. Women have made notable inroads in administrative and support functions; however, their representation in executive directorship positions that wield strategic influence and operational control remains alarmingly low (Kgoate, 2022; Tiwari & Malati, 2023). Females represent 17% of the mining workforce in South Africa, but just 7% occupy professionally qualified or middle management positions (DMRE, 2024). Executive leadership is even more skewed: globally, women occupy only 14.2% of executive roles and less than 5% of CEO positions in the mining sector (PwC, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). In South Africa, especially in Gauteng, the statistics remain deeply concerning, highlighting a clear gap between the country's gender equity policies and real experiences on the ground.

This study sets itself apart by using a combination of theoretical perspectives to better understand why women continue to be excluded from senior leadership roles in the mining sector. Drawing on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), Glass Ceiling Theory (Morrison et al., 1987), and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the research offers a more nuanced and interconnected analysis of the barriers women face. Human Capital Theory helps explain how unequal access to education, training, and career development limits women's advancement. Social Role Theory sheds light on how societal expectations about gender influence how women's leadership abilities are perceived. The Glass Ceiling Theory points to the often-unseen but deeply rooted institutional and cultural obstacles that block women's progression into top positions. Building on this, Intersectionality Theory, as extended by scholars like Nkosi (2024) and Areneke et al. (2023), reveals how factors such as race, class, age, religion, and disability combine to create distinct and often more severe challenges, particularly for Black women navigating leadership pathways in Gauteng. While these theories are central to this study, they are by no means exhaustive; other frameworks also contribute to a broader understanding of gendered leadership dynamics in historically male-dominated industries like mining.

Different studies have confirmed the ordinary individual and organisational barriers to leadership positions for women. However, prior studies often treat barriers in isolation. "Why these individual (intrapersonal and interpersonal), structural, and organisational barriers?" Can the cultural and religious barriers, situated within the socio-political and historical context of South Africa's mining sector, provide answers to these questions through the lens of critical feminist theory? It also provides a localised focus on Gauteng, which, despite being the administrative and economic heart of the industry, remains understudied in this specific context. This study aims to explain why the same individual and organisational barriers are consistently identified

across different studies, focusing on cultural and religious barriers as a root cause through the lens of critical feminist theory.

Next, the paper focuses on the research objectives of the study. This is followed by the literature review, which highlights the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, followed by the most common individual, organisational, and cultural challenges faced by females in executive director roles. This is followed by the research methodology used to reach the objectives of the study, the findings, a discussion of the findings, practical implications, recommendations, and limitations of the study.

Research objectives of the study

Primary objective of the study

The primary objectives of the study were to explore the barriers faced by female executive directors in leadership positions in the mining sector in the Gauteng province of South Africa. More specifically, the study was aimed at linking the barriers faced by executive directors to theoretical frameworks through the lenses of critical feminist theory.

Secondary objectives of the study

- The following secondary objectives were formulated to facilitate the achievement of the primary objectives
- To critically analyse the overall barriers encompassing individual barriers that impede women's entry into directorship positions in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To examine the organisational barriers that restrict women's access to executive leadership roles within the mining sector.
- To investigate the cultural constraints that limit the progression of women into directorship roles in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To develop a conceptual framework that explains from the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory, explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious barriers in individual barriers.

Literature review

Theoretical perspectives

The barriers to entry into leadership roles can be broadly *categorised* into individual, structural, socio-cultural, and religious dimensions. The individual barriers are further divided into intrapersonal factors, such as self-perception, confidence levels, and internalised gender norms, and interpersonal factors, including access to mentorship, peer support, and professional networks. From a *theoretical perspective*, understanding the barriers to leadership, particularly within the context of governance, requires an exploration of multiple

intersecting frameworks. The following theories provide a foundational lens: Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) explains disparities through differences in education and experience, while Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) highlight how traditional gender norms shape perceptions of leadership suitability. Structural and symbolic barriers are examined through the ideas of the Glass Ceiling (Morrison et al., 1987), the Glass Cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), and Tokenism Theories (Kanter, 1977), which highlight how organisational environments can perpetuate exclusion.

Gendered Organisations Theory (Acker, 1990) and Gendered Career Socialisation Theory (Cejka & Eagly, 1999) examine how workplace norms and the development of early career trajectories embed systemic bias. Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) underscores the critical role of professional networks in securing leadership positions. Work-Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) portrays the ongoing challenge between personal obligations and professional responsibilities, which often impacts women disproportionately. Meanwhile, psychological frameworks such as Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), Implicit Bias Theory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), and Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995) investigate how deeply rooted beliefs and societal expectations influence performance and self-perception in leadership roles. Together, these theories provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and layered challenges that influence the leadership trajectories of executive directors operating within governance structures.

The barriers to entry into executive directorship positions for women in the mining sector

Individual barriers

The literature suggests that Individual barriers include but are not limited to a lack of assertiveness (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024) and confidence (Steele et al., 2024), female inferiority complex (Islam et al., 2023, Hoyt & Simon, 2024) work-life balance (Nehemia & Lenkoe, 2023; Onyeka, 2022), lack of role models (Kansake et al., 2021), low self-esteem (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021), psychological factors (Larsson & Alvinus, 2020), Lack of skills and qualifications (Coleman, 2020; Kapoor et al., 2021; Arthur-Holmes & Busia, 2021) and a lack of interest (Buss & Rutherford, 2022; Glynn & Maimunah, 2024). Many barriers preventing women from advancing into executive directorship roles in the mining sector are *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal*. These barriers may be subtle, but they significantly impede women's professional advancement. They diminish women's confidence, influence their decision-making processes, and create barriers to assuming leadership positions.

Intrapersonal Barriers

Intrapersonal barriers refer to the internal psychological and emotional challenges that shape how women see themselves and their capabilities. These often include feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem, limited assertiveness, and shyness. Larsson and Alvinus (2020) suggest that such gender-related differences are frequently linked to the perception that women are less equipped to handle workplace pressures. However, this perspective can be problematic, as it tends to place the responsibility on women rather than questioning

the broader structural factors that fuel these perceptions. Many women report feeling as though they must consistently outperform their male peers just to be seen as equally competent, a pressure that often leads to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Mashele and Alagidede (2022) echo this by highlighting how low self-confidence among female leaders often translates into less assertive behaviour, which can then be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness in leadership roles (Schwartz & Blair, 2020). Still, much of the existing literature overlooks how organisational cultures and workplace dynamics actively contribute to and reinforce these internal struggles.

Power motivation significantly influences ambition. Yoong (2022) states that women are less likely than men to seek executive roles unless they meet all qualifications, while men often apply without fulfilling every requirement. This reluctance reveals self-imposed limitations shaped by societal influences. Pick (2024) notes that women struggle to express career ambitions, whereas men are socialised to communicate their goals assertively. Additionally, self-esteem is crucial, with research showing men report higher self-esteem than women (Zuckerman et al., 2016), linked to shyness and risk aversion. The historical marginalisation of women in leadership has intensified feelings of inferiority, causing many to believe they are less capable of such roles (Williams, 2023). While these findings highlight psychological trends, they tend to overlook the impact of institutional cultures and gender norms on these beliefs.

Interpersonal Barriers

Interpersonal barriers, rooted in both social and organisational contexts, continue to shape women's access to and retention in leadership positions within the mining sector. These challenges often revolve around balancing work and family life, meeting caregiving responsibilities, and the lack of consistent support structures. Nehemia and Lenkoe (2023) describe work-life balance as the absence of conflict between professional and personal responsibilities. Many women still carry the primary burden of caregiving, making leadership roles particularly strenuous. This dual pressure managing demands at home and work remains a persistent source of strain (Akobo & Stewart, 2020; Tshipani, 2021), especially in mining environments where long hours and physical intensity are standard (Adriano & Callaghan, 2020). As Chen et al. (2021) point out, leadership positions often require constant availability, which disproportionately disadvantages women with family commitments. Onyeka (2022) adds that women in junior roles frequently lack domestic support, which further limits their ability to rise through the ranks. Another key issue is the limited availability of mentors and role models, especially female ones, who can guide aspiring leaders. Sisodia and Rocque (2023) highlight how powerful it can be to have successful women to look up to; they also caution that while mentorship helps, it cannot substitute for the deeper, structural reforms still lacking in many organisations.

One area where interpersonal and systemic challenges overlap is skill development. Leadership positions require a broad range of competencies, yet access to such developmental pathways is often gendered. According to Abrassart (2013), educational achievement is closely tied to skill acquisition. However, women in mining are frequently discouraged from pursuing technical education from an early age. This

underrepresentation is often explained away as disinterest, but such reasoning fails to acknowledge how mining continues to be seen as a male-dominated and physically demanding field. While Mphokane (2008) recognises that there have been growing efforts to promote gender inclusion and employment equity, this optimistic outlook can sometimes obscure the cultural and institutional obstacles that remain in practice.

Several theoretical perspectives help unpack these dynamics further. Self-concept theory suggests that internalised gender norms can weaken women's leadership ambitions (Eagly & Karau, 2002), while self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) shows that women who lack confidence in their abilities are less likely to pursue leadership opportunities (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). Human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Eagly & Carli, 2007) brings attention to the inequalities in education, skills, and experience that continue to hinder women's leadership readiness. Across these frameworks, recurring themes emerge poor self-confidence, limited assertiveness, and low self-concept, along with gaps in qualifications and professional exposure, continue to act as significant intrapersonal and systemic barriers to women's progression in the mining industry.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers include a lack of orientation (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022), gender bias (Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020), stereotyping (Cundiff, 2022), tokenism (Biwa, 2021), an unwelcoming environment (Foley et al., 2022), restricted career progression (Chikwe et al., 2024), insufficient diversity (Manzi & Heilman, 2021), a shortage of mentorship (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021), stereotypes, and a deficiency in leadership (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). Additional obstacles, such as inadequate career orientation, guidance, and educational training, are commonly faced by women in the mining industry. Research indicates that over the past two decades, there has been a shift in public attitudes toward traditional beliefs and biases that regard women as inferior. Transformations influence this perspective on careers in external factors (Bravo et al., 2017). Ramos et al. (2021) argued that for women to prosper, organisations should do more to release them from traditional beliefs and biases that still regard women as inferior beings who should stay home and be housewives and mothers only.

Gender discrimination is a form of discrimination in which a person is treated *differently or unfairly* based on gender (Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020). When women pursue career advancement, gender stereotyping increases as women move higher up the corporate ladder, which means that they have to face various forms of discrimination (Chang & Milkman, 2019). Chigudu (2021) suggested that the mining industry still constitutes an unattractive work environment because of issues such as discrimination against women, sexual harassment, and prejudice due to marital status or maternity. In the context of globalisation, researchers like Neumayer and De Soysa (2007) suggested that when companies rely on international operations for their existence and foreign nations display biases against engaging with women, overseas employers may fail to recognise the importance of hiring and advancing women.

Stereotyping is a generalised view about the attributes, characteristics, or roles that women and men possess or ought to perform. Ensari and Riggio (2020) and Cundiff (2022) suggested that male stereotyping is one of

the key obstacles to women's advancement. Chikwe et al. (2024) argued that stereotypes about gender, which are formed through norms and social sanctions, provoke resistance to changing practices that favour having men in leadership positions. Flexible working hours can give women, in particular, more control over when and where they work (Kelly et al., 2011). Angelici & Profeta (2024) found that flexible working hours tend to increase men's working hours and encourage more commitment towards work, which may increase their earning potential and consequently narrow the gender wage gap between men and women.

A hostile work environment is also a significant structural barrier. Women who experience abuse may leave their jobs to avoid an unpleasant situation at work. Research findings show that some women in leadership positions experience sexual harassment. This type of behaviour creates an unsafe and hostile work environment. *Limited career advancement opportunities, or the glass ceiling*, are essential Structural Barriers (Randel et al., 2021; Groeneveld et al., 2020). Women encounter considerable obstacles in obtaining training opportunities. Organisations need to focus on meeting the specific requirements of women to remove barriers and promote a diverse workforce. *Lack of diversity* in the workplace can have various negative consequences on an organisation's growth and profitability.

Lack of mentorship opportunities

Mentorship plays a vital role in shaping leadership development, yet it remains a missing piece in the advancement of many women in the mining sector. As Khalid et al. (2017) point out, women often face more barriers in the workplace than their male counterparts, which makes access to mentorship even more essential. Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) describe mentorship as a *dynamic and transformative relationship*, one that not only supports professional growth but also nurtures personal development. Despite its importance, many women continue to be excluded from these opportunities, mainly due to persistent gendered ideas about who fits the image of a leader.

Mohan et al. (2023) highlight that women are frequently associated with *communal traits* such as empathy, nurturing, and collaboration, which, while valuable, are often devalued in leadership spaces that still prioritise stereotypically masculine characteristics. This observation aligns with Eagly and Karau's (2002) *role congruity theory*, which explains how the perceived mismatch between traditional female attributes and leadership expectations creates a barrier to women's upward mobility. Adding to this, Goyal et al. (2023) argue that exclusionary practices such as limiting mentorship access are sometimes defended through *biological essentialism*, reinforcing outdated beliefs about gender and leadership potential.

Although Bravo et al. (2017) acknowledge that some progress has been made in creating more inclusive mentorship environments, deep-rooted structural biases continue to stand in the way of meaningful change. As a result, many women in the mining sector still find themselves without the guidance and support networks that are often critical for leadership success.

Cultural barriers

Cultural barriers consist of patriarchy (Areneke et al., 2023), gender norms, stereotypes (Woods et al., 2024), gender roles (Kulkarni et al., 2023), and lifestyle conflicts (Mahdi Abaker et al., 2023). Seale et al. (2021) stated that *patriarchy* is a social system that privileges senior males over younger people and women. Power is sometimes linked to seniority, which comes with age and tradition. However, women in developing countries such as South Africa are increasingly acquiring more skills and participating more in the labour market (Klasen, 2018). Unfortunately, women still face challenges in their fight against patriarchy and patriarchal norms, both at home and in the workplace, as observed by Adisa et al. (2019). Areneke et al. (2023) and Kansake et al. (2021) still argue that *a woman's place remains in the kitchen*.

However, beliefs around *gender norms and stereotypes* persist and are significantly debated among academics, practitioners, and activists. Gender norms, as well as gender roles, gender socialisation, and gendered power relations, continue to prevail in society. Gender norms are the social rules and expectations that keep gender prejudices intact. Gillard and Iweala-Okonjo (2022) stated that gender norms are still deeply entrenched in the mining industry. *Gender roles* are based on the various expectations that individuals and societies have of individuals based on their sex and society's gender values and beliefs. Explicit and injunctive norms within societies aid in upholding the community's adherence to traditional gender roles. For example, descriptive norms reveal how comparable people behave in specific situations (Bursztyn et al., 2023). Williams (2023) stated that few female directors have children because having children would likely affect their careers. Conversely, many women have voluntarily left their jobs to take care of family responsibilities.

The persistence of cultural barriers in South Africa's mining sector, particularly in Gauteng, reflects deep-rooted patriarchal norms embedded in both formal and informal organisational structures (Areneke et al., 2023; Kansake et al., 2021; Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2020). While Klasen (2018) acknowledges increased female labour participation, this often excludes leadership mobility. These barriers are compounded for Black working-class women by intersecting racial and socio-economic inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Nkosi, 2024). Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (2001) help explain how internalised gender roles and societal expectations discourage women from pursuing leadership. Meritocracy frequently conceals masculine leadership standards, perpetuating bias while creating a false appearance of fairness (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Researchers like Greguletz et al. (2019), Williams (2023), and Keloharju et al. (2022) highlight that caregiving roles and lifestyle pressures hinder women's advancement into leadership positions. This research contends that unless these ideological and structural standards are dismantled, initiatives aimed at achieving gender equity will be merely symbolic rather than genuinely transformative.

Religious and Cognitive Barriers

Religious and cognitive barriers continue to shape and limit women's access to executive leadership in traditionally male-dominated sectors like mining, especially in Gauteng, South Africa, where modern

institutions operate alongside longstanding spiritual and cultural beliefs. In many cases, dominant religious narratives reinforce rigid gender roles, portraying women as caregivers and moral guardians, while positioning men as natural leaders and providers (Adisa et al., 2019; Makama, 2013). Within this framing, women's ambitions in sectors like mining are often seen as *spiritually inappropriate*, prompting resistance not only within organisations but also from their communities.

Adamu (2022) highlights how specific African religious environments openly discourage women from aspiring to leadership, reinforcing deeply embedded patriarchal norms. At the same time, Chitando and Chirongoma (2012) offer a more hopeful perspective, showing that when faith is reinterpreted through more progressive theological lenses, it can create meaningful space for women to lead. This dual nature of religion as both a tool of constraint and a potential source of liberation underscores its complex role in shaping leadership pathways for women. Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) further helps explain how these religious beliefs feed into broader societal norms, where leadership continues to be equated with traditionally masculine traits like independence and assertiveness. In the mining industry, which is physically demanding and high-risk, this masculine ideal is even more pronounced. As a result, attributes often associated with women, such as empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence, are undervalued in leadership selection and performance assessments (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Williams, 2023).

This clash of expectations can produce *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957) for women who are forced to navigate conflicting demands between their leadership ambitions and the religious or familial roles they are expected to uphold. The tension between internal aspirations and external expectations remains a profound obstacle for many women seeking leadership in spaces shaped by deeply ingrained cultural and spiritual norms. Many, as Greguletz et al. (2019) note, limit their careers not due to a lack of capability but to avoid the emotional toll of violating normative expectations. Schulze and Klugman (2023) show that some women subvert these norms by actively redefining their religious identities in ways that support, rather than inhibit, leadership ambitions.

An *intersectional lens* (Crenshaw, 1989) reveals that religious and cognitive barriers do not operate in isolation. They are compounded by race, age, class, disability, and socio-economic background, further marginalising women, especially Black women, in Gauteng within mining leadership pipelines (Nkosi, 2024; Areneke et al., 2023). For example, caregiving responsibilities and domestic expectations disproportionately affect women; leadership roles are still structured around assumptions of uninterrupted availability and physical mobility conditions historically tailored to male career trajectories (Connell, 2005). Gillard and Iweala-Okonjo (2022) critique this outdated model, which pathologises women's exit from leadership tracks as "choice," ignoring the ideological constraints that shape such decisions. This literature collectively challenges the male-centric archetype of leadership in mining and calls for a fundamental rethinking of the ideological and structural assumptions underpinning leadership access.

Critical feminist theory

Critical feminist theory is a multifaceted framework that examines the intersections of gender, power, and social justice, aiming to critique and transform oppressive structures. It is rooted in the broader tradition of critical theory, which seeks to uncover and challenge power dynamics and inequalities in society. Critical feminist theory emphasises the importance of intersectionality, recognising that gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Critical feminist theory is not merely a theoretical framework; it is also a political commitment to advancing equality and justice. At its core, the theory is guided by several key principles: *intersectionality*, *a critique of power structures*, *a focus on social justice*, *an emphasis on agency and resistance*, and *a challenge to binary ways of thinking*. Intersectionality lies at the heart of critical feminist analysis. It recognises that people's experiences of oppression and privilege are shaped by the interaction of multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability (Waldron & Krane, 2024; Arun, 2022). Rather than assuming a single, universal experience of womanhood, the theory stresses the diversity and complexity of women's lives and the importance of acknowledging these intersecting identities.

Another central concern of the theory is its critique of entrenched power structures. It interrogates how systems of authority and institutional practices uphold gender inequality and other forms of discrimination (Gong, 2023; Howell et al., 1999), and it works to expose and challenge the norms that sustain these hierarchies (Saxe, 2012). The pursuit of social justice is a defining feature of critical feminist thought. It goes beyond critique to actively seek societal transformation, aiming to address and correct deep-rooted inequalities (Cimino, 2014; Ferguson, 2017). As Ferguson (2017) notes, this involves not only academic work but also political engagement efforts that contribute to broader movements for justice, freedom, and equity. Finally, the theory places strong emphasis on *agency and resistance*. It recognises the capacity of individuals and communities to push back against oppression and initiate meaningful change, even within constraining systems (Saxe, 2012). Through this lens, critical feminist theory becomes both a tool for understanding injustice and a pathway toward dismantling it.

It explores various forms of resistance and empowerment, encouraging active participation in social transformation (Saxe, 2012). Critical feminist theory is suspicious of dualistic thinking, advocating for a more fluid understanding of identities and relationships (Ferguson, 2017). It challenges static and binary categorisations, promoting a more nuanced view of social dynamics (Ferguson, 2017).

Research methods

The methodology for this study is grounded in an inductive qualitative approach, aimed at generating rich, context-specific insights into the barriers faced by executive female directors in the mining sector. Data were collected using an online questionnaire comprised of open-ended questions, distributed via email with the assistance of HR managers who acted as gatekeepers. This method was chosen for its cost-effectiveness and

efficiency in reaching a specific and hard-to-access population (Pandey and Pandey, 2021; Taherdoost, 2021; Verma et al., 2024).

Research paradigm, methodology, design and time horizon

The researcher adopted an interpretivist/constructivist approach to understanding the world of human experience, suggesting that reality is socially constructed (Xu et al., 2020). The researcher relied upon studying the participants' views of the situation (Creswell et al., 2003) while recognising the impact of the participants' background and experiences on the study. The researcher used a qualitative research methodology because most qualitative research studies are completed rapidly using smaller sample sizes. An explanatory research design was employed because it goes beyond describing characteristics and finding causes of phenomena. The researcher conducted a cross-sectional study where the selected participants were chosen solely by using an addition and subtraction yardstick.

Population, sample and sampling technique

The study population comprised female executive directors within the mining sector, specifically those holding executive directorial positions in Gauteng. This population was deliberately selected to capture diverse, highly relevant perspectives on the barriers to female leadership in the industry. This study intentionally excluded non-executive directors, who are primarily responsible for governance oversight, ensuring accountability, and maintaining compliance with laws and policies, as they were not the focus of the investigation (Tricker, 2015). Instead, the research concentrated specifically on executive directors, who play a hands-on role in the day-to-day management of their organisations. These leaders are central to driving strategic vision, spearheading innovation, and leading transformational change (Kotter, 1996).

The research was conducted within Gauteng, a key economic hub and the heart of South Africa's mining industry, where many corporate headquarters and strategic decisions are based (Smith, 2020). To identify suitable participants, a purposive sampling approach was adopted. This non-random method was selected to ensure that all respondents met clearly defined inclusion criteria aligned with the study's focus on female executive leadership in mining. The final number of participants was determined through the principle of data saturation. This means that data collection continued until no new themes or insights were emerging from the interviews. Saturation was assessed through ongoing coding and thematic analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding before closing the data collection phase. Although qualitative studies do not require a predetermined sample size, existing literature suggests that approximately 25 participants are often sufficient to capture a diverse range of insights within specialised professional groups (Pandey & Pandey, 2021; Taherdoost, 2021; Verma et al., 2024).

By applying a rigorous purposive sampling strategy and focusing exclusively on executive directors, the study ensured that the findings remained relevant to the lived experiences of women in leadership roles within the mining sector, rather than broadly reflecting women's experiences in corporate governance. As reflected in Table 2.1, the sample was primarily composed of Black female executives, offering valuable insights into an underrepresented demographic in senior leadership.

Table 2.1: Participants Demographic Profile (N=25)

Demographic Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Ethnicity (Total = 100%)	Black	53.8%
	White	38.5%
	Coloured	7.7%
Marital Status (Total = 100%)	Married	31.0%
	Single	23.0%
	Divorced	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	15.2%
Age Group (Total = 100%)	51–69 years	57.1%
	36–50 years	42.9%
Highest Educational Qualification (Total = 100%)	Bachelor's degree	61.5%
	Master's degree	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	7.7%
Mining Industry Sector (Total = 100%)	Gold Mining	62.0%
	Mineral and Quarrying	19.0%
	Coal Mining	19.0%

Data collection instrument

The researcher used open-ended questions on Google Forms. Online technologies for qualitative data collection have become commonplace within academia (Moises, 2020). Google Forms was chosen as the data collection instrument due to its user-friendly interface, ability to handle open-ended responses, and ease of data management and analysis.

The following open-ended questions were asked:

- What individual-level, organisational, cultural, and religious factors hinder women's access to executive directorship roles in the mining sector?
- How do organisational practices and structures contribute to these barriers in the Gauteng mining sector?
- In what ways do cultural norms and gendered stereotypes influence the underrepresentation of women in executive directorship positions in this context?

Data collection process

The North-West University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval on 28 November 2022 (NWU-0061-22-A4). The Human Resource (HR) managers were contacted through a formal letter sent via email, requesting that they communicate the study details to the female executive directors. This correspondence asked the HR managers to communicate the study details to the female executive directors within their organisations. The details encompassed the study's primary aim, its objectives, the methodology

whereby the data would be collected, and ethical considerations such as the fact that the acquired data would be utilised for academic purposes only. Moreover, it enquired whether the company's female directors were willing to participate in the study. The HR manager emailed the female directors a link to the consent form and open-ended questions. Those willing to participate in the study were requested to click the link and complete the consent form online. There was a second link to a Google Forms document comprising open-ended questions. The participants completed the form and submitted their answers online. No form of identification was required. To ensure that all the questions were answered, the form was set up so that it would be impossible to move on to the next section without completing the previous section.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using qualitative data from a Google Forms questionnaire. To ensure credibility and minimise bias, best practices such as iterative coding, cross-checking, and reflexive analysis were followed (Naeem et al., 2020). Responses were exported to Google Spreadsheets for structured management, coding, and theme development, in line with digital methods proposed by Voutilainen et al. (2021). The manual, reflexive process began with repeated readings and colour-coded coding, identifying recurring patterns and beliefs. An audit trail and continuous reflexivity supported dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Manual coding was intentionally chosen over CAQDAS tools like NVivo to deepen engagement with the data and enhance interpretive insight (Verma et al., 2024; Taherdoost, 2021; Pandey & Pandey, 2021). This approach fostered proximity to participant narratives and critical reflexivity (Nowell et al., 2017), though it was time-intensive and limited by the lack of probing, typical of online surveys. These limitations were mitigated through iterative review and independent validation (Zakharovskiy & Németh, 2021). Rigour was maintained through deliberate strategies to uphold methodological integrity. Credibility was ensured by aligning data collection with the research questions (Kyngäs et al., 2020). A transparent presentation of participant diversity supported Transferability. Dependability was strengthened through a systematic process and audit trails, including memos and summary forms (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016; Coleman, 2022): reflexivity and transparent documentation reinforced confirmability, aligning with current qualitative research standards.

Findings

These findings are linked to the first secondary objective, which is to critically analyse the overall barriers encompassing individual barriers that impede women's entry into directorship positions in the Gauteng mining sector.

Individual Barriers

The findings of the study enabled the researcher to categorise and summarise the key themes that emerged as barriers to women's advancement into executive directorship positions. These themes were classified into two primary domains: intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers. Intrapersonal barriers, those rooted within the

individual, include issues such as low self-confidence, lack of belief in one's capabilities, poor self-image, low self-esteem, and feelings of inferiority. These internalised limitations often stem from prolonged exposure to gendered socialisation and workplace marginalisation. On the other hand, interpersonal and career-related barriers encompass factors such as difficulties in achieving work-life balance, lack of relevant skills or qualifications, the underrepresentation of women applying for senior roles, limited interest in the mining sector, lack of workplace flexibility, and the absence of visible female role models. These findings are presented in Figure 2.1 below, which outlines the dominant themes derived from participant responses and their frequency across the dataset.

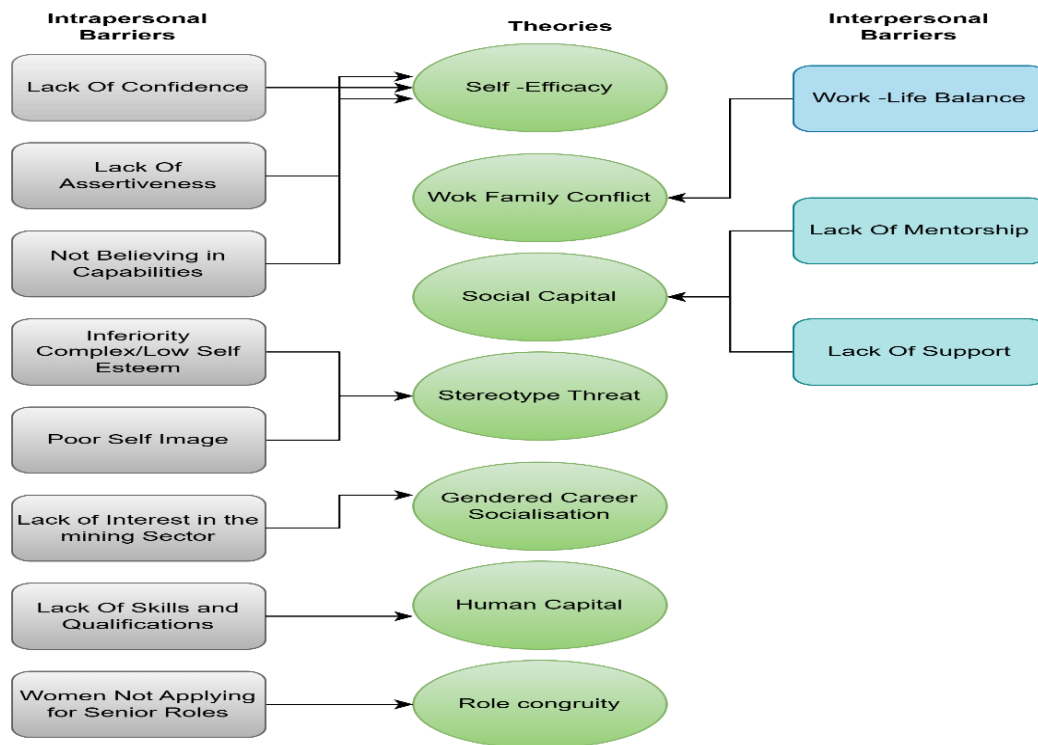


Figure 2.1: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Barriers linked to Theoretical Framework

The findings show that *lack of confidence*, *self-doubt*, and *poor self-perception* are significant barriers preventing women from pursuing executive roles in the mining sector. Resp. 5 stated, “*Women lack confidence... they do not feel worthy of taking on senior roles,*” while Resp. 14 added, “*There are no limits, but most women do not have the confidence even to apply.*” A lack of belief in their capabilities was also common. Resp. 6 noted, “*Even if women have the qualifications, they lack belief in their capabilities.*” Additionally, societal expectations and family responsibilities further hinder progress, with Resp. 11 pointing out, “*Motherhood is one of the primary reasons women are held back.*” The absence of role models was another challenge, as Resp. 23 highlighted, “*There is a lack of female role models in leadership.*” These utterances reflect the deep-rooted personal and societal barriers women face in advancing to executive positions in mining.

Structural Barriers

To address the second secondary research objective: to examine the organisational barriers that restrict women's access to executive leadership roles within the mining sector.

We explored a range of structural impediments as identified through participant narratives. These structural barriers, deeply embedded in organisational practices and policies, were thematically analysed to uncover recurrent patterns that hinder women's advancement. Figure 2.2 below presents the dominant themes from the data, reflecting participants' perceptions and experiences. Each theme represents a specific structural barrier and is accompanied by the frequency of its occurrence across the dataset, thereby highlighting its relative prominence in the organisational context of the mining sector.

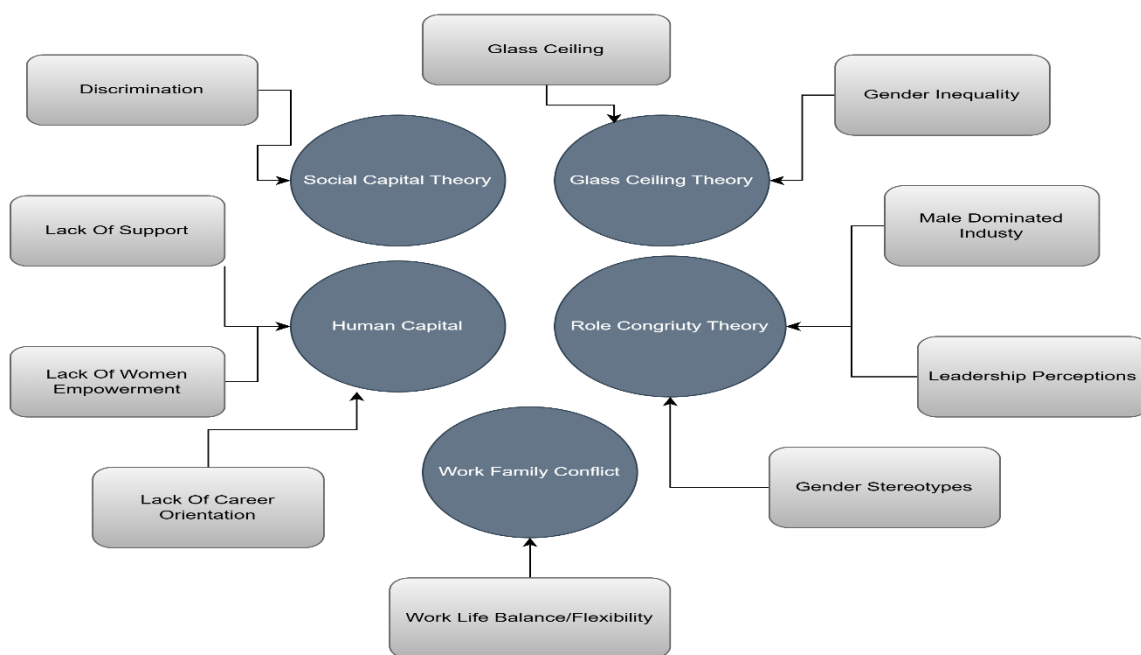


Figure 2.2: Organisational Barriers linked to theoretical Framework

The findings of this study reveal a persistent and deeply embedded system of gender based exclusion that hinders women's access to executive directorships in the Gauteng mining sector. Participants highlighted discrimination as a significant barrier, with Resp. 11 noting that "many corporate leaders are prejudiced against women in the workplace because they view a woman as a potential setback," and Resp. 24 calling for an end to "discrimination against working mothers." Outdated leadership stereotypes continue to disadvantage women, as Resp. 2 remarked, "being a woman works against you... you are perceived as weak," while Resp. 12 emphasised that "leadership traits are still seen as masculine." The mining sector's male-dominated culture further compounds these barriers, as noted by Resp. 9, who stated that "there has hardly been any focus on women in the mining sector." The lack of mentorship, empowerment, and career orientation contributes to a cycle of exclusion, with Resp. 19 citing the "lack of mentorship and sponsorship"

as a significant obstacle. These utterances collectively underscore the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that continue to sustain gender inequality at the highest levels of mining leadership.

Socio-Cultural barriers

This category corresponds to the third secondary research objective: To investigate the cultural constraints that limit the progression of women into directorship roles in the Gauteng mining sector.

Figure 2.3 below summarises the thematic analysis derived from participant responses, highlighting the dominant socio-cultural barriers identified throughout the dataset. These themes reflect deeply ingrained societal norms and cultural expectations that continue to shape perceptions of women's leadership potential and influence their career trajectories within the mining industry.

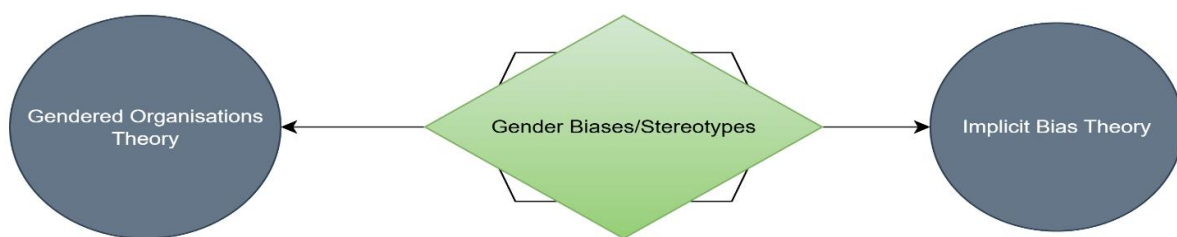


Figure 2.3: Socio-cultural barriers linked to Theoretical Framework

The findings highlight that gender bias and stereotyping remain significant obstacles to women's advancement into leadership roles. Respondents described how women are often perceived as less competent than men, with Resp. 6 stating, *"Men are often seen as more competent and capable of leadership than women."* These perceptions, reinforced by workplace norms, discourage the promotion of women into senior positions. Resp. 11 noted that *"gender biases and stereotyping work against professional women's leadership aspirations,"* while Respondents 19 and 10 echoed similar concerns. These views reflect the influence of Gendered Organisations Theory and Implicit Bias Theory, suggesting that structural inequality is maintained through policy, cultural expectations, and unconscious bias. To enable real progress, organisations must confront and disrupt these persistent stereotypes.

The last objective was to develop a conceptual framework that explains from the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory, explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious barriers in individual barriers. This model, a graphic representation, is presented in Figure 2.4 below.

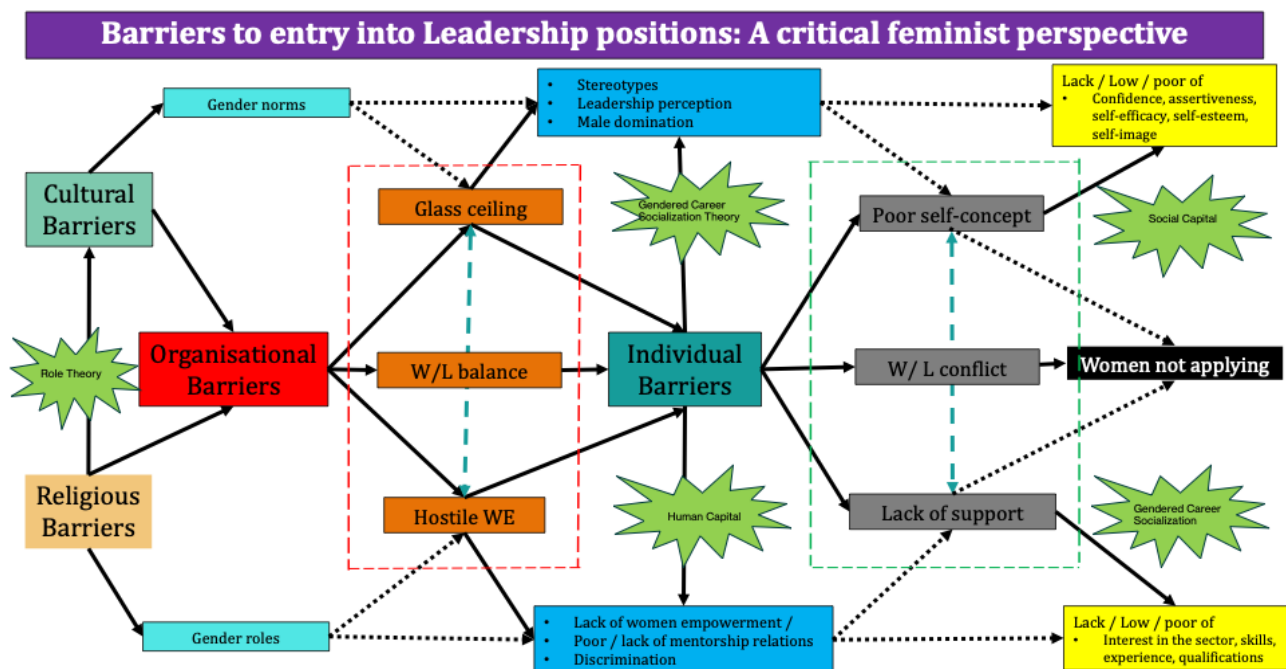


Figure 2.4: A conceptual model depicting integrated theoretical perspectives on female barriers

Discussion of findings of the study

The majority of participants were highly educated women over the age of 45, many of whom held postgraduate qualifications and possessed decades of work experience in the industry. These profiles starkly contradict assumptions embedded in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which postulates that qualifications and experience should naturally translate into career advancement. The lived experiences of these women instead reveal the insufficiency of human capital in patriarchal systems where advancement is not based on competence but on conformity to gendered and ideological norms. Their exclusion points to a deeper systemic failure and an organisational and cultural matrix that disqualifies female legitimacy at the executive level, irrespective of merit. This finding critically undermines the notion of meritocracy and demands a reassessment of how leadership is constructed, conferred, and legitimised.

Individual Barriers: Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Dimensions

Individual barriers emerged in this study through both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics. Intrapersonal, women described struggles with imposter syndrome, internalised self-doubt, and hesitancy to apply for senior roles despite their qualifications. This submission would argue that from the feminist critical perspective, these challenges are not merely psychological anomalies but instead represent the long-term effects of structural and cultural invalidation. Karelaia and Guillén (2014) assert that such internalised doubt is the result of organisational environments that repeatedly undermine women's perceived legitimacy. Ely and Meyerson (2000) describe these ingrained patterns not as personal shortcomings but as tactical responses to unfriendly work settings. Respondents articulated how they have learned to downplay ambition or soften their leadership style to avoid being labelled "too aggressive," which aligns with Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory. These intrapersonal effects are closely linked to interpersonal exclusion. Participants

consistently highlighted the lack of mentorship, sponsorship, and informal access to male-dominated leadership networks. These interpersonal barriers are not simply incidental but reflect structurally gendered networking cultures, as identified in Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001). Despite their experience and credentials, participants reported being overlooked for advancement because of their limited access to key relational capital. The result is a form of epistemic exclusion where women's knowledge, presence, and leadership styles are rendered peripheral.

This internal-external interplay is exacerbated by stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Women anticipated that their performance would be scrutinised through gendered lenses, discouraging risk-taking and encouraging retreat from leadership contention. As such, what appears as a lack of confidence or ambition is a rational response to environments that penalise female authority. Women are thus not only excluded but actively taught to exclude themselves from pathways to leadership. This submission would also argue that whatever we observe as individual factors is the direct consequence of the structural organisational practices as gendered mechanisms. Therefore, instead of looking at females for reasons why they are not sufficiently represented on the higher echelons of mining companies, we should instead look at the environment and the patriarchal organisational culture framed by cultural and religious beliefs in which they function.

Structural Barriers: Organisational Practices as Gendered Mechanisms

Structural barriers in the mining sector are deeply embedded and systemic, rather than incidental or temporary. These barriers are reflected in recruitment, promotion, and evaluation practices that continue to reward traits aligned with masculine norms, availability, assertiveness, and individualism while undervaluing relational or collaborative leadership behaviours. This aligns with Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organisations, where organisational logics implicitly privilege men's life trajectories and leadership styles. Participants described how the structure of work itself was exclusionary, with expectations of extended availability and constant travel, all predicated on the assumption of a male worker unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities. Williams et al. (2012) refer to this ideal as the "unencumbered worker," a norm which serves to discipline and marginalise those who cannot or do not conform. This inflexible structure contributes to a career standstill, especially for women who are managing various responsibilities both at work and at home.

Moreover, leadership development and succession planning are rarely institutionalised in ways that support women's advancement. Mentorship remains informal and inaccessible to many, especially in hypermasculine sectors like mining. This exclusion from leadership pipelines is not simply a matter of oversight but represents a strategic reproduction of masculine dominance within executive spaces. As Fletcher (1999) demonstrates, organisations frequently misrecognise or ignore leadership behaviours that do not conform to dominant performance ideals. This misrecognition is a core mechanism of structural exclusion.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Barriers: Ideological Control Mechanisms

Socio-cultural and religious norms function as powerful ideological forces that frame female leadership as morally suspect or culturally inappropriate. In these instances, the perceived transgression was not incompetence, but ambition cast as incompatible with femininity and spiritual purity. This study introduces the Spiritual Legitimacy Deficit Model to explain how religious ideologies, particularly those rooted in conservative Christian traditions, script leadership as a masculine domain. Biblical injunctions such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12: “*A woman must quietly receive **instruction with entire submissiveness**. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.*” 1 Timothy 3:1-3: “*It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do*” and Ephesians 5:22 reads: “*Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as you do to the Lord.*” This verse is part of a larger passage (Ephesians 5:21-33) that discusses the relationship between husbands and wives within a Christian context. It emphasises mutual submission within the church and then specifically addresses the roles of wives and husbands. These verses were cited as discursive tools used by both men and women to restrict the public authority of women. These texts, selectively interpreted, function as what Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) term “moral narratives,” positioning female ambition as morally deviant and spiritually undesirable.

This ideological burden produces a condition of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), where women experience internal conflict between their leadership aspirations and the social roles expected of them. The result is a muted form of self-censorship and withdrawal that functions to reinforce the status quo. Unlike structural barriers, which can potentially be addressed through policy, these socio-cultural constraints are embedded in broader systems of value, identity, and meaning.

Critical feminist theory

Critical feminist theory identifies patriarchy as a dominant structure that enforces male superiority and marginalises women, influencing various societal domains, including education and criminal justice (Omojemite, 2024; Naples, 2018). This theory emphasises the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, and other identities, revealing how these intersections create unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Arun, 2022; Wilkins, 2005). Critical feminist theory scrutinises how institutions, such as schools and legal systems, reinforce gender biases through policies and practices that favor male perspectives (Omojemite, 2024; Henry & Lanier, 2018). It challenges cultural narratives that normalise gender inequality, advocating for a re-evaluation of societal values that uphold discriminatory practices (Naples, 2018; Wilkins, 2005). While critical feminist theory is a powerful tool for analysing and challenging oppression, it is not without its critiques. Some argue that it can lack cohesion due to its diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives, particularly when dominated by relatively privileged voices (Howell et al., 1999). Nonetheless, its commitment to intersectionality and social justice makes it a vital framework for understanding and addressing contemporary social issues.

Interconnectedness: The Ideological Loop of Exclusion

These three categories of barriers, individual, structural, and socio-cultural, are not discrete or additive, but mutually constitutive and ideologically co-produced. Intrapersonal self-doubt arises in response to interpersonal exclusion and structural marginalisation, which are in turn justified and reinforced by cultural and religious ideologies that masculinise authority and delegitimise female ambition. Together, they form what this study identifies as an ideological loop of exclusion. The root cause of this cycle lies in the patriarchal construction of leadership itself. Leadership is seen not as a practice or relational role but as an identity reserved for those who uphold specific gendered, cultural, and religious norms. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity is especially relevant here, as it illustrates how institutional practices maintain the dominance of certain male-coded behaviors while discrediting others. Berdahl et al.'s (2018) Masculinity Contest Culture further explains how hyper-competitive, zero-sum organisational environments undermine inclusive leadership by rewarding emotional suppression and dominance traits that are not only gendered but deliberately exclusionary. This study shows that these forms of exclusion are not accidental but are part of an ideologically structured system. Women are not failing to lead; they are systematically prevented from leadership through the combined influence of institutional policies, organisational culture, and religious morality.

Theoretical Contribution of the Study

This study makes a meaningful contribution to critical organisational theory and feminist scholarship by introducing the *Gendered Legitimacy in Organisational Cultures* (GLOC) framework. GLOC reimagines leadership legitimacy not as an objective measure, but as a socially constructed resource shaped by dominant cultural, religious, and gendered norms. In contrast to theories like Human Capital or Role Congruity, it draws from Acker's (2006) inequality regimes and post-structural feminist critiques, while adding the dimension of spiritual and moral legitimacy.

Building on this, the *Spiritual Legitimacy Deficit Model* developed as part of this study extends Social Role Theory by examining how religious ideologies undermine female ambition, both internally and through institutional practice. By showing how these narratives are absorbed into organisational culture, the model helps explain why gender-equity policies often fail to achieve real structural change. Leadership legitimacy, the study argues, is not simply earned through merit or competence but is embedded in broader systems of meaning. Together, these frameworks call for a move beyond liberal feminist strategies focused on inclusion, toward a more profound transformation of the norms, values, and power structures that define leadership itself.

Practical Implications

These findings indicate a need for immediate action. Organisations should implement mentorship and succession planning for women, with clear accountability to track progress. Cultural assessments must explore the underlying narratives that shape leadership practices. Involving faith-based leaders and cultural

intermediaries is crucial for redefining inclusive leadership standards. Leadership development should focus on emotional intelligence, collaboration, and ethical conduct as essential skills. True organisational transformation requires a comprehensive re-evaluation of leadership, power dynamics, and cultural perceptions of legitimacy.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative, cross-sectional design of this study limits its ability to capture long-term trends. Similar to findings by Botha and Cronjé (2014), the small sample size limits representativeness. Additionally, the research focused exclusively on Gauteng, limiting its geographic scope. However, qualitative depth offers nuanced insights that are not captured in broader surveys. Future research should incorporate mixed methods approaches and expand to rural mining areas and other provinces.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that the underrepresentation of women in executive leadership within South Africa's mining sector is not due to a lack of capability or ambition but is rooted in entrenched structural, cultural, and ideological forces that systematically undermine female authority. The testimonies of highly qualified and experienced women reveal how patriarchal norms embedded in organisational practices, religious beliefs, and societal expectations shape narrow definitions of leadership that continue to privilege masculinised ideals over merit. Rather than viewing exclusion as a policy gap or pipeline issue, this study positions it as a legitimacy crisis. Through frameworks such as the *Gendered Legitimacy in Organisational Cultures (GLOC)* and the *Spiritual Legitimacy Deficit Model*, it becomes clear that leadership legitimacy is not neutral; it is constructed, coded, and often weaponised against women. These models expose how systems of exclusion are not only institutional but also internalised, self-reinforcing, and deeply ideological.

The findings require more than simple reforms. They call for a profound rethinking of what leadership should be, one that breaks down exclusionary norms and rebuilds legitimacy using intersectional, feminist, and culturally aware perspectives. This does not mean abandoning faith or tradition but rather reinterpreting them as tools for equity and justice. As Bracken et al. (2023), Areneke et al. (2023), Saville et al. (2024), and hooks (2000) argue, real change must directly address the moral and cultural roots that support inequality. By identifying the hidden rules that guide leadership, this research provides both a critique and a plan. It encourages institutions and society to reshape leadership into an inclusive, just, and diverse reflection of the people it serves.

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CHAPTER 3: CHALLENGES FACED BY EXECUTIVE FEMALE DIRECTORS IN GAUTENG'S MINING SECTOR

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Abstract

Orientation: This study investigates the persistent challenges faced by female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector, a historically male-dominated industry in South Africa. Despite legislative progress and increased awareness of gender equity, women in senior leadership continue to navigate complex structural, socio-cultural, and interpersonal challenges. Drawing on feminist organisational theory, role congruity theory, and intersectionality, the study examines how leadership is shaped and constrained by power, identity, and institutional dynamics.

Research purpose: To explore the lived experiences of women in mining executive roles, focusing on individual, organisational, and cultural challenges limiting their leadership progression, and to provide insights for strategies that can advance gender equity.

Motivation for the study: Despite transformation policies, women remain underrepresented in mining leadership. This study examines how entrenched masculine cultures, rigid gender norms, and exclusionary practices sustain this underrepresentation while contributing to gender and leadership theory.

Research approach, design and method: A qualitative, inductive approach within a constructivist paradigm was employed. Twenty-five participants, chosen intentionally, responded to open-ended survey questions shared via HR gatekeepers. Thematic analysis identified common challenges.

Main findings: Women leaders face tokenism, gender bias, lack of institutional support, exclusion from influential networks, and internalised constraints such as low confidence. Masculine leadership norms and resistant organisational cultures reinforce these.

Practical implications: Mining organisations should embed mentorship, succession planning and cultural audits to dismantle bias and redefine leadership norms to value inclusive traits.

Contribution: The study advances feminist organisational and leadership theory, emphasising cultural transformation beyond representation, and offers actionable insights for policy reform and leadership development.

Keywords: Female directorship, Gender inequality in mining, Feminist organisational theory, Gendered leadership challenges, Tokenism.

Introduction

This research study explores the challenges faced by women in holding executive directorship positions within the mining industry. Despite ongoing efforts toward gender equity, mining remains a sector where men overwhelmingly occupy top leadership roles (Nguyen et al., 2023; Dlamini & Sefalafala, 2024). Globally, only a small proportion of women have managed to break through the executive ranks, and this pattern is mirrored in South Africa, where female representation at the board level remains minimal (Nkosi, 2024). These challenges significantly hinder women's professional advancement and limit their influence at the highest levels of corporate decision-making. Rather than generalising about women in leadership, this study focuses specifically on the executive tier, where authority, strategic decision-making, and institutional power are concentrated, shedding light on the unique struggles that persist at this level of organisational hierarchy.

The study draws on an integrated theoretical framework, combining feminist theory and organisational theory to interrogate the systemic factors shaping women's exclusion from executive leadership. Central to this is *Role Congruity Theory* (Eagly & Carli, 2002), which argues that leadership is culturally aligned with masculine traits, creating dissonance when women seek roles perceived as requiring dominance and assertiveness. This misalignment undermines their credibility in boardroom settings. *Feminist organisational theory* (Connell, 2005; Botha, 2014; Moyo, 2022) offers further insight, revealing how patriarchal institutional structures and male-dominated corporate cultures systematically marginalise women, regardless of policy-level commitments to diversity. These frameworks illuminate how women in directorships are held to higher standards, frequently excluded from informal networks, and subtly undermined, even when they meet formal criteria for executive competence.

Building on these theoretical foundations, this article critically examines the specific challenges experienced by female executive directors once they are in post. Rather than attributing underrepresentation to a lack of ambition or qualifications, this research reveals a more complex reality shaped by gendered norms, exclusionary organisational cultures, and resistance to institutional change. Recent studies (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Dube & Mahlangu, 2024) highlight how the lack of mentorship, implicit bias in evaluations, and masculinised leadership models converge to constrain women's influence and growth in directorial roles. In the South African mining sector, these challenges are intensified by historical and socio-cultural legacies that position women as outsiders in both leadership and industry. This study, therefore, contributes not only by documenting these challenges but by engaging critically with existing theoretical models to advance a more nuanced understanding of gender and executive power in highly gendered organisational contexts.

Problem statement

Despite decades of global advocacy for gender equity, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership, particularly within male-dominated industries such as mining. As of 2024, women occupy only 29.2% of

senior management roles worldwide and less than 10% of executive director positions in extractive industries, where leadership remains closely aligned with masculine norms and values (Catalyst, 2024; Grant Thornton, 2024). In South Africa, the picture is even more concerning. Although women constitute over 53% of the economically active population, they represent only 17% of the national mining workforce and less than 5% of executive director roles in mining firms (Minerals Council South Africa, 2023; PwC, 2023). These figures have stagnated over the past decade, despite the presence of enabling policies such as the Mining Charter and the Employment Equity Act.

In Gauteng, the economic heart of South Africa's mining industry, the exclusion of women from executive leadership is particularly pronounced. Women who do rise to executive directorships often encounter symbolic inclusion without substantive authority, facing challenges such as exclusion from strategic networks, credibility gaps, and heightened performance scrutiny. These challenges are exacerbated for Black South African women, who navigate the compounded effects of race and gender through what scholars describe as *intersectional marginalisation* (Crenshaw, 1991; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). While executive directors are expected to shape high-level strategic and operational decisions, women in these roles are frequently confined to performative representation, their influence curtailed by deeply entrenched patriarchal cultures.

This study addresses a critical gap in research by centring the lived experiences of female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector. While previous literature has often examined leadership broadly or focused on access to roles, this study interrogates what happens *after* appointment, unpacking how structural, sociocultural, and interpersonal dynamics continue to undermine women's legitimacy, authority, and advancement even at the top. By doing so, it contributes to feminist organisational theory and intersectionality studies, exposing how gendered power continues to shape the governance landscape long after the boardroom door has opened.

Next, the paper focuses on the research objectives of the study. This is followed by the literature review, which highlights the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, followed by the most common individual, organisational, and cultural challenges faced by females in executive director roles. This section outlines the research objectives and methodology employed to achieve the study's objectives, presents the findings, discusses the findings, explores practical implications, offers recommendations, and highlights the study's limitations.

Literature review

Theoretical frameworks

Despite progress in gender equity, mining remains a deeply male-dominated sector, where female directors continue to face persistent challenges post-appointment (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). These challenges extend beyond individual capabilities and are deeply embedded in socio-cultural norms, organisational structures, and interpersonal power dynamics. At the socio-cultural level, leadership is

still associated with masculinity, often penalising women who assert themselves (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011; Eagly & Sczesny, 2009). Patriarchal expectations (Walby, 1990) and societal institutions such as mining reinforce male dominance (Connell, 2005; Ridgeway, 2011), shaping perceptions of female leaders before they speak.

Structural challenges further entrench inequality. Organisational cultures in mining reflect gendered norms that marginalise women (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Theories such as Institutionalism and Gendered Organisation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ely & Padavic, 2007) show how organisational systems reflect broader power dynamics. Tokenism and occupational segregation expose women to visibility pressures and symbolic representation (Kanter, 1977; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Charles & Grusky, 2004), while implicit bias and Expectation States Theory undermine their competence (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Berger et al., 1972; Carnes et al., 2015).

Individual challenges faced by female directors in the mining sector can be categorised into *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal* dimensions, each carrying distinct yet interconnected implications. Interpersonal challenges refer to the relational dynamics within organisations that limit women's access to leadership influence and advancement. These include exclusion from informal networks and a lack of mentorship, which restrict strategic knowledge sharing and visibility issues well-articulated by Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Ibarra, 1993; Sealy & Singh, 2006). Homosocial Reproduction Theory (Kanter, 1977) explains how dominant male leaders tend to promote individuals similar to themselves, thereby reproducing male leadership hierarchies, while Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) highlights how women are subtly undermined to preserve existing power structures (Settles et al., 2006).

The absence of social support systems contributes further to women's professional isolation, as described in Social Support Theory (Cobb, 1976; Yoder, 1991; O'Neil et al., 2008). On the other hand, intrapersonal challenges are internal and psychological, often shaped by cumulative experiences of marginalisation. These include self-doubt, lack of confidence, and hesitancy in decision-making, as explained by Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981; Valian, 1998). In high-pressure, male-centric environments, such internalised beliefs can impair performance despite capability. Work-Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Eagly & Carli, 2007) adds another layer, illustrating how the strain of managing caregiving responsibilities alongside demanding leadership roles can exacerbate stress and reduce career sustainability. For Black women directors, these individual-level challenges are further intensified by the intersecting impact of race and gender. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991) reveals how overlapping identities result in unique forms of exclusion and hyper-visibility (Booyesen, 2021; Makama, 2013; Herbst, 2020), adding further complexity to their leadership experience in South Africa's mining sector.

Individual challenges

Individual challenges encompass both *intrapersonal* (internal, psychological) and *interpersonal* (relational, social) dimensions. These challenges do not occur in isolation from broader systemic, cultural, or

organisational forces, but are deeply embedded within and shaped by them. While often portrayed as personal deficits, these challenges are better understood through a *critical theoretical lens* that highlights how internalised norms, exclusionary practices, and societal expectations reproduce gendered inequalities at the leadership level. In male-dominated sectors like mining, these challenges are intensified by hypermasculine cultures, limited female representation, and rigid leadership norms that favour male-coded behaviours.

Interpersonal Challenges

At the interpersonal level, challenges emerge from women's exclusion from influential networks, lack of institutional support, and experiences of being actively undermined by peers and superiors. The *Social Capital Theory* (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) explains that access to informal networks provides opportunities for advancement, credibility, and influence. However, Ibarra (1993) and Sealy & Singh (2006) found that women are often peripheral to these networks, particularly in hierarchical, male-dominated environments like mining, which undermines their career mobility and visibility. This exclusion is not incidental it reflects a broader culture of *homosocial reproduction* (Kanter, 1977), where dominant male groups promote individuals who resemble themselves, thereby marginalising women from informal decision-making and succession pipelines (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ibarra, 1992).

Additionally, *Social Support Theory* (Cobb, 1976) underscores how interpersonal support systems are essential for resilience and well-being in leadership. Yet women in executive pathways often lack access to sponsors and mentors (Ragins & Kram, 2007; O'Neil et al., 2008), contributing to emotional fatigue and stagnated progression. Worse still, the experience of being *undermined* explained by *Social Dominance Theory* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999)—shows that dominant groups maintain hierarchy by devaluing and subtly discrediting out-group members. Empirical work by Settles et al. (2006) and Pratto et al. (2006) confirms that women leaders often face covert resistance and microaggressions, undermining their credibility and authority. These relational dynamics compound structural discrimination and reinforce the perception of women as "outsiders" in leadership.

Intrapersonal Challenges

Intrapersonal barriers refer to the internalised psychological effects of gendered expectations, such as diminished self-confidence, assertiveness, and decision-making capacity. These are not innate traits but reflect the cumulative effects of socialisation, stereotype threat, and persistent exclusion. *Self-Efficacy Theory* (Bandura, 1977) posits that individuals' belief in their capabilities directly affects their willingness to pursue challenging goals. Research by Hoyt & Blascovich (2007) and Eagly & Carli (2007) demonstrates that women often internalise doubt due to repeated marginalisation and lack of role models, resulting in lowered ambition and risk aversion, particularly in masculine contexts like mining, where female leaders are rare. Closely related is the challenge of *assertiveness*, shaped by *Gender Schema Theory* (Bem, 1981), which suggests that internalised gender norms guide behaviour and self-concept. Women are frequently socialised

to be accommodating and deferential, making assertive leadership more cognitively and emotionally taxing (Valian, 1998; Heilman, 2001).

This contradiction between leadership norms and feminine behaviour scripts contributes to chronic self-monitoring and imposter syndrome. Furthermore, *Stereotype Threat Theory* (Steele & Aronson, 1995) explains how the anxiety of confirming negative stereotypes undermines decision-making capacity, especially under evaluative pressure. Studies by Davies et al. (2005) and Spencer et al. (1999) reveal that stereotype threat can significantly impair women's performance in leadership tasks, reinforcing negative perceptions of their competence. Finally, intrapersonal challenges are compounded by the *Work-Family Conflict Theory* (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which highlights the tension women face between professional obligations and caregiving roles. In sectors such as mining, where leadership roles demand long hours and geographic mobility, these tensions are exacerbated (Kossek et al., 2011). The constant balancing act between these competing domains often results in burnout, career interruptions, or exit from the leadership track entirely.

While these interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges are frequently individualised, they are systemic in origin and relational in effect. Theories such as *Homosocial Reproduction*, *Social Capital*, and *Self-Efficacy* provide a critical framework for understanding how women's internal experiences and interpersonal interactions are shaped by broader organisational and cultural structures. Importantly, these challenges do not arise because women are less capable or ambitious, but because leadership environments are designed to reward masculine norms and penalise deviation. Thus, addressing these challenges requires more than personal development; it requires systemic reconfiguration of leadership cultures, organisational policies, and evaluative standards that currently favour men by default.

Structural challenges

Organisational challenges include discrimination (Streitfeld, 2015; Bell et al., 2019) as explained by Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests discriminatory behaviour stems from role-based expectations of women; organisational culture (Lundy & Cowling, 1996; Martins & Terblanche, 2003), aligning with Gendered Organisation Theory (Acker, 1990), which argues that workplaces are inherently gendered in structure and practice; lack of support (Dashper, 2020; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Hoang et al., 2022), tied to Expectation States Theory (Berger et al., 1972), where social status affects how contributions are recognised; lack of career orientation/women empowerment (Field et al., 2020; Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2023); male domination (O'Brien, 2024; MTUI, 2023; Bridge et al., 2023), reflecting Occupational Segregation Theory (Reskin & Roos, 1990), which explains how industries remain stratified by gender; closed social networks (Offermann & Foley, 2020; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022); gender bias and stereotype (Chikwe et al., 2024; Busse & Poell, 2020; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023), supported by Implicit Bias Theory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995); company policies (Maida & Weber, 2022; Moraka, 2023), which echo Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and Gendered Organisation Theory (Acker, 1990); undermining women (Chikwe et al., 2024; Smith & Sinkford, 2022); underrepresentation of women

(Kansake et al., 2021; Perks & Schulz, 2020); and unequal pay (Williams, 2023; Brick et al., 2023; Bishu & Headley, 2020), as highlighted in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which attributes wage disparities to perceived skill and experience differences.

Cultural challenges

Gender norms

The socially constructed expectations prescribing nurturing traits to women and assertiveness to men (Eagly & Carli, 2007) are foundational to understanding gendered leadership challenges. These norms are deeply embedded within organisational structures, aligning with Acker's (1990, 2006) theory of gendered organisations, which argues that workplaces inherently privilege masculine behaviours and marginalise women. Critically, such embedded norms do not merely reflect individual bias but are systemic, shaping policies, practices, and power relations that constrain women's leadership agency. This institutionalisation makes cultural change difficult, as normative expectations of femininity and masculinity dictate acceptable leadership behaviours, limiting women's ability to fully exercise authority without facing social penalties (Heilman et al., 2024).

Gender stereotypes

The generalised beliefs about gendered traits and roles intersect with these norms to shape biased evaluations of female leaders. Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) explains how women violate stereotypical expectations when occupying leadership roles, eliciting prejudice and discrimination. Women face a "double bind" (Ridgeway, 2011), penalised for exhibiting either stereotypically feminine traits (seen as weak) or masculine traits (seen as unlikable), reinforcing a no-win situation that restricts authentic leadership expression. This dynamic is intensified by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), where overlapping identities such as race or class exacerbate stereotyping and marginalisation. Critically, the persistence of these stereotypes underscores the insufficiency of policy interventions alone, as cultural narratives and implicit biases remain deeply entrenched, requiring comprehensive cultural and structural change to dismantle.

Together, gender norms and stereotypes operate synergistically within organisational contexts to perpetuate gender inequality. While theories like Acker's and role congruity provide robust frameworks for understanding these dynamics, the challenge remains in translating theoretical insights into effective organisational practices that transform both culture and structure. Addressing these intertwined cultural challenges is essential for enabling women's equitable participation and leadership.

Research objectives

Primary research objective

The *primary research objective, which is significant*, is to explore the barriers and challenges female directors face in the Gauteng mining sector.

Secondary research objectives

The following *secondary research objectives* will be pursued to achieve the primary research objectives:

- To critically analyse the overall challenges encompassing individual barriers that impede women's entry into directorship positions in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To examine the organisational challenges that restrict women's access to executive leadership roles within the mining sector.
- To investigate the cultural challenges that limit the progression of women into directorship roles in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To develop a conceptual framework that explains the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory that explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious challenges in individual barriers.

Research methods

Research Paradigm, Methodological Orientation, and Design Ethics and consent

The research was anchored in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which asserts that reality is socially constructed through human interaction and meaning-making (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2000). This worldview was appropriate for a study focused on exploring the nuanced, subjective experiences of women in leadership. The study privileged participants' voices and perspectives, acknowledging that their professional journeys are shaped by individual, structural, and socio-cultural forces (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

A qualitative, explanatory research design was adopted to go beyond surface-level descriptions and uncover the underlying causes and mechanisms behind persistent gendered barriers. The investigation was cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of experiences at a single point in time. This approach enabled us to draw out recurring patterns and contextual factors shaping the participants' realities, without seeking generalisability beyond the studied context.

Population, Sampling, and Inclusion Criteria

The research population included executive female directors operating within Gauteng's mining sector, an intentional focus that allowed for the examination of leadership challenges in a high-impact, male-dominated industry. The exclusion of non-executive directors was deliberate, as their oversight and governance Responsibilities differ substantially from the operational and strategic leadership roles held by executive directors (Monks & Minow, 2011; Mallin, 2019). The emphasis on executive-level roles ensured the findings would reflect those directly involved in organisational decision-making, innovation, and transformation (Yukl, 2013).

Given the targeted nature of the study, a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting participants based on their relevance to the research aims. We were guided by the principle of data saturation, where participant recruitment ceased once no new themes emerged during analysis (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015). This ensured methodological rigour and thematic depth. While sample sizes in qualitative research vary, prior leadership studies suggest that 20–30 information-rich cases are sufficient to achieve conceptual saturation in focused elite populations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2018).

The study was geographically restricted to Gauteng, a critical region in South Africa’s mining economy and corporate governance landscape (Moodley, 2020). The demographic profile of Respondents, summarised in Table 3.1, reflected a predominantly Black female leadership cohort, further enhancing the intersectional relevance of the findings. The demographic characteristics of the participants are detailed in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Participants Demographic Profile (N=25)

Demographic Category	Subcategory	(%)
Ethnicity	Black	53.8%
	White	38.5%
	Coloured	7.7%
Marital Status	Married	31.0%
	Single	23.0%
	Divorced	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	15.2%
Age Group	51–69 years	57.1%
	36–50 years	42.9%
Qualification	Bachelor's degree	61.5%
	Master's degree	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	7.7%
Mining Industry Sector	Gold Mining	62.0%
	Mineral/Quarrying	19.0%
	Coal Mining	19.0%

Data collection instrument

We used open-ended questions. The data collection instrument was Google Forms. Online technologies for qualitative data collection have become commonplace within academia (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). The possibility of collecting data on web surveys has eliminated the need to transcribe responses. The following open-ended questions were asked: *What individual, structural (organisational) and cultural challenges do you experience as a woman in an executive directorship position?*

Data collection process

The North-West University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval on 28 November 2022 (NWU-0061-22-A4). The Human Resource (HR) managers were formally contacted via email and provided with a written letter requesting that the HR manager communicate the study details to the female executive directors.. This correspondence asked the HR managers to communicate the study details to the female directors within their organisations. The information shared outlined the study's primary aim, its objectives, the methodology employed for data collection, and ethical considerations, including a clear statement that all data obtained would be used strictly for academic purposes. In addition, the communication sought to ascertain whether the company's female directors were willing to participate in the study. The HR manager emailed female directors a link to the consent form and open-ended questions. Those willing to participate in the study clicked the link and completed the consent form online. There was a second link to a Google Forms document consisting of open-ended questions. The participants completed the form and submitted their answers online. No form of identification was required. To ensure that all the questions were answered, the form was set up so that it was impossible to move to the next section without completing the previous section.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using qualitative data from a Google Forms questionnaire. To ensure credibility and minimise bias, best practices such as iterative coding, cross-checking, and reflexive analysis were followed (Naeem et al., 2020). Responses were exported to Google Spreadsheets for structured management, coding, and theme development, in line with digital methods proposed by Voutilainen et al. (2021). The manual, reflexive process began with repeated readings and colour-coded coding, identifying recurring patterns and beliefs. An audit trail and continuous reflexivity supported dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Manual coding was intentionally chosen over CAQDAS tools like NVivo to deepen engagement with the data and enhance interpretive insight (Verma et al., 2024; Taherdoost, 2021; Pandey & Pandey, 2021). This approach fostered proximity to participant narratives and critical reflexivity (Nowell et al., 2017), though it was time-intensive and limited by the lack of probing, typical of online surveys. These limitations were mitigated through iterative review and independent validation (Zakharovskiy & Németh, 2021). Rigour was maintained through deliberate strategies to uphold methodological integrity. Credibility was ensured by aligning data collection with the research questions (Kyngäs et al., 2020). A transparent presentation of participant diversity supported Transferability. Dependability was strengthened through a systematic process and audit trails, including memos and summary forms (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016; Coleman, 2022): reflexivity and transparent documentation reinforced confirmability, aligning with current qualitative research standards.

Findings

Individual challenges

The first secondary objective of this study was to identify the individual challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng's mining sector and to link them to theoretical frameworks that could be used to explain their genesis. The thematic analysis revealed a constellation of interrelated challenges spanning social, attitudinal, institutional, and policy-based domains. Individual challenges faced by female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector span two deeply interrelated dimensions: *intrapersonal* (internal and psychological) and *interpersonal* (relational and social). While often interpreted as personal shortcomings, these challenges are best understood as *socially produced effects* emerging from persistent exposure to *gendered cultural scripts*, *patriarchal organisational norms*, and *institutional exclusion*. Feminist theory compels us to reframe such "internal" experiences as outcomes of systemic power relations.

Intrapersonal Challenges

A prominent theme that emerged from the study was a *lack of assertiveness*. Participants expressed concern about how women's hesitance to speak up or push back in boardroom dynamics often diminishes their leadership legitimacy. One Respondent reflected that lack of assertiveness leads to "*being overpowered or overruled in decision-making*" (Resp. 3). In contrast, others described an active effort to defy this pattern: "*I stand my ground and am very firm. I do not take nonsense*" (Resp. 2). Still, others affirmed the need for improvement in this area: "*Lack of assertiveness to apply for positions and lack of assertiveness to keep the role even when they get hired*" (Resp. 11). This finding is critically supported by *Gender Schema Theory* (Bem, 1981), which explains how social norms shape gendered behaviour encouraging women to be deferential and accommodating. Assertiveness, traditionally coded as masculine, is often discouraged in women, or worse, punished. *Self-Efficacy Theory* (Bandura, 1977) also highlights that a diminished sense of agency, often shaped by repeated exclusion, limits women's pursuit of leadership opportunities. These findings point not to psychological deficiency but to *structural socialisation* that teaches women not to lead loudly.

Closely connected is the issue of decisiveness. Some participants voiced frustration at the stereotype that women lack decision-making confidence. As one Respondent noted, "*Women are not decisive*" (Resp. 5). Here, *Stereotype Threat Theory* (Steele & Aronson, 1995) becomes particularly relevant. The fear of confirming negative stereotypes often causes hesitation, over-analysis, or delayed decision-making. In male-dominated leadership spaces, such as mining, decisiveness is equated with authority, yet when women adopt this trait, it is often framed as aggression or arrogance. Lack of confidence also featured prominently in the narratives. "*Without confidence, you cannot succeed in a leadership role, no matter how qualified you may be*" (Resp. 16), stated one participant. Another affirmed, "*Confidence is needed to succeed... it means that he/she can move past any fears and embrace self-assurance*" (Resp. 12). Confidence is not merely a personality trait; it is a resource, built through recognition, support, and opportunity. Nevertheless, many

women in leadership find themselves in environments that deny them these inputs. As *Self-Efficacy Theory* (Bandura, 1977) indicates, confidence grows through mastery and reinforcement. In contrast, mining boardrooms often reinforce *doubt, isolation, and hyper-surveillance*, undermining the development of self-efficacy in female leaders.

Work-life balance was another pressing challenge. Balancing domestic Responsibilities with demanding leadership roles remains a heavy burden for women. “*Balancing family and work is hard for women. You have to make sure the family is well taken care of while also making sure that you deliver at work and working long hours*” (Resp. 5). *Work-Family Conflict Theory* (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) helps contextualise this tension: when organisations operate on the outdated “*ideal worker*” model one that assumes constant availability they effectively marginalise caregivers, who are predominantly women. *Feminist organisational theory* challenges this norm, calling for a restructuring of work itself, not just the women trying to survive within it. Feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation also surfaced repeatedly. “*I am alone and powerless*” (Resp. 6) and “*The biggest challenge is loneliness at the top*” (Resp. 4) exemplify this emotional burden. These sentiments are captured by *Tokenism Theory* (Kanter, 1977), which shows how being the “only” woman in a leadership space often results in *symbolic inclusion*, social alienation, and intensified scrutiny. However, feminist critics of Kanter have argued that this framework must be *intersectional*. Black women are not just isolated by gender, but also by race, class, and cultural exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991; Yoder, 1991).

Interpersonal Challenges

Among the most distressing interpersonal challenges was the experience of *being undermined*. Participants repeatedly expressed that their authority was deliberately weakened. “*Being made to feel weak and small*” (Resp. 7), “*Being undermined, just because women are soft-hearted*” (Resp. 5), and “*I was undermined a lot when I started in this position. I deliver, and I am currently one of the best performers*” (Resp. 18), all speak to a culture that subtly but persistently discredits women in leadership. *Social Dominance Theory* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) illuminates this behaviour as a tactic through which dominant groups preserve power by devaluing out-group members. These forms of undermining are rarely overt; instead, they are embedded in decision-making dynamics, tone, body language, and exclusion from critical conversations. Women leaders in mining thus face a *cognitive tax*: expending additional energy navigating doubt and hostility not faced by their male counterparts.

Another significant interpersonal barrier was exclusion from informal male-dominated networks; although less directly quoted, this theme permeated many responses. One participant noted the presence of “*closed social networks of men in the top management*” (Resp. 10), pointing to the power of informal influence. *Social Capital Theory* (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) reminds us that advancement is often determined less by formal qualifications and more by access to these *invisible corridors of power*. *Homosocial Reproduction Theory* (Kanter, 1977) reinforces this, showing that male leaders often replicate themselves by promoting those with whom they feel comfortable, typically other men. This exclusion is not accidental but

systemic. It limits mentorship, blocks visibility, and prevents women from participating in the political undercurrents of leadership decision-making. As feminist theorists have long argued, power is not just held at the top; it is negotiated in relationships, conversations, and social alignment.

Critical Reflection

What this analysis reveals is that individual-level challenges faced by female leaders in mining are anything but individual. They are structurally produced and culturally reinforced. Drawing on feminist and critical theories, we see that these “internal” struggles are symptoms of a larger *gendered leadership paradigm* that rewards traits coded as masculine and penalises deviation from that norm. *Lack of confidence, indecision, or withdrawal* are not signs of deficiency, but rather symptoms of *institutionalised resistance* to women’s authority. Feminist organisational theory, *Role Congruity Theory* (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and *Intersectionality Theory* (Crenshaw, 1991) all argue that these dynamics are rooted in power, not in personality. Thus, solutions must go beyond coaching or training and address the deep architecture of leadership itself: its language, its expectations, its assumptions, and its reward systems. Without such transformation, women will continue to be invited into leadership spaces that were never designed with them in mind and then blamed when they do not thrive within them. The individual challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng’s mining sector, and their connection to theoretical frameworks that help explain their persistence, are illustrated in Figure 3.1 below, which outlines the key individual-level challenges.

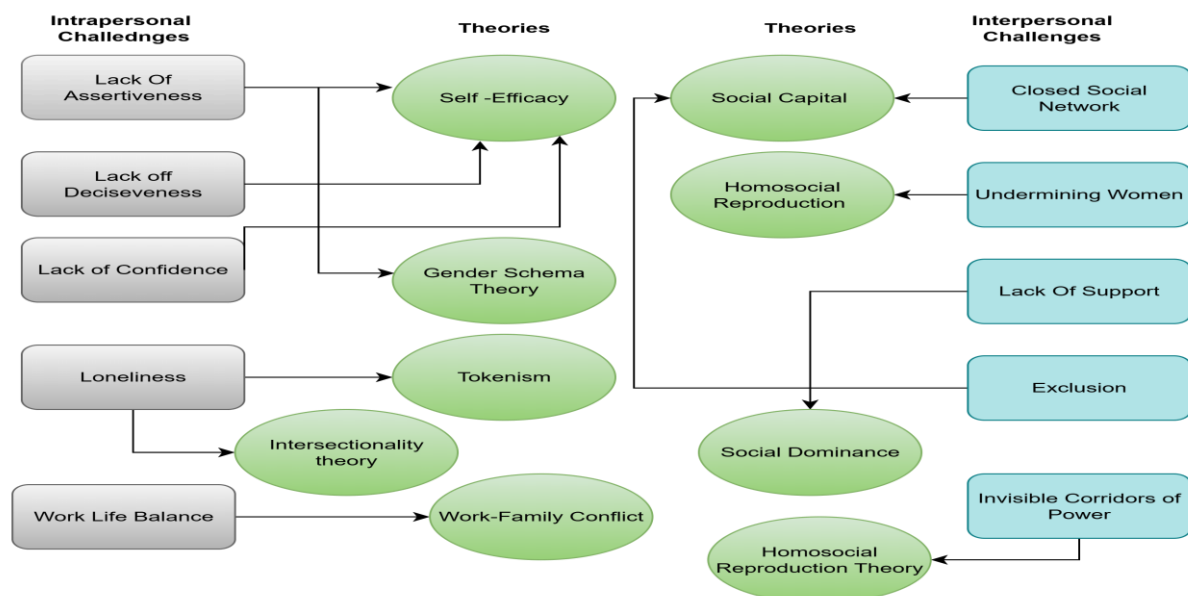


Figure 3.1: Individual Challenges Theoretical Framework

Structural challenges

The secondary objective of this study was to examine the structural challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng’s mining sector and to link them to theoretical

frameworks that could be used to explain their presence. The thematic analysis revealed a constellation of interrelated challenges spanning social, attitudinal, institutional, and policy-based domains. They include *discrimination, lack of support, unequal pay, undermining, exclusion from male-dominated networks, excessive expectations, gender stereotypes, tokenism, lack of recognition, poor organisational policies, underrepresentation, and gender-based harassment*. Though seemingly distinct, these themes reflect a common root: *deeply gendered organisational structures* that reproduce patriarchal norms while penalising difference. The following sections unpack these challenges, linking them to theoretical frameworks and offering a critical analysis of both the responses and the systemic dynamics they reveal.

Discrimination: Subtle, Systemic, and Silencing

Discrimination emerged as one of the most prominent themes, manifesting through exclusionary practices, implicit marginalisation, and race-gender hierarchies. “*White females, especially in leadership positions, dominate the mining sector*” (Resp. 2) points to an often-overlooked intersectional dimension: the exclusion not only of women broadly but Black women, in particular. This reflects the reality that representation within elite spaces can be racially skewed, and the inclusion of one identity group does not imply equitable access for all. While *Social Role Theory* (Eagly, 1987) explains how gendered expectations create bias against women in leadership, it falls short in accounting for racialised gender dynamics. Here, *Intersectionality Theory* (Crenshaw, 1991) provides a more robust explanatory lens, illustrating how multiple axes of identity compound discrimination. Respondents’ brevity in articulating “discrimination” (Resp. 6) may itself be a symptom of normalised exclusion where systemic inequality becomes so embedded that it ceases to be surprising or noteworthy, only silently endured.

Lack of Support: Institutional Neglect and Gendered Isolation

Respondents widely cited the absence of meaningful support systems, particularly regarding mentorship, advocacy, and resource allocation. “*No one relates fully to the issues or concerns we put across as women*” (Resp. 7), and “*It makes work difficult because there is a lack of support structure, and you get shut down easily*” (Resp. 13), reflect not only a failure of individual empathy but a systemic organisational neglect. Although *Human Capital Theory* (Becker, 1964) claims that investment in employee development determines advancement, this theory naively assumes gender neutrality in opportunity access. In male-dominated sectors, access to support, both formal and informal, is often structured through *homosocial reproduction* (Kanter, 1977), where men mentor and promote those who mirror their trajectories. Respondents’ isolation thus reflects the structural privileging of masculine career pathways, where women are left without the networks needed for strategic advancement.

Unequal Pay: Beyond Human Capital Deficits

Seven participants explicitly referred to *unequal pay* as a critical barrier. This cannot be sufficiently explained through *Human Capital Theory*, which attributes pay gaps to differences in experience, education, or role type. The persistence of pay inequality among equally qualified male and female executives directly contradicts this logic and calls for a more critical framework, one that acknowledges *organisational bias*,

negotiation penalties, and *valuation disparities*. As *Blau and Kahn (2000)* argue, women are paid less not because they bring less value, but because their labour is systematically undervalued. Here, *Expectation States Theory* (Berger et al., 1972) is instructive: women's work is assessed through a lens of scepticism, with competence assumed until proven, while men are granted assumed authority by default.

Undermining and Devaluation

Several Participants spoke of being persistently undermined. "Even if they do get the position, they doubt themselves as they are made to feel inferior" (Resp. 7), and "I feel undermined and made to feel as if my work does not add value as a Black woman" (Resp. 14), reflect the epistemic injustice women experience where their knowledge, decisions, and authority are constantly questioned. This dynamic reflects *Implicit Bias Theory* (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), but the issue is not simply unconscious. It is strategic: a means by which male-dominated leadership spaces reassert dominance by discrediting alternative leadership styles or voices. Critically, mainstream leadership theories rarely interrogate how credibility is conferred and on whose terms. Feminist critiques have long argued that leadership is evaluated against masculine norms, and women's "failure" is often pre-determined by those standards.

Closed Networks: Exclusion by Design

As Resp. 10 noted, "*Closed social networks of men in the top management*" systematically exclude women from the informal spaces where power is brokered. *Social Capital Theory* (Bourdieu, 1986) explains how access to key networks determines opportunity, yet this access is neither neutral nor evenly distributed. These networks are not just social; they are strategic, and their closure to women ensures the reproduction of existing power structures. This insight calls for a critique of the myth of meritocracy. Advancement is not solely based on skill, but on *visibility*, *sponsorship*, and *relational proximity to power*; all of which are structurally skewed against women in mining.

Excessive Expectations and Leadership Double Standards

Respondents expressed frustration at being held to higher standards than their male counterparts. "*You have to work twice as hard compared to your male counterparts*" (Resp. 12), and "*Difficult expectations*" (Resp. 10) reveal a double bind. While men are presumed competent, women must constantly prove themselves. *Expectation Confirmation Theory* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) supports this: evaluators interpret women's performance through biased lenses, expecting failure and then finding it. This dynamic places women under intense pressure, with significant implications for mental health, job satisfaction, and retention. Rather than simply "resilient leaders," women are being asked to succeed in an unequal game whose rules were never written with them in mind.

Gender Bias and Stereotyping

The persistence of *gender stereotypes* was evident in comments such as "*Biases that women face as they progress up the career ladder*" (Resp. 13) and "*Biases*" (Resp. 6). These are not abstract concepts but lived realities that shape women's daily professional experiences. *Implicit Bias Theory* explains how these stereotypes are enacted unconsciously, but feminist critique argues that such biases are often *institutionally*

protected and reproduced through policy, culture, and leadership modelling. More critically, the default traits of leadership assertiveness, decisiveness, and independence are still coded as masculine. Women who embody these traits risk being labelled aggressive, while those who do not are dismissed as weak. This no-win scenario sustains gender inequity through a “damned if you do” trap.

Male-Dominated Culture and Gender Inequality

Respondents consistently reinforced the dominance of men in the sector. “*Men still dominate in the mining sector*” (Resp. 1), and “*Mining sector is male dominated*” (Resp. 25) underscore the cultural saturation of masculinity. *Masculinity Contest Theory* (Berdahl et al., 2018) captures this well, describing workspaces that reward aggression, endurance, and stoicism while marginalising alternative expressions of leadership. This theory is instrumental in mining, a sector with deeply embedded narratives of physical dominance, competitiveness, and exclusion. Women are not just navigating leadership; they are navigating cultures that valorise masculine performance as the baseline of competence.

Lack of Career Orientation and Empowerment

“*There is a lack of training and women empowerment programmes*” (Resp. 4) signals a structural failure in talent development pipelines. *Human Capital Theory* assumes that individual agency drives skill accumulation, but this ignores how *gendered career scripts* limit access to mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership pathways. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002) offers a more dynamic view: careers are shaped by narrative, identity, and opportunity—factors often constrained for women in male-dominated fields.

Tokenism: The Burden of Symbolic Inclusion

Many Respondents expressed “*There are limits because I do not have enough authority*” (Resp. 21) and “*I feel I was only employed as a form of tokenism*” (Resp. 4), highlighting the gap between position and power. *Tokenism Theory* (Kanter, 1977) argues that tokens are hyper-visible yet structurally marginal, expected to perform without real influence. More troubling is the psychological toll of this arrangement, where one is constantly unsure whether one's presence is merited or merely strategic. This leads to internalised doubt and external undermining, sustaining a system that pretends inclusion but resists transformation.

Lack of Recognition and Poor Policies

Recognition remains a critical motivator in leadership roles. “*Lack of recognition is a challenge*” (Resp. 24) captures how undervaluing women's contributions not only demotivates but also legitimises exclusion. *Expectation States Theory* again explains this dynamic, where low-status actors must work harder for less reward. Furthermore, “*There are no policies which support women in senior positions*” (Resp. 10) demonstrates that institutional structures fail to respond to the actual barriers women face. *Gendered Organisation Theory* (Acker, 1990) explains that seemingly neutral policies are often designed around male norms, leaving women structurally unsupported.

Underrepresentation and Harassment

Several Respondents reported being the only woman in their unit. “In my unit, I am the only woman” (Resp. 22) underscores token isolation and epistemic loneliness. Meanwhile, “There is much sexual harassment” (Resp. 12) and “Sexual or gender-based harassment” (Resp. 10) reflect how power is exercised through bodily control and intimidation. Power Theory (MacKinnon, 1979) asserts that harassment is not personal; it is structural, used to enforce compliance and deter resistance.

Synthesis and Recommendations for Theoretical Reorientation

Collectively, these findings challenge the adequacy of mainstream theories such as *Human Capital Theory* and *Social Role Theory*, which insufficiently account for systemic, intersectional, and power-laden dynamics in leadership. Future inquiry must embrace *Critical Feminist Organisational Theory*, *Masculinity Contest Theory*, and *Intersectionality* to understand better how institutions maintain gendered hierarchies even as they perform diversity. More fundamentally, organisations must shift from performative inclusion to substantive transformation. Leadership frameworks, policy design, and organisational culture must be interrogated, deconstructed, and rebuilt to accommodate diverse pathways to power. Only then can equity move from rhetoric to reality. The structural challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng’s mining sector and linking them to theoretical frameworks that could be used to explain their presence are presented in Figure 3.2 below.

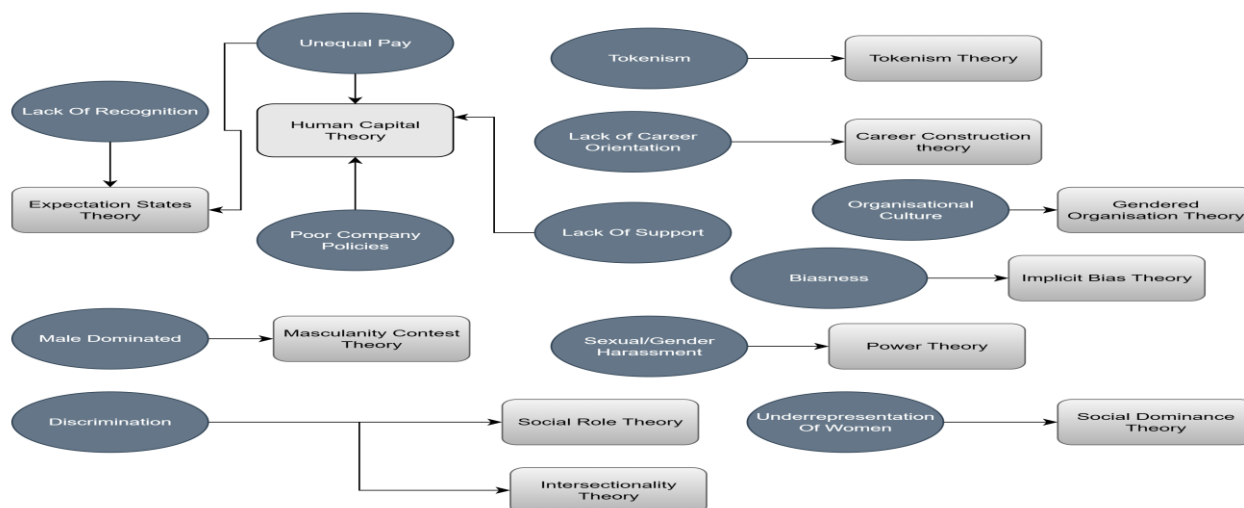


Figure 3.2: Structural challenges

Cultural challenges

The third secondary objective of this study was to examine the cultural challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng’s mining sector and to link them to the theoretical frameworks that could be used to explain their presence. The thematic analysis revealed a constellation of

interrelated challenges spanning social, attitudinal, institutional, and policy-based domains. They include gendered stereotypes and norms.

Gender stereotypes and entrenched norms continue to undermine women’s leadership credibility in male-dominated sectors. These stereotypes often portray women as overly emotional or more suited for domestic roles, reinforcing the belief that they do not belong in leadership. This aligns with Role Congruity Theory (Eagly, 1987), which explains that women in leadership face resistance because they violate traditional gender expectations.

“Gender stereotypes,” noted Resp. 10, remains a persistent barrier. Resp. 13 reflected on the internal struggle this creates: “Integrating leadership into one’s core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority. “These lived experiences reveal that women’s leadership is still subject to scrutiny within a culture that resists their authority. The persistence of such norms illustrates how patriarchal structures are not only outdated but actively maintained to uphold male dominance in sectors like mining. The cultural challenges encountered by women occupying executive directorship roles in Gauteng’s mining sector, and to link them to theoretical frameworks that could be used to explain their presence, are presented in Figure 3.3 below.

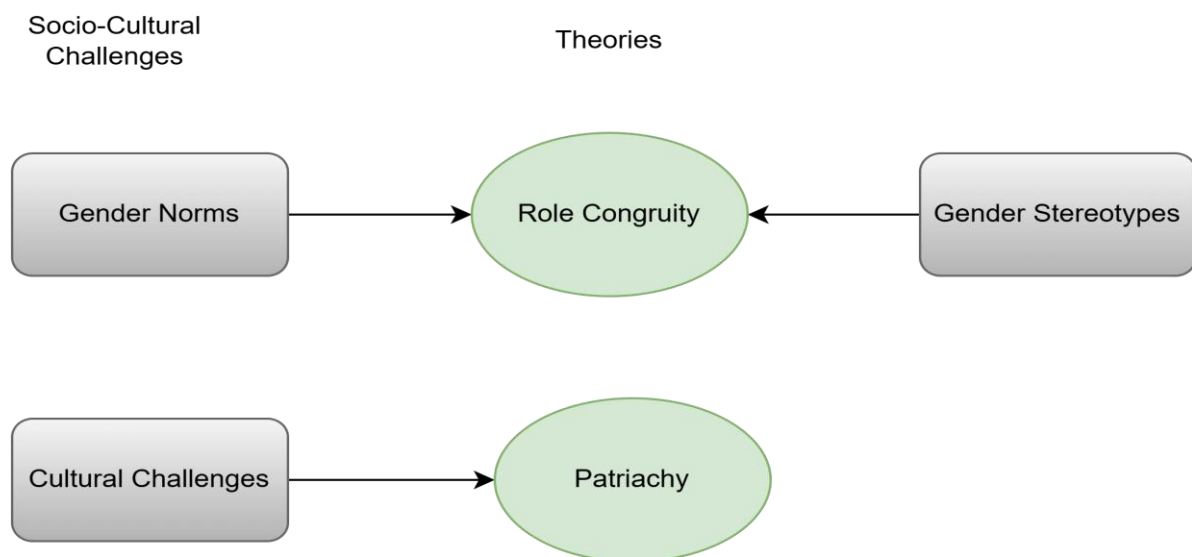


Figure 3.3: Cultural Challenges

The last objective was to develop a conceptual framework that explains from the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory, explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious challenges in individual challenges. This model, a graphic representation, is presented in Figure 8 below.

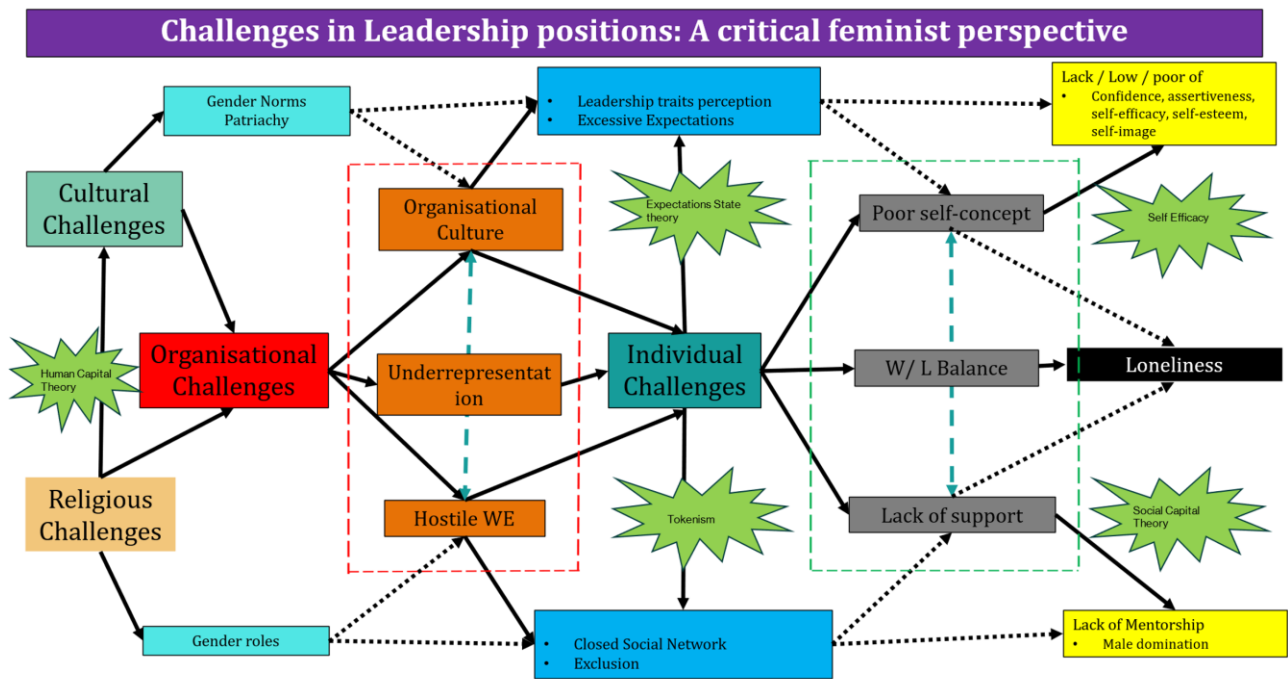


Figure 3.4: A conceptual model depicting an integrated perspective of female challenges in leadership positions

Interlinked Systems of Inequality in Women's Leadership Trajectories

The purpose of this study was to explore the multi-layered challenges faced by female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector, a historically patriarchal, masculinised industry. The findings reveal that challenges occur not in isolation but through an interlocking system of individual, structural, and sociocultural constraints, which together form a *web of gendered exclusion*. Critically analysing these interconnected dimensions reveals that despite the increasing visibility of women in leadership, deep-rooted power structures continue to delegitimise their presence, authority, and advancement systematically.

Interlinking the Layers: A Feminist Structural Critique

Individual challenges such as lack of assertiveness, confidence, and decisiveness are often framed as personal deficits. However, when examined through a feminist lens, they are not individual failings but the *internalisation of external structural forces*. For example, the internal doubt expressed by female leaders is shaped by repeated exposure to tokenism, exclusion from decision-making networks, and consistent devaluation of their leadership styles. The very design of mining leadership, which privileges traditionally masculine traits, creates an environment in which women's leadership is seen as a contradiction. These individual experiences directly intersect with structural constraints: harassment, lack of recognition, discriminatory policies, and male-dominated networks. These structures are not gender-neutral but are *active mechanisms of control*. *Institutional Theory* (Scott, 2001) helps us understand how organisational practices legitimise male dominance by resisting policy reform and reinforcing legacy norms.

At the cultural level, sociocultural norms and stereotypes provide the ideological scaffolding that justifies these structures. Gender norms prescribe narrow behavioural expectations, while stereotypes cast doubt on women's competence and authority. These narratives naturalise male leadership and render female leadership as anomalous thereby shaping implicit leadership prototypes (Lord & Maher, 1991) that reinforce structural exclusion and individual doubt. Thus, individual, structural, and sociocultural barriers are mutually reinforcing, and sociocultural norms feed structural discrimination, which in turn reproduces internalised limitations, forming a cyclical system of gendered inequality.

The root cause of these interconnected challenges lies in the *historical and institutional privileging of masculinity as the leadership norm*. Mining, as an extractive and physically demanding sector, has been *constructed as a masculine space*, with leadership defined by authority, competition, and emotional detachment traits historically ascribed to men. This system creates what *Berdahl et al. (2018)* describe as masculinity contest cultures, where success is achieved through domination rather than collaboration. This hegemonic masculinity is further sustained by what *MacKinnon (1979)* and *Rhode (2016)* identify as *power-preserving mechanisms*: harassment, tokenism, exclusion, and organisational inertia. The reluctance of mining organisations to transform their internal cultures and leadership frameworks despite external equity mandates demonstrates a form of *institutional gaslighting*, where women are symbolically included but structurally disempowered. Moreover, the epistemic injustice women experience, where their knowledge, authority, and voices are systematically devalued, compounds these challenges. As *Resp. 13* reflected, *"Integrating leadership into one's core identity is particularly challenging for women, who must establish credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority."* This quote highlights how *organisational ambivalence* toward women's authority undermines even the most competent leaders, reinforcing *stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and producing emotional labour that is rarely acknowledged

Practical implications

This study seeks to demonstrate the urgent need for profound structural and cultural transformation in male-dominated sectors such as mining, where the challenges confronting female executive directors arise from systemic organisational dynamics rather than individual deficiencies. It argues that inclusion must move beyond token gestures to fundamentally redefine leadership, embracing diverse leadership styles and challenging gendered assumptions about competence and merit (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). To this end, the study emphasises the importance of implementing gender-responsive policies that acknowledge women's dual roles across work and home, positioning measures such as flexible work and parental leave as essential infrastructure rather than discretionary benefits (Acker, 1990). It further calls for mentorship and sponsorship programmes to be reimagined as mechanisms for redistributing power and disrupting exclusionary male networks, thereby securing women's access to influence and leadership opportunities. Crucially, the study underscores the role of institutional accountability, advocating for equity to be embedded into governance through gender audits, leadership equity targets, and inclusivity-focused performance reviews. Such

interventions must be compulsory rather than voluntary. Ultimately, the study aims to demonstrate that genuine inclusion necessitates the reshaping of organisational systems to affirm and be transformed by women's leadership, rather than compelling women to conform to oppressive norms.

Recommendations

The recommendations arising from this study reflect a multi-level response to the entrenched barriers facing women in executive directorships within the mining sector. Collectively, they emphasise organisational transformation through *policy reform*, *cultural reorientation*, *mentorship development*, and *equity enforcement*. By targeting structural, interpersonal, and sociocultural dimensions simultaneously, these strategies aim not merely to include women in leadership but to reconstruct the conditions under which leadership is defined and practised. The support for work-life balance through flexible arrangements and parental equity addresses one of the most pervasive and gendered structural burdens of caregiving responsibilities. These measures not only alleviate women's dual role strain but also *challenge the masculine-coded ideal worker model* (Acker, 1990), thereby redistributing domestic expectations across genders.

Over time, such interventions have the potential to normalise shared caregiving and dismantle the false dichotomy between professionalism and parenting. However, unless culturally reinforced and organisationally safeguarded, these policies risk being perceived as “benefits” rather than strategic infrastructure, which could dilute their impact or lead to stigma. Efforts to address gender stereotypes and biases through awareness programmes and inclusive leadership training are essential in challenging the normative scripts that frame women as less competent or less assertive. These initiatives, if meaningfully implemented, could shift the implicit leadership prototype (Lord & Maher, 1991) away from its masculine bias. Nevertheless, these programmes must go beyond performative workshops. Without structural accountability, such as transparent promotion systems and equity metrics, bias training may only serve as reputational optics rather than a mechanism for substantive behavioural change.

Crucially, structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes offer a high-impact intervention by opening access to networks, career-defining assignments, and strategic visibility. This addresses not only skill development but *epistemic inclusion*, the validation of women's leadership knowledge and voices. Mentorship, if aligned with intersectional and feminist frameworks, can disrupt homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977) and reorient leadership succession pipelines. Similarly, transparent pay structures and salary audits directly confront one of the most tangible manifestations of gender inequality: economic disenfranchisement. However, closing the wage gap is not only about numerical equity but also about *symbolic and material recognition*. If implemented authentically, it signals that women's contributions are valued not only in discourse but in institutional practice.

Future Impact

If these recommendations are fully operationalised, their long-term impact could reshape the leadership landscape of the mining sector. By integrating gender equity into the DNA of organisational culture, policy,

and practice, these interventions could disrupt the historically masculinised leadership model and create space for more inclusive, relational, and transformative leadership styles. More importantly, these measures can initiate a systemic shift from performative inclusion to structural empowerment, where women are not only represented but resourced, selected, and retained. Nonetheless, for such strategies to yield lasting impact, they must be embedded within a broader organisational commitment to equity, guided by continuous evaluation, accountability, and leadership willingness to cede and redistribute power. This study reinforces that the success of gender equity efforts hinges not merely on policy presence, but on the courage to interrogate and reconstruct the power dynamics that sustain exclusion. Without this more profound transformation, even well-designed recommendations risk being absorbed into systems that are fundamentally resistant to change.

Research limitations

The qualitative, cross-sectional design of this study limits its ability to capture long-term trends or generalisable outcomes. Like the findings by Botha and Cronjé (2014), the small sample size limits representativeness. Additionally, the research focused exclusively on Gauteng, limiting its geographic scope. However, qualitative depth offers nuanced insights that are not captured in broader surveys. Future research should incorporate mixed methods approaches and expand to rural mining areas and other provinces.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the challenges facing female executive directors in Gauteng's mining sector are deeply systemic, operating across individual, structural, and sociocultural levels. These barriers are not due to women's deficiencies but are rooted in organisational cultures and leadership models shaped by patriarchal norms. True inclusion requires more than representation; it demands a fundamental redefinition of leadership and a dismantling of the power structures that sustain gender inequality. The findings call for a shift from accommodating women within existing systems to transforming those systems entirely. Leadership in mining must evolve to embrace equity, disrupt exclusionary norms, and foster environments where women can lead authentically and effectively. The time for symbolic gestures has passed since genuine change requires bold, structural action.

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CHAPTER 4: INTERVENTIONS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN DIRECTORSHIP ROLES WITHIN THE MINING SECTOR

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Abstract

Orientation: This study critically investigates the underrepresentation of women in leadership within South Africa's mining sector. It highlights how intrapersonal, structural, and socio-cultural barriers intersect to reinforce gender inequality, drawing on feminist organisational theory, intersectionality, and self-determination theory to unpack these challenges.

Research purpose: The study aims to explore the persistent disconnect between women's agency and organisational inertia, where systemic policies and cultures remain resistant to transformation. It seeks to provide insights for developing holistic strategies that strengthen female leadership representation in mining.

Motivation for the study: Despite progressive gender equity policies, women remain excluded from executive mining leadership roles. The research investigates how entrenched patriarchal systems and organisational practices sustain this exclusion, while contributing to the refinement of theoretical models explaining structural resistance to gender equity.

Research approach, design and method: An interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative design was employed, drawing from interviews with senior female leaders in the Gauteng mining sector. Thematic analysis and reflexive coding were used to surface recurring structural, cultural, and individual-level barriers.

Main findings: The findings reveal that empowerment initiatives such as training and mentorship, though beneficial, are insufficient on their own. Deeply embedded patriarchal norms, structural inertia, and cultural expectations continue to undermine women's leadership aspirations. These barriers are systemic, mutually reinforcing, and perpetuated by organisational cultures that privilege masculine leadership norms.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations must embed structural accountability and context-specific interventions, such as leadership equity scorecards, digital sponsorship platforms, and cultural audits. Redefining leadership norms to value inclusivity, collaboration, and collective agency is critical for sustainable transformation.

Contribution: The study introduces the Contextually Embedded Empowerment Framework (CEEF), which integrates structural accountability, contextual specificity, and collective agency. Grounded in feminist and critical theory, this framework advances gender equity discourse by offering transformative, practice-based strategies for embedding inclusive leadership in mining and other gendered industries.

Keywords: feminist organisational theory; intersectionality; Gender Equity; Leadership Development; organisational transformation; sponsorship; Inclusive Leadership; Organisational Culture

Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, particularly at the directorship level, remains a critical issue globally and within South Africa's mining sector. Despite ongoing efforts to advance gender equity, the mining industry continues to be characterised by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and exclusionary leadership structures that marginalise women from executive decision-making roles (Sithole, 2024; Mkhize & Rampele, 2023). While incremental gains have been made in boardroom diversity, women account for only 10–12% of executive and board-level positions in the South African mining sector as of 2024 (DMRE, 2024; Minerals Council South Africa, 2024). This low level of representation is symptomatic of broader structural and cultural constraints that continue to undermine gender-inclusive leadership.

This study critically explores the individual and organisational initiatives that can enable greater representation of women in directorship roles within the mining industry. It draws on feminist and intersectional frameworks to understand how women navigate male-dominated leadership spaces and what organisational strategies are most effective in enabling their advancement and retention in directorship positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Morley, 2023; Ng & Blake, 2022). At the individual level, initiatives such as leadership development, mentorship, and agency-building strategies are considered, while organisational-level interventions include gender-sensitive recruitment, inclusive policy frameworks, accountability mechanisms, and male allyship in leadership transformation (Taylor & Kim, 2024; Simmons & Carter, 2023; Lee & Patel, 2024).

By examining both levels of initiative, this study aims to generate practical insights into how gender-transformative leadership can be fostered in the mining sector. The research hopes to contribute to theory by deepening understanding of how power, gender, and organisational cultures interact to sustain inequality, while also informing policy and practice aimed at closing the gender leadership gap in South Africa's resource economy.

Problem statement

Despite increased discourse and advocacy around gender equity in leadership, the mining sector in South Africa remains markedly male-dominated at the executive level. This reflects a broader paradox in post-apartheid corporate South Africa: while formal equality frameworks have created entry points for women into leadership pipelines, they have not dismantled the institutional and cultural barriers that limit women's upward mobility (Mashele & Alagidede, 2023; Mofokeng, 2023). Although women now hold senior management positions in various sectors, only a small fraction, less than 15% occupy directorship roles in mining companies, which remain governed by hierarchical, masculinist, and exclusionary leadership models (Minerals Council SA, 2024; Sithole, 2024).

This persistent disparity raises questions about the adequacy of current equity and transformation frameworks in addressing deep-rooted gender inequalities. Scholars such as Eagly and Carli (2007) and Connell (2005) argue that structural inequality cannot be overcome without a critical re-evaluation of power

dynamics, leadership norms, and gendered organisational cultures. Sithole (2024) reinforces this by suggesting that true transformation requires not only empowering women but also redistributing power and actively engaging male leaders as allies in the process.

Moreover, intersectional barriers such as race, class, and socio-economic background further complicate access to leadership for black women in mining, revealing how systemic exclusion operates at multiple levels (Crenshaw, 1991; Morley, 2023). Organisational cultures that fail to address work-life integration, unconscious bias, and gender stereotyping exacerbate this problem and hinder the retention and progression of women in executive roles (Taylor & Kim, 2024; Harris & Morgan, 2023).

This study is therefore motivated by the urgent need to investigate the mechanisms, both organisational and individual, that can disrupt this enduring imbalance. It seeks to identify not only the barriers but also the practical strategies that can advance gender-inclusive leadership in mining. The overarching aim is to develop a context-specific, theoretically informed framework that promotes equitable representation in mining directorships, enhances organisational performance, and contributes to a more just and inclusive economy.

Next, the paper focuses on the research objectives of the study. This is followed by the literature review, which highlights the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. It then examines the most common individual and organisational gendered initiatives aimed at increasing the number of females in executive director roles. This is followed by the research methodology used to reach the objectives of the study, the findings, the discussion of the findings, the practical implications, the recommendations, and the limitations of the study.

Research objectives of the study

Primary objective of the study

The primary objectives of the study were to explore the challenges faced by female executive directors in leadership positions in the mining sector in the Gauteng province of South Africa. More specifically, the study was aimed at linking the challenges faced by executive directors to theoretical frameworks through the lenses of critical feminist theory.

Secondary objectives of the study

The following *secondary research objectives* will be pursued to achieve the primary research objectives:

- To critically analyse the overall challenges encompassing individual barriers that impede women's entry into directorship positions in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To examine the organisational challenges that restrict women's access to executive leadership roles within the mining sector.

- To investigate the cultural challenges that limit the progression of women into directorship roles in the Gauteng mining sector.
- To develop a conceptual framework that explains the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory that explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious challenges in individual barriers.

Literature Review

Individual Initiatives: Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Dimensions

Individual initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation in leadership are typically classified into *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* strategies. *Intrapersonal initiatives* include *self-confidence* (Chemers et al., 2000), *resilience* (Lambert, 2021), *ambition* (Saha & Weeks, 2022), *self-awareness* (Eurich, 2017; Aboytes & Barth, 2020), and *self-empowerment* (Fries et al., 2021). These initiatives are underpinned by *Self-Determination Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2019), which explains how *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* motivate proactive behaviour in leadership development. Scholars such as Botha and Cronjé (2014) argue that *internal motivation* and *leadership identity* are critical in overcoming organisational and cultural constraints.

Interpersonal initiatives include *mentorship* (Ayyala et al., 2019), *sponsorship* (Harts, 2019), *networking* (von Essen & Smith, 2023), and *seeking out challenging leadership opportunities* (Clark, 2021). Eagly and Carli (2002) and Catalyst (2007) assert that such interventions help mitigate *role incongruity* and improve access to *social capital*. However, scholars like Ng and Blake (2022) and Morley (2023) critique these studies for neglecting how *intersectional identities* particularly race and class affect access to and outcomes from such programs. Furthermore, many studies assume a neutral or supportive organisational environment, thus ignoring how workplace cultures may undermine these *individual-level efforts*. While effective, these strategies often rely on women's *internal agency* to challenge externally imposed barriers, revealing a mismatch between *effort* and *opportunity* if organisational support is absent.

Organisational and Structural Initiatives

Organisational initiatives encompass targeted interventions such as leadership development programs, gender equity policies, flexible work arrangements, psychological safety measures, equal pay commitments, and award recognition. Research from Catalyst (2007), PWC (2015), and Simmons and Carter (2023) highlight that formal structures such as training, mentorship programs, and career-path development schemes have shown promising results in improving gender parity in some sectors. However, studies specific to the mining sector, such as those by Lekchiri and Kamm (2020) and Thelma and Ngulube (2024), demonstrate that deeply entrenched masculine cultures and operational rigidity often stifle the successful implementation of these programs.

Moreover, the *South African context*, shaped by historical apartheid and enduring socio-economic inequality, introduces additional challenges (Herbst, 2020; Nkosi, 2024). Organisational structures often reflect these inequities, limiting the transformative potential of generic inclusion policies. While organisations may adopt progressive frameworks on paper, the *translation into practice* remains inconsistent. Connell (2005) and Eagly and Carli (2002) argue that unless organisations fundamentally shift their cultures, challenging dominant masculinities and reconfiguring power, most initiatives will remain *performative*. Therefore, although the global literature offers applicable models, the South African mining industry requires *locally contextualised solutions* that acknowledge its specific *social, cultural, and historical* landscape. This gap in *sector-specific evidence* calls for a more nuanced approach to *organisational transformation*.

Categorisation of diversity initiatives

Using data collected by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and survey data from organisations, researchers divided diversity programs into three categories: *structures of responsibility*, such as affirmative action plans, diversity committees and task forces, and diversity managers; *educational programs*, such as diversity training and diversity feedback for managers; and *networking and mentoring programs*. This categorisation concurs with the ones used by Morrison (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2001) that referred and labelled them *accountability practices* (fair treatment of all and *administrative procedures* aimed that are aimed at integration of diverse work force), *development practices* (preparation for greater responsibility and advancement through training, networks and mentoring), and *recruitment practices* (attracting qualified divers' employees. Randall and Nielsen (2010) classify interventions into three types: *primary, secondary, and tertiary*. Primary interventions aim to prevent issues by modifying work conditions. Secondary interventions focus on early detection and management of stress, while tertiary interventions address existing health problems. These interventions, grounded in strong theoretical frameworks, significantly impact employee well-being by enhancing health, reducing stress, and improving overall organisational effectiveness.

Wheeler (1996) identified four types of corporate practices in diversity measurement called the Diversity Measurement model (DMM). This model identifies tactics for measuring the management of diversity along a continuum that varies from creating diversity (initial stage), managing, valuing, and leveraging diversity (final stage where organisations benefit at a strategic level). Wheeler (2001) also presented stages of diversity and organisational readiness that can be used to assess organisational readiness for diversity based on the diversity initiative used. These stages range from exclusion (intolerance) to symbolic pioneers (tolerance), critical mass (acceptance), and finally, inclusion (fully integrated). These models and frameworks can be used as categorization matrices of diversity initiatives that could be suggestive of organisational readiness for diversity acceptance or integration.

Linking Theory, Integration of Initiatives, and Critical Synthesis

The integration of *individual and organisational initiatives* is essential for *sustainable transformation*. *Feminist theory* (Connell, 2005) critiques the *power asymmetries* embedded in organisational life, arguing

that leadership is not gender-neutral but shaped by historical exclusion and male-dominated norms. Simultaneously, *Self-Determination Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2019) provides a psychological lens to understand how women *navigate* and *respond* to these structures through *self-driven action*. When used together, these frameworks reveal that *individual agency* and *organisational change* must be *mutually reinforcing*.

A key shortcoming in existing research is the tendency to treat these *initiatives* in isolation. As Eagly and Carli (2002) and Botha and Cronjé (2014) suggest, even the most capable, *self-empowered* woman will struggle in *hostile* or *indifferent workplace environments*. Conversely, *policy reforms* without corresponding *individual engagement* often fail to produce genuine transformation. Therefore, the *dynamic interaction* between the two levels must be acknowledged. *Empowered women* are essential for pushing boundaries, but *structural support* is equally critical to sustain those gains. In the *mining sector*, where *gendered norms* and *resistance to transformation* are particularly entrenched, this interplay is especially urgent.

In sum, while *individual strategies* equip women with tools to survive and excel, *organisational initiatives* must remove *systemic barriers* that perpetuate inequality. A comprehensive, *theory-driven approach* that addresses *both motivation and structure, both the self and the system*, is essential to advance women into *directorship positions* in the South African mining industry.

Research methods

The methodology for this study is grounded in an inductive qualitative approach, aimed at generating rich, context-specific insights into the barriers faced by executive female directors in the mining sector. Data were collected using an online questionnaire comprised of open-ended questions, distributed via email with the assistance of HR managers who acted as gatekeepers. This method was chosen for its cost-effectiveness and efficiency in reaching a specific and hard-to-access population (Pandey and Pandey, 2021; Taherdoost, 2021; Verma et al., 2024).

Research Paradigm, Methodology, Design, and Time Horizon

This study adopted an *interpretivist–constructivist* research paradigm, which posits that reality is *socially constructed*, dynamic, and shaped through human interaction and interpretation (Moon & Blackman, 2022; Xu et al., 2020). Within this worldview, knowledge emerges from subjective meanings developed through participants' lived experiences, making it especially suitable for exploring nuanced gendered realities in leadership. The researcher sought to understand participants' interpretations of their leadership trajectories, while acknowledging the influence of their cultural, social, and organisational contexts (Gray, 2021; Sutton & Austin, 2023).

A *qualitative research methodology* was employed to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, emotions, and meanings attached to their leadership experiences. Qualitative approaches are efficient in gender and leadership studies as they prioritise depth over breadth, accommodate small and specialised samples, and enable iterative data collection and analysis (Nowell et al., 2022; Arghode et al., 2023). The study adopted an *explanatory qualitative research design*, aiming to go beyond surface-level

descriptions to uncover causal mechanisms and contextual drivers influencing women’s underrepresentation in executive leadership roles. This approach was ideal for interrogating the structural and interpersonal barriers encountered by women in the mining sector (Moser & Korstjens, 2021). A *cross-sectional time horizon* was chosen, as the study aimed to capture insights at a specific point in time, reflecting the contemporary realities of executive female leadership in Gauteng's mining industry. Participants were selected using a *purposive sampling strategy* that applied defined inclusion criteria to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The study population comprised *female executive directors* operating in South Africa’s mining sector, specifically within Gauteng. This province was selected for its concentration of mining headquarters and corporate decision-making centres, making it a strategic location for accessing senior women in leadership (Ngulube & Thelma, 2024; Jansen & Govender, 2023). The population was deliberately limited to those in *executive directorships* to ensure focus on individuals with day-to-day decision-making authority and strategic organisational influence. *Non-executive directors* whose roles primarily involve governance oversight and fiduciary accountability were excluded to differentiate between oversight and operational leadership (Madzivhandila & Mofolo, 2022). The study specifically explored the experiences of women responsible for driving organisational vision, innovation, and internal transformation, in line with research that positions executive directors as central agents of institutional change (Chikwe et al., 2024; Mhlongo, 2023).

A *non-probability purposive sampling technique* was used to select participants who met predefined eligibility criteria: women currently holding executive directorship roles in mining companies headquartered or operating in Gauteng. This technique was appropriate given the specificity of the study population and the need for deep, contextual insight (Verma et al., 2024; Tuckett, 2020). The final sample size was determined using the *principle of data saturation*, a point at which no new codes, categories, or themes emerged during the iterative process of data collection and thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2022). Saturation was reached after approximately 25 interviews, aligning with prior qualitative research that indicates this number is typically adequate for capturing thematic richness in professional and expert populations (Pandey & Pandey, 2021; Taherdoost, 2021). This sampling approach ensured that the findings reflect *deeply contextualised and leadership-specific insights*, rather than generalised accounts of gender in corporate governance. As reflected in Table 4.1 below, the sample was predominantly composed of *Black South African women*, allowing for a rich intersectional exploration of gender, race, and power within the post-apartheid mining industry.

Table 4.1: Participants Demographic Profile (N=25)

Demographic Category	Subcategory	(%)
Ethnicity	Black	53.8%

Demographic Category	Subcategory	(%)
	White	38.5%
	Coloured	7.7%
Marital Status	Married	31.0%
	Single	23.0%
	Divorced	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	15.2%
Age Group	51–69 years	57.1%
	36–50 years	42.9%
Qualification	Bachelor's degree	61.5%
	Master's degree	30.8%
	Prefer not to say	7.7%
Mining Industry Sector	Gold Mining	62.0%
	Mineral and Quarrying	19.0%
	Coal Mining	19.0%

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval was granted by the North-West University Research Ethics Committee on 28 November 2022 (NWU-0061-22-A4). The Human Resource (HR) managers were contacted through a formal letter sent via email, requesting that they communicate the study details to the female executive directors. This correspondence asked the HR managers to communicate the study details to the female executive directors within their organisations. The details encompassed the study's primary aim, its objectives, the methodology whereby the data would be collected, and ethical considerations such as the fact that the acquired data would be utilised for academic purposes only. Moreover, it enquired whether the company's female directors were willing to participate in the study. The HR manager emailed the female directors a link to the consent form and open-ended questions. Those willing to participate in the study were requested to click the link and complete the consent form online. There was a second link to a Google Forms document comprising open-ended questions. The participants completed the form and submitted their answers online. No form of identification was required. To ensure that all the questions were answered, the form was set up so that it would be impossible to move on to the next section without completing the previous section.

To initiate data collection, *human resource managers* were approached as organisational gatekeepers and formally invited via email to distribute participation requests. The emails outlined the research aims, ethical assurances, and participant confidentiality. Female executive directors were provided with a two-step process: first, an online consent form; second, a link to the questionnaire. The form design ensured completion of all questions before submission, enhancing data completeness and internal consistency.

Qualitative responses were analysed using *manual thematic analysis*, guided by reflexivity and methodological rigour. Data were exported to Google Sheets for iterative coding, with themes developed through repeated engagement, colour-coding, and categorisation of emerging patterns (Voutilainen et al., 2021; Kyngäs et al., 2020). This manual approach, as opposed to using CAQDAS tools like NVivo, was purposefully chosen to deepen interpretive engagement and maintain proximity to participant narratives (Nowell et al., 2022; Zakharovskyi & Németh, 2021).

Credibility was ensured through alignment with the research questions and consistent coding procedures (Coleman, 2022). *Dependability* and *confirmability* were supported by maintaining an audit trail, reflective memos, and summary logs (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *Transferability* was enhanced through clear articulation of participant demographics and context. Despite limitations such as the absence of probing typical in face-to-face interviews, these were mitigated through repeated review, independent validation, and methodological transparency, per current best practices in qualitative research (Naeem et al., 2020; Arghode et al., 2023).

Findings

These findings are linked to the 3rd objective, which is to *to* examine the organisational and individual strategies that both women and organisations can employ to enhance female representation in directorship roles within the mining sector

Individual initiatives

Individual-level initiatives to advance women into executive leadership within the mining sector can be broadly categorised into *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* dimensions, each addressing distinct yet interconnected aspects of individual agency. *Intrapersonal initiatives* refer to internal psychological and behavioural attributes that women cultivate to navigate and challenge gendered organisational barriers. These include *self-confidence*, *self-awareness*, *assertiveness*, *resilience*, *persistence*, *positive attitude*, *being more vocal*, *ambition*, *self-empowerment*, *embracing one's leadership style*, *taking on challenging opportunities*, and the development of *individual strategies*. These factors are best understood through the lens of *Self-Determination Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2019), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness underpin intrinsic motivation, enabling women to act with agency despite systemic constraints. Conversely, *interpersonal initiatives* rely on social interaction and relational capital to facilitate leadership progression. These include *mentoring programmes*, *support structures*, *participation in learning and development* (e.g., *attending training*), and *engaging in research* on sector-specific issues, all of which strengthen women's

access to information, networks, and sponsorship opportunities. When considered together, these initiatives demonstrate how individual agency, both internal and relational, can be mobilised to disrupt exclusionary leadership norms. However, their effectiveness is contingent on supportive organisational conditions that do not merely valorise personal resilience but also confront structural inequality.

The qualitative findings reveal a robust pattern of intrapersonal and interpersonal initiatives employed by women to navigate leadership pathways within South Africa's mining sector. These initiatives underscore a more profound paradox: while women are continuously asked to upskill, self-reflect, and adjust, the organisational environments in which they operate remain largely unaltered. The burden of transformation is thus displaced from the system onto the individual.

Intrapersonal factors such as *confidence*, *self-awareness*, *resilience*, *assertiveness*, *ambition*, and *positive mindset* emerged as foundational pillars of women's leadership development. *Respondent 1* stated, "*Confidence is key*," affirming the view that self-belief underpins proactive behaviour. Nevertheless, this recurring emphasis on confidence exposes more than an internal deficit; it reflects a broader organisational context where women's competence is routinely questioned, demanding over-preparation and emotional fortitude merely to gain access. *Self-awareness*, described by *Respondent 13* as "*very important*," and *Respondent 19*, who stressed the need to "*know your value and worth as a leader*," reflects an internal strategy to navigate bias and promote authenticity. However, the call for constant reflection and self-regulation points to a psychological tax women pay to remain professionally viable in male-dominated spaces.

Assertiveness was particularly highlighted, not as a soft skill but as a form of survival. *Respondent 2* shared, "I stand my ground and am very firm. I don't take nonsense," while *Respondent 3* advised women to "be firm and consistent in all decision-making." Eleven other participants echoed this sentiment. This reveals how leadership expectations require women to perform hyper-competence while carefully navigating the fine line between assertiveness and the backlash often triggered by perceived aggression. These strategies, though empowering, are not equally accessible, especially for women at the intersections of race and class, pointing to the selective effectiveness of interpersonal tactics when organisational cultures remain unchanged.

Closely aligned to assertiveness, resilience, and persistence were also underscored. *Respondent 16* referred to the importance of "persistence," while *Respondent 13* explained that "resilience is essential for women as we navigate hidden challenges and barriers our male counterparts do not face." These statements reveal the emotional labour demanded of women in leadership labour that often goes unacknowledged. While resilience is celebrated, the underlying structures that necessitate it remain intact and unchallenged.

Interpersonal strategies, *mentorship*, *networking*, *vocal advocacy*, and *taking on challenges* were also emphasised, reflecting how women seek connection, visibility, and legitimacy within organisational hierarchies. *Respondent 12* shared, "*I try to invest in the growth of my team members, providing them with opportunities to learn and grow*," showing how women in leadership roles use mentorship as a tool for

collective advancement. *Respondent 9* advised, “*Get a mentor even if it is not where you are currently employed,*” suggesting a workaround for the absence of institutionalised support. The data demonstrates that women not only climb alone, but they lift as they rise. However, reliance on mentorship as a compensatory mechanism for institutional failure underscores the limits of interpersonal goodwill when not accompanied by structural reform.

The need to speak up was also persistent. *Respondent 16* insisted, “If they are not happy about certain matters, they must speak up more,” while *Respondent 17* shared, “Women need to find their voice. Stand up for what you believe in, and do not allow anyone to intimidate you.” However, encouraging vocality assumes that the workplace is receptive to female voices, when in many cases women are penalised for expressing dissent. These insights reflect not only agency but the risk of backlash, silence, or exclusion. Thus, ‘speaking up’ is not neutral; it is a gendered act fraught with consequences.

Ambition and the proactive pursuit of challenging opportunities were similarly presented as critical. *Respondent 19* stated, “Being ambitious means challenging yourself to reach new heights,” while *Respondent 13* highlighted the need to “invest more in developing their careers, including taking on additional work responsibilities.” These narratives demonstrate that ambition is not lacking among women, contrary to persistent stereotypes. What is lacking is the structural capacity to recognise and reward that ambition equitably.

One of the most dominant themes was self-empowerment, cited by 25 respondents. *Respondent 22* stated, “Women need to empower themselves with the right skills,” while *Respondent 13* suggested “pursuing further education or obtaining industry-recognised qualifications.” This illustrates a deeply internalised belief in personal agency. It also reveals the neoliberal conditioning that places responsibility for success or failure squarely on the individual, rather than interrogating the systems that exclude. The ideal of the self-empowered woman may inspire, but it also absolves organisations from providing equitable pathways.

The emphasis on sector-specific knowledge reflects the critical role of credibility in a male-dominated industry. *Respondent 5* observed, “Women need to understand the industry,” and *Respondent 8* added, “They need to put in the work and study the sector.” Here, knowledge is power, but the expectation that women must ‘do more’ to be taken seriously is problematic. It reveals a tacit acceptance that meritocracy is gendered and conditional.

Theoretically, these responses strongly align with *Self-Determination Theory*, especially the need for competence and autonomy in navigating restrictive environments. Simultaneously, the data speaks to *intersectional feminist theory*, which critiques how overlapping systems of oppression shape women lived experiences differently. What is glaring, however, is that despite decades of emphasis on the very strategies respondents articulate confidence, resilience, and ambition, gender disparities in mining leadership persist. This signals an apparent disjuncture between individual empowerment and institutional transformation.

What remains under-researched is how these individual strategies function within hostile systems. While previous studies highlight the efficacy of mentoring and confidence-building, they rarely interrogate how these strategies lose effectiveness when confronted with rigid organisational cultures and unyielding masculine norms. The persistence of gender inequality despite widespread adoption of these interventions suggests that individual initiatives, while necessary, are insufficient without concurrent structural change.

The data reveal that women are not passive recipients of inequality; they are active architects of their leadership journeys. But asking women to lead the charge without recalibrating the structures around them creates a lopsided model of transformation. Empowerment must be decoupled from overburdening. Until organisations evolve to value diverse leadership styles, flatten hierarchies, and challenge systemic bias, individual initiatives will remain compensatory rather than catalytic. The future of gender equity in mining leadership will depend not only on how women lead but on how institutions follow.

Organisational/Structural Initiatives

Organisational Policies and Procedures

Respondents frequently cite the adoption of inclusive policies and procedures as a foundational step toward gender equity in leadership. However, a closer examination reveals that many of these assertions reflect an aspirational commitment rather than evidence of sustained structural change. Respondent 19 stated that *"implementing inclusive policies and a supportive work environment for women"* is crucial, while Respondent 21 added that *"companies should have policies in place that support women."* These statements underscore the recognition that policy frameworks are essential, but they also reflect an underlying assumption that the mere existence of policies is enough to bring about transformation. This sentiment risks reducing gender inclusion to compliance rather than integrating it into the organisational ethos.

Notably, Respondent 23 affirmed that *"having policies in place strongly encourages employment equity,"* which reveals a procedural understanding of transformation where compliance with policy substitutes for deeper cultural reform. The emphasis on policy presence rather than impact indicates a possible disconnection between formal policy and lived experience. This discrepancy may stem from respondents navigating environments where policies exist in documentation but lack enforcement, accountability mechanisms, or transformative intent.

Theoretically, these responses align with the notion of symbolic compliance, where organisations adopt policies to signal alignment with equality norms without substantively altering power dynamics. Furthermore, feminist institutional theory suggests that without challenging entrenched gender norms within institutions, policies will be ineffective in shifting leadership demographics.

Awards and Recognition

Some respondents identified awards as symbolic and motivational tools for recognising and legitimising women's leadership potential. Respondent 4 observed the importance of *"issuing awards for women in mining."* While awards may provide visibility and external validation, relying on recognition as a core

strategy raises concerns. Recognition without reform risks commodifying women's achievements rather than transforming the conditions that limit their access to leadership roles.

The emphasis on awards may reflect respondents' experiences in systems where external validation is one of the few visible affirmations of women's leadership, given limited structural pathways. Such initiatives, while well-meaning, often function more as public relations strategies than mechanisms of institutional change. Recognition should not replace substantive commitments to dismantling organisational hierarchies or redistributing leadership opportunities.

Equal Pay

Equal pay emerged as a recurring theme in discussions of fairness and inclusion, with Respondent 24 stating the need for *"providing equal pay."* However, the brevity of such responses suggests that equal pay is considered an obvious and non-negotiable right, simultaneously taken for granted in discourse, rather than rigorously examined as a structural barrier. This may reflect respondents' fatigue with ongoing wage inequality and a lack of transparency within mining organisations.

From a critical perspective, the framing of equal pay as a solution oversimplifies systemic barriers such as occupational segregation, opaque remuneration systems, and gendered value attribution. Implementing equal pay in isolation without examining the broader economic structures that perpetuate undervaluing women's labour risks offering a partial and performative response to inequality.

Mentorship and Support Structures

Mentorship and internal support structures were among the most strongly supported organisational initiatives. Respondent 19 stated that *"providing mentoring, support, and support networks can help reduce negative effects and improve retention of women in leadership roles,"* while Respondent 24 stressed the need for *"executive mentorships."* These responses reflect a deeper understanding of the structural and emotional labour women must navigate in male-dominated environments.

Notably, Respondent 13 admitted that "I am fairly new in this role; I have not really been able to implement any strategies or initiatives yet. But I would like to have a mentorship programme so that young women do not go through the same experience that I still face at this age." This statement is particularly revealing, highlighting both the limitations placed on junior leaders to influence institutional reform and the intergenerational cycle of gendered hardship. It also signals that mentorship is not only a strategy but a response to unaddressed systemic pain and exclusion.

These narratives point to a lack of embedded, organisation-wide mentorship frameworks, which are instead left to individual goodwill. The reliance on informal or aspirational mentorship signals weak institutional accountability and aligns with theories of gendered organisational culture, where women are expected to support one another in navigating biased systems rather than the systems being restructured.

Networking

Networking was also highlighted as a key mechanism for visibility and advancement. Respondent 7 shared: *"I encourage meeting outside work. I have also recommended that they join WIMSA, which supports women in mining."* Respondent 23 added that *"they must network with other women in similar roles."* These insights underscore the value of social capital and peer affiliation in mitigating professional isolation.

However, the focus on networking among women can reproduce gender silos and place the burden of career advancement solely on women's proactive behaviour, rather than organisational scaffolding. This reflects an individualised approach to leadership development, where systemic exclusion is addressed through self-navigation rather than institutional redesign. Furthermore, these sentiments may be a response to the reality that traditional, male-dominated networks remain largely inaccessible or unwelcoming to women.

Leadership and Management Development

Training and career development programmes were widely seen as fundamental to advancing women into leadership. Respondent 17 noted that *"there are no limits, there are many study opportunities, and we provide career path development programmes."* At the same time, Respondent 25 affirmed that *"training and development are among the initiatives that organisations should implement."* Similarly, Respondents 20 and 23 stressed that *"organisations should provide more training for women,"* and Respondent 16 described sending women for *"assertiveness and leadership training on a quarterly basis."*

While these initiatives represent active strategies for skill-building, they also reveal implicit assumptions that women lack sufficient preparation or confidence. There is a risk of problematising women rather than problematising the gendered structures that limit access to opportunity. By overly focusing on fixing women, organisations may divert attention from the discriminatory practices that continue to favour male leadership pipelines.

The emphasis on leadership training mirrors self-determination theory principles, especially the need for competence and autonomy. However, insufficient attention is given to restructuring systems that undermine those needs in the first place.

Women's Empowerment

Empowerment was the most widely referenced concept, although often ambiguously defined. Respondent 23 discussed *"developing programmes that can empower women more,"* and Respondent 7 noted that *"in my unit, I try to empower women who report to me, give them a platform to share ideas, and encourage them to study further."* Respondent 19 stated that *"organisations need to give women equal opportunities to succeed."* These responses reflect a sincere desire to uplift, yet empowerment is frequently positioned as a personal or managerial responsibility rather than a structural imperative.

The ambiguity surrounding empowerment reflects broader critiques in feminist theory that empowerment rhetoric, when detached from institutional accountability, becomes hollow. Empowerment cannot be

confined to programs or motivational support. It must involve redistributing power, revising workplace cultures, and removing institutional barriers. Respondents' framing of empowerment likely reflects their constrained agency within rigid corporate structures. Many women feel they must create informal spaces of support or model empowerment themselves in the absence of formal organisational transformation.

The last objective was to develop a conceptual framework that explains from the literature and the empirical findings of this study, and through the lenses of the critical feminist theory, explains the salience of organisational, cultural, and religious initiatives. Looking across the models of Morrison, the EEOC, Randel and Nielson, and Wheeler shows that organisations often put energy into training, mentoring, and managing diversity, but fall short on deeper accountability and cultural change. The findings suggest progress has been made in building programmes, yet the harder work of prevention, structural responsibility, and valuing diversity remains unfinished. Together, these frameworks help us see not only where steps forward have been taken, but also how far the organisation still is from genuine transformation.

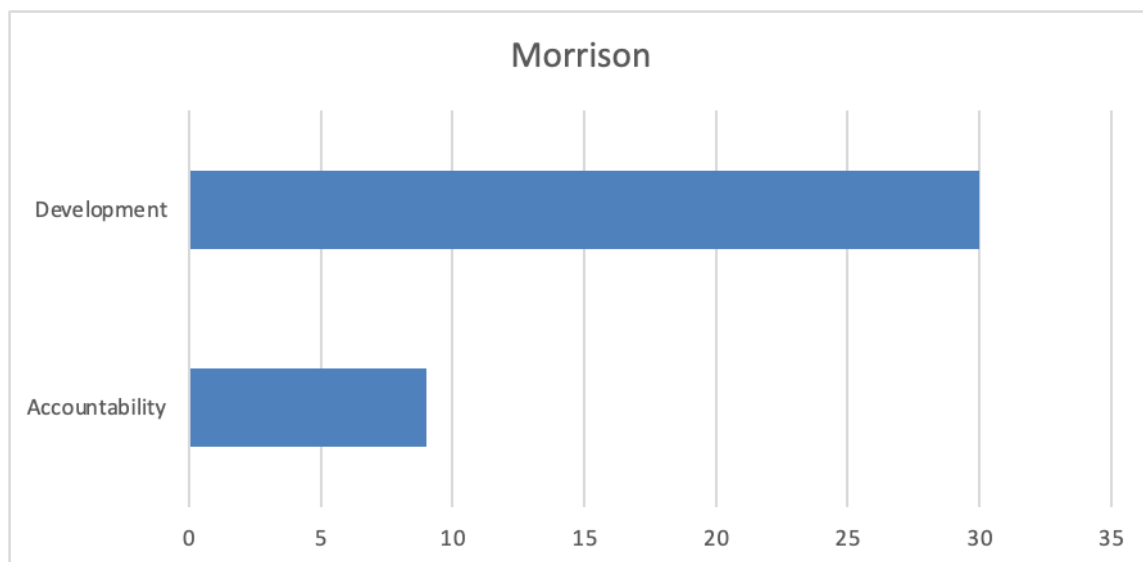


Figure 4.1: Morrison Accountability and Development

In Figure 4.1 above Morrison highlights the importance of both accountability and development practices in building an inclusive workforce. Here, the organisation scores highly on development but far lower on accountability, showing that while women are given access to training and mentoring, the responsibility for transformation is not embedded at a systemic level. This imbalance suggests a culture where progress depends on individual upskilling rather than institutional responsibility, echoing Connell's (2005) argument that gender transformation cannot be sustained without deeper structural accountability.

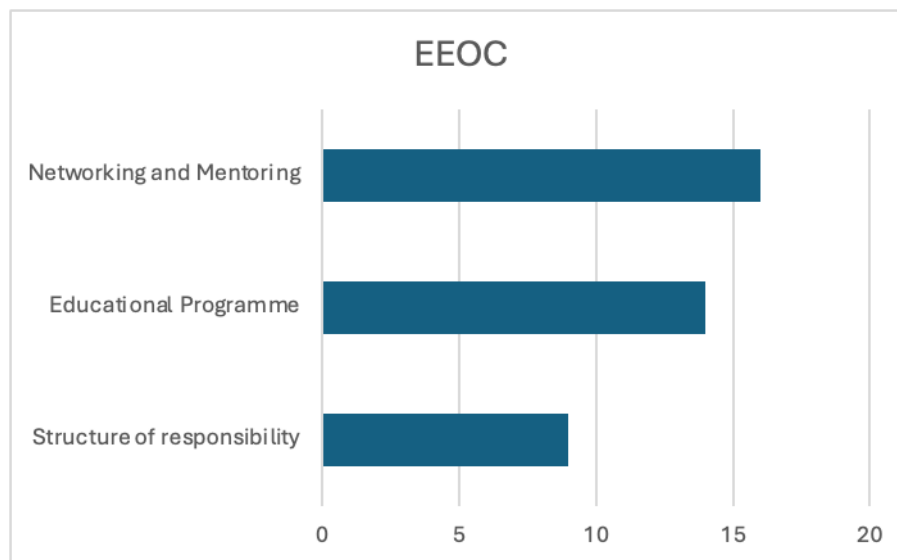


Figure 4.2: EEOC Structures, Education and Mentoring

Figure 4.2 above shows a similar trend: mentoring and networking are relatively well supported, while structures of responsibility and educational programmes lag behind. This reflects a reliance on interpersonal support rather than on formal institutional scaffolding. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, diversity structures matter because they anchor equity work into organisational systems; without them, training and mentoring can become compensatory rather than transformative.

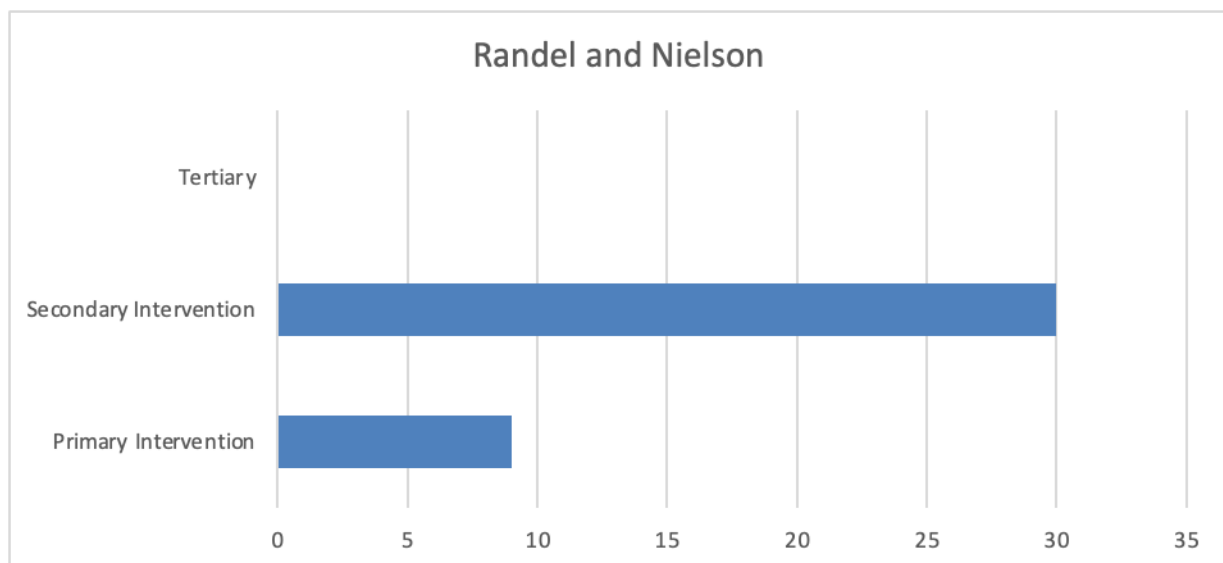


Figure 4.3: Randel & Nielson Levels of interventions

Randel and Nielson's model Figure 4.3 above further exposes the imbalance, with the organisation heavily invested in secondary interventions such as training but neglecting both prevention (primary) and repair (tertiary). This means that issues are being managed once they arise, but not prevented, nor are existing inequities meaningfully addressed. The absence of tertiary interventions is particularly concerning, as it suggests that the organisation has few mechanisms for healing or correcting the harm already experienced by women in leadership pathways.

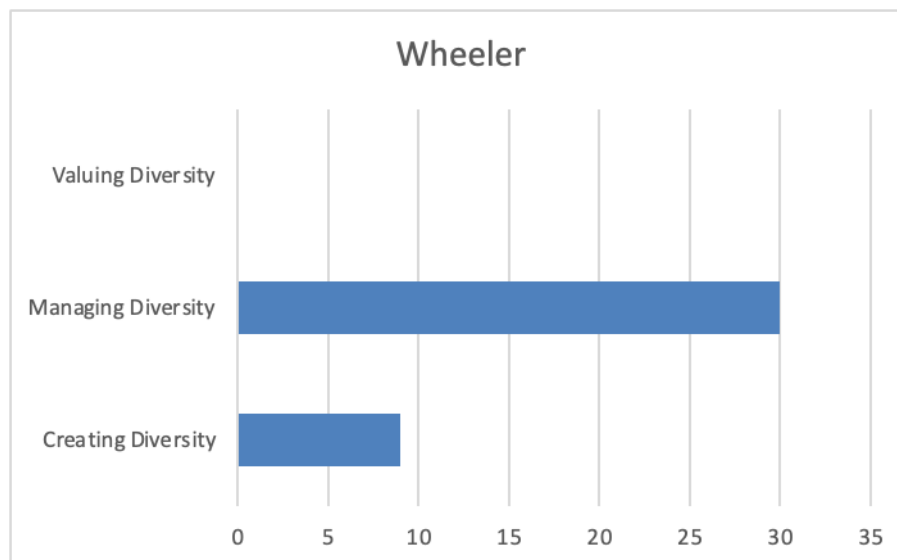


Figure 4.4: Wheeler's Diversity measurement

Wheeler Diversity Measurement

Wheeler's model represented in Figure 4.4 reveals that the organisation is stuck at the "managing diversity" stage, without progressing toward valuing or leveraging diversity. This indicates that diversity is being handled administratively rather than embraced as a strategic advantage or cultural ethos. As Eagly and Carli (2007) argue, true transformation requires moving beyond management to embedding diversity as an organisational strength that shapes leadership, innovation, and competitiveness.

Reflection

The findings from these models make one thing clear: while organisations know what should be done, they often stop short of doing the harder work. Mentorship, training, and policy frameworks are visible, but they rarely go far enough to shift entrenched hierarchies or hold leadership accountable. This creates a cycle of partial progress where women continue to prepare themselves for leadership, yet the structures around them remain unchanged.

What this reveals is that most initiatives stay at the level of support rather than transformation. They build confidence and skills but do little to question how power is organised or how leadership is defined. As long as diversity work remains about "fixing women" instead of re-engineering systems, the promise of equity will remain unfulfilled. This echoes Ahmed's (2012) idea of "institutional comfort," where organisations adopt diversity work only to the extent that it does not disrupt business as usual.

It is here that the importance of this research becomes most visible. By mapping gaps across Morrison, EEOC, Randel and Nielson, and Wheeler, this study shows why a new approach is needed—one that goes beyond development programmes and embeds equity at the very core of organisational life. This is the gap the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) Framework is designed to fill: it moves the conversation from

isolated programmes to systemic redesign, ensuring that equity is not an add-on but a fundamental organising principle of leadership and culture in the mining sector.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal a persistent gap between awareness of effective gender-equity initiatives and their actual implementation within the South African mining sector. While respondents highlighted individual strategies such as leadership training, mentorship, and networking as empowering mechanisms, their effectiveness remains limited without structural reinforcement. This suggests that while self-determination theory offers a valuable lens in framing women's agency, it inadequately accounts for the institutional resistance embedded in patriarchal mining cultures. Despite decades of research advocating for inclusive practices (e.g., Catalyst, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2002), interventions remain poorly contextualised. The recurring emphasis on skill development and empowerment often misdiagnoses the problem by focusing on individual deficits rather than institutional bias. This misalignment reflects role congruity theory's limitations in explaining the sector's inertia, highlighting the need to evolve toward intersectional feminist organisational theories that interrogate how race, gender, and historical legacy converge to marginalise women in leadership.

The failure to implement well-documented strategies such as flexible work policies and structural mentorship points to a disconnect between organisational rhetoric and transformative action. As noted in earlier studies (Herbst, 2020; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022), cultural rigidity and male-dominated operational norms in mining present unique constraints that generic frameworks overlook. To address this, future research and policy must move beyond transferable solutions and engage with context-specific, historically informed models. The study proposes integrating feminist institutionalism and change leadership theory to uncover how informal power structures sabotage formal equity efforts. New approaches should include gender-responsive audits, co-designed leadership pipelines with affected women, and accountability-linked diversity targets. Ultimately, the sector must shift from symbolic inclusion to power redistribution where women are not merely supported but positioned to transform leadership spaces on their own terms.

Discussion of Individual and Organisational and Structural Initiatives

Despite decades of discourse on gender equity in leadership, women in South Africa's mining sector continue to propose the same foundational initiatives: leadership training, mentorship, assertiveness development, networking, and flexible work arrangements. Their persistence does not signal ignorance but rather an enduring institutional failure to implement, integrate, and hold leadership accountable for meaningful change. The repetition of these strategies underscores a more profound crisis: a chronic gap between knowledge and action, rooted in organisational inertia and the entrenchment of patriarchal norms (Connell, 2005; Makama, 2013; Nkosi, 2024). Women are asked to be assertive in spaces that penalise vocality, to build confidence in environments that routinely undermine their competence, and to lead in systems that continue to valorise masculine-coded leadership traits. This dynamic reinforces what scholars term the "individualisation of structural failure" (Eagly & Carli, 2002; Sandberg et al., 2015), where women

shoulder the burden of institutional dysfunction a hallmark of neoliberal feminism that celebrates resilience while obfuscating the need for structural disruption (Fraser, 2013; Gill, 2017).

Individual initiatives such as confidence building, cultivating emotional intelligence, embracing visibility, networking, and taking on high-stakes projects are critical and reflect core tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2019), which emphasises intrinsic motivation, competence, and agency. Yet these efforts are stifled when organisational systems remain unresponsive. For instance, networking and mentorship are often promoted as accelerators of women's advancement, but in the absence of inclusive leadership structures, they reproduce homosocial capital and elite exclusivity (Ragins & Kram, 2007; Ibarra et al., 2013). Likewise, assertiveness training is encouraged, but without psychological safety or responsive feedback mechanisms, women are punished for behaviours that deviate from gendered expectations, an issue well explained by Role Congruity Theory and Impression Management Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Cuddy et al., 2015). These tensions reveal the failure of isolated initiatives to drive change without structural anchoring.

Organisational policies, equal pay, flexible work, inclusive training, and leadership pipelines are equally compromised when treated as symbolic acts rather than embedded practices. In many cases, these initiatives interact superficially with individual efforts, offering formal endorsement without addressing informal cultures of exclusion. For example, leadership training may equip women with strategic skills, but when promotion pathways remain opaque or male-dominated, the skills fail to translate into influence (Hunt et al., 2020; Mercer, 2021). Similarly, flexible work policies designed to support work-life balance often carry implicit penalties in performance evaluations, deterring uptake and reinforcing maternal bias. These contradictions highlight how the fragmentation between individual and structural initiatives undermines their efficacy. Unless these systems are deliberately aligned where mentoring feeds into transparent succession planning, assertiveness is met with receptive leadership, and networking links to measurable sponsorship outcomes, the impact will remain performative. As Ahmed (2012) cautions, diversity policies without enforcement often serve as institutional cover rather than genuine change.

Thus, the interaction between individual and organisational initiatives must be reimagined not as parallel tracks but as an integrated, mutually reinforcing ecosystem. When policies and personal strategies are synchronised through structural support, cultural realignment, and equity-based accountability, transformation becomes not only possible but sustainable. The continued recycling of familiar recommendations signals not fatigue, but organisational refusal, and that is the actual site where change must begin.

Theoretical Contribution: The Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) Framework

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by proposing the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) Framework, a novel model that transcends traditional binaries between individual agency and organisational reform. Rooted in critical feminist theory and informed by empirical evidence from the South African mining sector, the EEA Framework responds to a persistent disconnect: women are expected to be

“leadership-ready,” yet the institutional architectures within which they operate remain profoundly unprepared for gender-inclusive leadership. Existing models such as Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2019), and Organisational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1987) fail to fully account for the embedded, relational, and adaptive mechanisms required to dismantle systemic inequality. The EEA framework reconceptualises equity not as an “add-on” programme but as a core design principle embedded in the formal and informal structures of leadership, organisational policy, and cultural practice.

The EEA Framework comprises five interconnected components. First, Personal Agency Activation emphasises individual self-awareness, motivation, and confidence-building. It includes targeted leadership training, coaching, and visibility platforms designed to build psychological capital and challenge internalised gender inferiority, critiqued extensively in feminist literature as a by-product of structural exclusion (Gill, 2017; Sandberg et al., 2015). Second, Structural Enablement addresses formal organisational mechanisms that sustain equity: transparent promotion systems, inclusive policies, and psychologically safe environments (Kroupová, 2024; Mercer, 2021). These structures move beyond compliance to intentionally disrupt gendered power hierarchies. Third, Relational Reinforcement centres the feminist principle of relational accountability, positioning mentorship, sponsorship, and community-building as essential for enabling horizontal leadership development rather than top-down tokenism (Ahmed, 2012; Ibarra et al., 2013). Fourth, Cultural Realignment recognises the need to dismantle hegemonic masculinity as the default leadership archetype. This is achieved through narrative shifts, diverse role modelling, and tying performance evaluations to gender equity outcomes (Connell, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2002). Finally, Adaptive Accountability builds feedback mechanisms into organisational review structures, ensuring equity is not aspirational but operational where promotions, incentives, and recognition are tied to measurable outcomes, not performative intent.

What sets the EEA Framework apart is its capacity to address the root problem of misalignment: the repeated failure to translate individually focused strategies (such as confidence building or training) into meaningful outcomes due to systemic organisational inertia. Feminist theorists have long argued that without structural and cultural reform, initiatives aimed at “fixing women” merely adapt them to oppressive systems rather than transforming those systems (Fraser, 2013; Gill, 2017). EEA resists this neoliberal trap by embedding equity into the organisation’s DNA, its metrics, rituals, relationships, and leadership values. Unlike prior models that overemphasise either individual merit or surface-level policy reform, the EEA framework captures the dynamic interplay between self, system, and society.

Recommendations

This study unveils a sobering reality: the persistence of gender inequality in executive leadership is not due to a scarcity of ideas, but to the cyclical neglect and symbolic adoption of initiatives without structural traction. The repetition of recommendations by women across roles and ranks should not be dismissed as redundancy but rather interpreted as a manifestation of organisational inertia and institutional deafness.

Women continue to call for mentorship, inclusive leadership development, flexible work, and equal pay, not because they are uninformed or unimaginative, but because these interventions have never been fully institutionalised with integrity, context-specific adaptation, or intersectional nuance. This phenomenon reflects what Fraser (2013) terms a "crisis of recognition," where demands for justice are acknowledged rhetorically but subverted in practice. To resolve this paradox, a paradigm shift is required: a fundamental reordering of power, policy, culture, and accountability through an Embedded Equity Architecture that integrates individual empowerment with structural transformation.

Against this backdrop, the study proposes several sophisticated, future-oriented, and evidence-informed recommendations. First, the implementation of Equity Accountability Indices is paramount. These would involve annual, disaggregated reporting of gender equity outcomes by department and job function, linked directly to executive remuneration, promotion pathways, and board-level performance reviews. Such indices operationalise Ahmed's (2012) notion of "institutional listening," forcing organisations to hear the gendered effects of their policies not as anecdotes but as performance indicators. The success of such indices depends on independent verification and public disclosure, transforming diversity from an HR responsibility into an executive mandate. Second, the establishment of Feminist Policy Co-Design Labs is critical. These labs would convene a cross-section of stakeholders, including women mineworkers, supervisors, HR practitioners, and executives, to collaboratively co-create workplace policies grounded in lived experience. This disrupts the top-down technocratic logic of policy-making that too often reinforces managerial blind spots. Drawing on participatory design theory (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), such labs offer a radical reconfiguration of power in policy formation and deepen organisational epistemology by privileging subaltern knowledge (Spivak, 1988).

Third, Boardroom Equity Immersions are proposed as experiential leadership development initiatives for senior executives, particularly men who occupy positions of hegemonic authority. These would use narrative simulation and design thinking to simulate the experience of exclusion, microaggression, and visibility politics as faced by women. This aligns with theories of perspective taking and embodied empathy (Decety & Cowell, 2014) and can serve as a transformative tool to humanise abstract discussions about equity. Fourth, Narrative Impact Audits should be institutionalised as part of organisational sense-making practices. These audits would analyse internal communications, newsletters, public accolades, and exit interviews to surface how the stories of women leaders are told, distorted, or erased. As Foucault (1980) reminds us, discourse is power. By auditing organisational narratives, companies can identify and rectify the implicit storylines that normalise masculine dominance and marginalise women's leadership contributions. These audits would support the dismantling of symbolic exclusion and help reauthor equity narratives from within.

Fifth, Operational Gender Labs are recommended as embedded experimentation hubs within mining sites that test, evaluate, and refine leadership development initiatives in real-world conditions. These could include context-specific interventions such as rotational leadership roles for women in technical departments or hybrid work models for underground operations. Grounded in theories of adaptive experimentation

(Heifetz et al., 2009), these labs would shift organisations away from one-size-fits-all interventions and enable evidence-based innovation tailored to mining's unique operational culture. Sixth, a bold recommendation is the Decolonial Feminist Review of National Mining Charters and Sectoral Frameworks. Existing regulatory instruments often reinforce masculinised assumptions of leadership and extractive logics that sideline women and non-dominant voices. A decolonial feminist review, grounded in intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and critical policy analysis (Ball, 1994), would interrogate how race, class, and gender hierarchies are codified in regulation. Such a review would be a foundational step toward crafting a mining regulatory regime that is not merely inclusive but structurally equitable.

In addition to these structural recommendations, this study proposes the creation of Equity Leadership Scorecards at the level of individual line managers. These would measure inclusivity behaviours, bias mitigation efforts, mentorship outcomes, and team diversity as criteria for promotion. Research has shown that leadership behaviour, not just policy, determines the everyday experiences of women in the workplace (Prime & Salib, 2014; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). These scorecards could be complemented by Peer-Based Gender Advocacy Panels, multi-gender collectives empowered to oversee and co-evaluate promotion decisions and hiring practices, drawing on evidence from collaborative governance models (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Ultimately, these recommendations form the operational expression of the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) framework. The EEA does not separate women's empowerment from institutional change, but instead weaves personal development, cultural transformation, and structural reform into a unified system of organisational redesign. This model resists the trap of symbolic compliance, which Fraser (2009) warns is a hallmark of neoliberal diversity regimes. Instead, it seeks to *materialise* equity, embedding it into the logics, rituals, and rewards of organisational life.

In conclusion, the contribution of this study is not only theoretical, but also strategic and practical. It offers a sophisticated feminist-informed intervention model grounded in the complex realities of the South African mining sector. It challenges prevailing models that focus on fixing women, instead proposing the reengineering of institutions themselves. The study urges sector leaders, policymakers, and scholars to abandon incrementalism and embrace a bold, systemic, and context-sensitive model of transformation. Only by shifting from rhetoric to structural responsibility can the sector evolve from a site of exclusion to a beacon of gender-equitable leadership. The Embedded Equity Architecture thus stands not as a suggestion but as a new imperative.

Practical Implications

This study reconceptualises gender transformation in the mining sector by arguing that advancing women's leadership requires moving beyond individual empowerment programmes toward embedding equity as a core organisational function. The proposed Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) Framework operationalises this shift by aligning personal agency with structural accountability, cultural realignment, and adaptive

governance, thereby dismantling the false dichotomy between “fixing women” and “fixing the system.” In practical terms, the study advances tools such as equity accountability indices that link gender outcomes to executive performance reviews. These feminist co-design labs root policy in lived experience, and narrative audits that interrogate organisational discourse to disrupt masculinised leadership archetypes. At a regulatory level, it calls for recalibrating the Mining Charter and sectoral frameworks to move away from compliance-driven diversity models toward transformative justice approaches anchored in intersectional feminist analysis. By embedding equity in leadership assessment, policy design, and organisational culture, the study provides a replicable, context-specific blueprint for institutionalising gender-inclusive leadership in mining, with broader relevance for other structurally resistant and gendered industries.

Research limitations

This study’s focus on the South African mining sector in Gauteng provided deep contextual insights but limits generalisability to other industries or regions. While the qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of gendered leadership experiences, the reliance on a small, purposively selected sample may have excluded broader perspectives. Additionally, the interpretive nature of the analysis, though strengthened through reflexivity, introduces the potential for researcher bias, as acknowledged by contemporary scholars in qualitative inquiry (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023; Taherdoost, 2021).

To address these limitations, the study applied rigorous credibility measures, including peer coding, triangulation, and iterative thematic refinement (Nkosi, 2024; Marx, 2023). Anonymity was protected through de-identification and strict data handling protocols. While full generalisability remains constrained, the study’s methodological transparency and contextual specificity enhance its transferability for future cross-sectoral studies. Future research should consider incorporating digital anonymisation tools and larger mixed-methods samples to broaden the scope and validate findings (Jones & Adams, 2023; Kroupová, 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that while female directors are indispensable to organisational resilience and innovation, their ascension into directorship roles continues to be obstructed by persistent gendered assumptions and institutional inertia. Despite growing awareness and policy rhetoric, entrenched masculine norms and leadership archetypes remain embedded in organisational structures—particularly within sectors such as mining and heavy industry (Nguyen & Blake, 2022). As such, fundamental transformation requires more than surface-level interventions; it demands the structural re-engineering of how leadership is conceptualised, developed, and rewarded.

Building on emerging scholarship, this research urges organisations to adopt intersectional, equity-driven frameworks that move beyond tokenistic inclusion (Lee & Patel, 2024; Taylor & Kim, 2024). Effective pathways include embedding feminist-informed mentorship structures, expanding inclusive digital ecosystems to accommodate diverse working realities, and critically auditing internal cultures for gendered bias (Miller & Zhang, 2022). Crucially, the leadership pipeline must be reimagined not as a linear ascent, but

as a flexible, relational network shaped by sponsorship, access, and trust. The future of leadership lies in how boldly organisations are willing to recalibrate power, embrace systemic accountability, and centre the lived experiences of women not at the margins, but at the core of governance.

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CHAPTER 5: INTEGRATED LITERATURE SYNTHESIS AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

This final chapter brings together the findings, literature, and theoretical insights from all three articles to construct a comprehensive synthesis of the barriers and opportunities shaping women's advancement into executive directorship within the mining sector in Gauteng. The research was motivated by the persistent paradox between South Africa's progressive legislative frameworks, which mandate transformation and gender equity, and the lived experiences of women, which continue to reflect exclusion, marginalisation, and tokenistic participation at the highest levels of decision-making. While the policy landscape, including instruments such as the Employment Equity Act, Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), and the Mining Charter, has created space for women's entry into the boardroom, the findings revealed that substantive inclusion remains elusive.

The three articles that structured this research each approached the problem from a distinct but complementary angle. The first article developed a critical mapping of the global and local literature on barriers to women in leadership, highlighting the persistent stereotypes, structural barriers, and organisational cultures that reproduce exclusion. The second article drew from in-depth interviews with women executive directors, providing a rare qualitative account of how these barriers are lived and negotiated in the South African mining sector. The third article extended the analysis towards solutions, assessing initiatives and interventions aimed at embedding equity while critically examining their unintended consequences. Together, these articles provided a multi-layered exploration of the research problem, moving from the theoretical and descriptive to the empirical and prescriptive.

The purpose of this integrated chapter is to weave these strands into a coherent synthesis, demonstrating how the findings relate to each other, how they are grounded in theory and literature, and how they collectively achieve the objectives of the research. This chapter also situates the study's contribution within the broader field of organisational and gender studies, while offering practical solutions for mining organisations, boards, and policymakers. By drawing on Critical Organisational Theory, Intersectionality Theory, Glass Ceiling Theory, and other complementary frameworks, the analysis goes beyond surface-level descriptions of gender disparity to interrogate the deeper logics of organisational life that perpetuate exclusion. It also critically reflects on the iatrogenic consequences of transformation efforts, underscoring that equity initiatives can sometimes reinforce rather than dismantle marginalisation when poorly designed.

This chapter, therefore, serves both as a conclusion and as a conceptual reimagination. It consolidates the empirical voices of respondents with theoretical insights to articulate a new framework, which this study has termed an Embedded Equity Architecture, that seeks to institutionalise gender equity in mining organisations in ways that are substantive, sustainable, and resistant to tokenism. In so doing, the chapter confirms that the

objectives of the research were fully achieved and that the study makes significant theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions.

Literature Synthesis Across All Chapters

Across the three articles, the literature consistently pointed to the persistence of gendered barriers and challenges in leadership, despite decades of feminist scholarship, policy interventions, and organisational reforms. Scholars such as Acker (1990) have long argued that organisations are inherently gendered, embedding masculine norms and values into structures and routines that appear neutral on the surface but in practice marginalise women. This argument remains highly relevant in the South African mining sector, where the culture of toughness, endurance, and hierarchical authority is aligned with hegemonic masculinity (Botha, 2020; Booysen, 2007). The literature reviewed in Article 1 demonstrated that stereotypes about women being less competent leaders, too emotional for high-stakes decision-making, or more suited to caregiving roles continue to undermine their progression into executive spaces (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

At the same time, the literature has also revealed the limitations of treating women as a homogeneous group. Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Theory, which has been widely taken up in feminist organisational studies, shows that women of colour experience compounded discrimination that cannot be understood by looking at gender or race alone. The global literature also emphasised the glass ceiling and the glass cliff phenomena as barriers to women's leadership. The glass ceiling refers to the invisible but pervasive barriers that prevent women from rising beyond middle management (Morrison et al., 1987; Cotter et al., 2001), while the glass cliff describes how women who do make it into leadership are often placed in precarious roles where failure is likely (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The findings from Article 2 and Article 3 aligned with these frameworks. Respondents described being excluded from informal networks and decision-making spaces, with one noting: *"Sometimes you realise the decisions were already made; you are just asked to endorse them."* This confirms Kanter's (1977) earlier work on tokenism, which highlighted how women are often given visibility without real influence. Similarly, initiatives to place women in leadership positions without addressing organisational culture often result in glass cliff appointments, where women are set up to fail in hostile or under-resourced contexts.

Despite this long trajectory of scholarship, Article 1 highlighted the persistence of research gaps. Much of the global literature has been based in Western contexts, leaving African mining organisations under-researched. Moreover, while legislative frameworks in South Africa have been studied, less attention has been given to the lived experiences of women executive directors in mining. Article 2 addressed this gap by providing empirical data, while Article 3 extended it by showing how existing initiatives need to be critically re-examined to avoid iatrogenic consequences. Together, the three articles contributed to advancing the literature by situating global theories within the specificities of South African mining, foregrounding women's voices, and critically interrogating policy-practice disjunctors.

In synthesising the literature across all three articles, it becomes clear that the barriers to women's leadership are multi-layered, intersecting at personal, organisational, and systemic levels. Human Capital Theory, which suggests that women lack experience or education, has been repeatedly debunked, as many women in mining possess equal or superior qualifications compared to their male peers (Adisa et al., 2019; Alruwaili et al., 2022). Instead, the persistence of exclusion must be understood through theories of social roles, gendered organisations, and critical perspectives that reveal how power and inequality are reproduced within organisational life. This synthesis underscores the necessity of integrating multiple theoretical lenses rather than relying on a single explanatory framework.

5.2.1 Integration of Findings with Respondents' Voices

The empirical data collected across the three articles provided a powerful window into how the barriers identified in the literature manifest in the lived realities of women in South Africa's mining sector. Respondents consistently described their experiences in ways that confirmed, extended, and at times challenged the frameworks offered by existing theories. The integration of these voices with the theoretical and policy analysis underscores the persistence of entrenched barriers while also revealing the complexity and contradictions of women's leadership trajectories.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the persistence of stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes. One executive director explained that *"you always have to work twice as hard to prove yourself because people assume you are not capable."* This reflects Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, which suggests that women are penalised when their behaviour violates stereotypical gender expectations. The perception that women are "out of place" in mining organisations has deep historical roots, given that the sector was long considered the preserve of male labour. The respondents' testimonies make clear that these stereotypes are not relics of the past but continue to shape the reception and evaluation of women leaders.

Another respondent highlighted exclusion from decision-making processes, noting that *"sometimes you realise the decisions were already made; you are just asked to endorse them."* This reflects Kanter's (1977) tokenism theory, where women may be symbolically included in executive positions without substantive influence. From a Critical Organisational Theory perspective (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000), this dynamic illustrates how organisations maintain gendered structures of power by relegating women to symbolic roles while real authority remains concentrated in male-dominated networks. This finding resonates with global scholarship on the glass ceiling (Cotter et al., 2001) and highlights the organisational mechanisms through which it is sustained.

Many respondents also described being subjected to heightened scrutiny compared to their male colleagues. One observed: "When a man makes a mistake, it is seen as just that a mistake. But when you make one, it becomes proof that women can't handle leadership." This echoes Ryan and Haslam's (2005) concept of the glass cliff, where women leaders are often set up to fail by being placed in precarious situations and then judged harshly when things go wrong. The iatrogenic consequences of transformation initiatives are evident here: while policies aimed at increasing women's representation have created opportunities, the failure to

transform organisational cultures has meant that women are often appointed into positions where their authority is undermined and their performance is disproportionately scrutinised.

The narratives also revealed the significance of intersectionality in shaping women's experiences. Black women, in particular, reported being seen as beneficiaries of B-BBEE rather than as capable leaders. One participant explained: *"people look at you as if you are here only because of BEE, not because of your ability."* This reflects Crenshaw's (1989) argument that women of colour face forms of oppression that cannot be explained by gender or race alone but must be understood as intersecting systems of disadvantage. It also confirms Booysen's (2007) critique that equity initiatives in South Africa have sometimes reinforced tokenism by prioritising numerical compliance over genuine inclusion. The finding is significant because it highlights how legislative frameworks, while progressive in intent, can produce unintended outcomes when not supported by cultural and structural change.

Another striking theme from the interviews was the emotional labour required of women leaders to manage both their professional roles and the biases they encounter. As one respondent put it: *"you are always cautious about how you speak, how you behave, because you know you are being judged more harshly."* This aligns with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour but also resonates with Ely and Meyerson's (2000) critical perspectives on gendered organisations, which show how women are expected to adapt themselves to fit into masculine organisational norms rather than the norms changing to accommodate diversity. Respondents' accounts revealed that this constant self-monitoring is exhausting and often discourages women from aspiring to executive leadership in the first place.

Furthermore, respondents noted structural barriers embedded in organisational practices. A participant reflected: *"Networking happens on the golf course or over drinks, and we are excluded from those spaces."* This exclusion from informal networks confirms Kanter's (1977) analysis that opportunities, power, and proportions shape women's access to leadership. Even when formal opportunities exist, the informal practices of networking and sponsorship remain dominated by men, thereby reproducing exclusion in less visible but equally powerful ways. This points to the importance of understanding organisations not only through their formal structures but also through the unwritten rules and practices that shape career advancement.

Several respondents also raised the issue of work-life balance and the pressure of managing family responsibilities alongside demanding executive roles. One explained: *"there is an assumption that because you have children, you will not cope with the workload."* This reflects Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests that expectations about gender roles shape perceptions of women's suitability for leadership. It also demonstrates how organisational cultures in mining, which valorise long working hours and constant availability, are implicitly designed around the assumption of a male breadwinner unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities. These findings underscore the need to move beyond individualised solutions, such as encouraging women to "lean in," towards structural reforms that challenge the gendered nature of organisational time and workload expectations.

Importantly, the findings also highlighted the resilience and strategies women employed to navigate these barriers. One participant noted: *“you learn to build alliances with those who support you, otherwise you won’t survive.”* This suggests that despite the hostile environment, women exercise agency and develop adaptive strategies. However, as Ely and Meyerson (2000) caution, focusing only on women’s resilience risks obscuring the need for systemic transformation. The accounts of respondents illustrate that while women can and do adapt, the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on them, and without structural change, the cycle of exclusion will continue.

Taken together, the integration of respondents’ voices with the theoretical and policy frameworks reveals a deeply entrenched gender order in mining organisations. The findings confirm that barriers are not simply a matter of individual deficits or lack of qualifications, as Human Capital Theory might suggest, but are rooted in the cultural, structural, and political dimensions of organisational life. The lived experiences of women leaders provide empirical confirmation of what Critical Organisational Theory, Intersectionality, and Glass Ceiling Theory have long argued: that organisations are not neutral spaces but contested terrains where power is reproduced through gendered norms and practices.

5.2.2 Theoretical Engagement

The findings across all three articles reaffirm the value of a multi-theoretical framework for understanding barriers to women’s executive leadership in the mining sector. No single theory alone adequately captures the complexity of experiences described by respondents. Instead, a critical synthesis of Human Capital Theory, Social Role Theory, Glass Ceiling Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Critical Organisational Theory reveals how cultural, structural, and individual-level dynamics interlock to sustain gendered exclusion.

Human Capital Theory has historically suggested that women’s underrepresentation in executive leadership is a result of inadequate education, skills, or experience (Becker, 1964). However, the respondents in this study demonstrate that these explanations are insufficient. Many of the women interviewed were highly qualified, with advanced degrees and decades of industry experience. One executive director observed, *“I have more qualifications than some of my male counterparts, yet I am still not taken seriously in boardroom discussions.”* This not only undermines the assumptions of Human Capital Theory but supports Acker’s (1990) argument that organisations are gendered, privileging men regardless of credentials. In this sense, the findings confirm scholars such as Booysen (2007) who argue that the barriers women face are not deficits in human capital but systemic exclusion.

Social Role Theory provides a more convincing lens through which to interpret respondents’ accounts of gendered expectations. The assumption that caregiving responsibilities render women less suited for demanding executive roles was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews. One participant noted: *“there is an assumption that because you have children, you will not cope with the workload.”* This reflects the persistence of traditional gender role expectations, where women are perceived as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners (Eagly, 1987). In male-dominated sectors such as mining, these assumptions are exacerbated by organisational cultures that valorise long hours, constant availability, and physical presence,

leaving little room for flexibility. The study thereby affirms the insights of Eagly and Carli (2007), who argue that gender roles continue to shape perceptions of competence and leadership potential.

Glass Ceiling Theory further illuminates the accounts of respondents who described invisible barriers that prevent their progression despite qualifications and competence. Several women described being excluded from informal networks, with one respondent commenting: *“Networking happens on the golf course or over drinks, and we are excluded from those spaces.”* This example demonstrates how exclusion operates through informal but powerful practices that reinforce male dominance at the executive level. Cotter et al. (2001) defined the glass ceiling as an artificial barrier based on attitudinal or organisational bias that prevents women from advancing. The lived experiences shared in this study confirm the theory’s applicability to South African mining, where formal equality policies exist but are undermined by exclusionary practices embedded in organisational cultures.

Intersectionality Theory offers an even deeper explanatory lens, particularly for Black women who reported that their presence in executive roles was often attributed to Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) rather than their competence. As one respondent explained: *“people look at you as if you are here only because of BEE, not because of your ability.”* This aligns with Crenshaw’s (1989) seminal argument that women of colour experience unique forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood solely through gender or race but through their intersection. The South African case highlights how equity policies, while progressive, can inadvertently reinforce tokenism by focusing on numerical representation rather than substantive inclusion. The findings thereby extend Booysen’s (2007) work, emphasising the need to move beyond compliance-driven approaches to transformation that risk producing iatrogenic consequences.

Critical Organisational Theory provides the most comprehensive framework for interpreting the findings. Respondents’ experiences of exclusion from decision-making, heightened scrutiny, and constant self-monitoring reflect Ely and Meyerson’s (2000) argument that organisations are not neutral spaces but are structured by hidden systems of power that privilege certain identities. One participant lamented, *“sometimes you realise the decisions were already made; you are just asked to endorse them.”* This testimony illustrates Acker’s (1990) claim that organisational processes systematically privilege men and marginalise women, thereby reproducing inequality under the guise of neutrality. Mining organisations exemplify this phenomenon, as their cultures continue to valorise masculine norms of toughness, endurance, and domination, while marginalising alternative leadership styles often associated with women.

At the same time, the findings highlight the contradictions within transformation policies, which create opportunities for women while simultaneously reinforcing their marginalisation. The appointment of women into precarious leadership roles, where they are subjected to intense scrutiny and risk of failure, resonates with Ryan and Haslam’s (2005) glass cliff theory. As one respondent put it: *“When a man makes a mistake, it is seen as just that a mistake. But when you make one, it becomes proof that women can’t handle leadership.”* Such experiences demonstrate the iatrogenic effects of transformation, where interventions intended to correct inequality inadvertently generate new forms of exclusion or reinforce stereotypes. This

underscores the importance of applying critical perspectives that interrogate both the intended and unintended outcomes of policy interventions.

The synthesis of theories also reveals important tensions. While Human Capital Theory explains little in this context, it retains residual influence in organisational discourse, as women reported being told to pursue additional qualifications or experience to “prove” themselves. Social Role Theory captures gendered expectations but underestimates the organisational and structural dimensions of exclusion. Glass Ceiling Theory highlights invisible barriers but does not fully account for the ways in which race, class, and policy intersect in South Africa. Intersectionality provides a nuanced lens for understanding multiple marginalities, but it is Critical Organisational Theory that best integrates these insights into a systemic critique of power, structure, and culture. Together, these theories elevate the analysis to a multi-dimensional understanding that moves beyond blaming individual women to exposing the systemic reproduction of inequality.

In critically engaging with these theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates that women’s underrepresentation in executive mining leadership is not a failure of women to adapt, but a failure of organisations and society to transform. The findings confirm Acker’s (1990) notion of gendered organisations, extend Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality to the South African corporate context, and validate Kanter’s (1977) insights into tokenism, while also contributing new evidence on the unintended consequences of transformation policies. Importantly, the respondents’ voices ground these theories in lived realities, ensuring that the analysis is not abstract but anchored in the practical challenges women face.

Recommendations

The synthesis of findings across the three articles underscores that gender inequality in mining executive leadership is not simply the product of individual deficits, but a systemic problem embedded in organisational structures, cultures, and decision-making logics. In response, this study advances the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) as a framework for transformation. Unlike compliance-based diversity models, EEA positions equity as a strategic and cultural imperative, to be integrated across all levels of organisational practice. Rooted in feminist, critical, and leadership theories, the framework confronts the structural and cultural inertia of mining organisations and seeks to embed equity not as an add-on, but as the DNA of institutional life.

5.3.1 Pillar 1: Systemic Redesign

Systemic redesign involves a fundamental reworking of policies, recruitment, promotion pathways, and performance evaluation systems to eliminate gendered biases and move beyond tokenism. Although mining companies often showcase progressive policies, respondents emphasised that these policies rarely translate into meaningful protection or inclusion in practice. This aligns with Kanter’s (1977) analysis of tokenism, where women’s representation without structural support results in heightened visibility, undue scrutiny, and limited authority. Systemic redesign therefore requires integrating intersectionality into policy frameworks so that women are positioned not as symbolic figures, but as substantive leaders. **Practical measures** include:

- Gender equity audits of recruitment, pay, and promotion pathways, conducted annually and benchmarked against industry averages.
- Equity-linked KPIs tied directly to executive bonuses, ensuring that leadership has measurable incentives to achieve diversity targets.
- Transparent promotion criteria published internally, with gender-disaggregated reporting to reduce opacity in advancement processes.
- Independent oversight committees (including external stakeholders such as regulators or civil society) to verify the integrity of transformation outcomes.

5.3.2 *Pillar 2: Cultural Transformation*

Culture emerged as one of the deepest barriers, with respondents repeatedly describing mining leadership as synonymous with toughness, long hours, and masculinised behaviours. As one noted, “You are always expected to prove that you can be tough; otherwise, they don’t see you as capable.” This reflects Ely and Meyerson’s (2000) argument that gender equity cannot be realised unless organisations challenge the very norms that define competence and authority. Cultural change therefore requires not only challenging stereotypes but actively redefining leadership as inclusive, collaborative, and diverse in style. Practical measures include:

- Mandatory allyship training for senior executives, focusing on recognising and interrupting bias, fostering inclusive decision-making, and modelling equity-oriented leadership.
- Inclusive leadership scorecards, capturing behaviours such as sponsorship of women, recognition of diverse contributions, and evidence of bias mitigation, factored into annual performance reviews.
- Narrative impact audits of internal communication and recognition practices, ensuring women’s achievements are celebrated beyond symbolic awards.
- Equity leadership champions appointed at board and executive level to model inclusive behaviours and hold peers accountable.

5.3.3 *Pillar 3: Accountability and Voice*

Respondents expressed frustration at being sidelined in decision-making, describing their roles as “rubber-stamping” rather than shaping strategy. This highlights the need for equity to be tied to accountability structures at the very top of organisations. Acker (1990) reminds us that organisations are gendered not only in policy but in everyday practices, meaning accountability must be continuous, transparent, and binding. Beyond compliance reporting, equity outcomes should be monitored at board level with clear avenues for women to exercise authentic voice. Practical measures include:

- Board-level equity dashboards, publicly reporting gender-disaggregated data on representation, pay equity, promotions, and retention.

- Quarterly accountability reviews, where transformation outcomes are presented as standing agenda items in board meetings.
- Whistle-blower protections and confidential reporting lines specific to gender bias, ensuring women can safely raise exclusionary practices.
- Structured feedback loops, such as regular forums where female leaders directly advise the board on barriers and opportunities.

Mitigating Iatrogenic Risks

A crucial dimension of the EEA is recognising unintended harms caused by poorly designed equity initiatives. Respondents shared experiences of being labelled “BEE appointments,” facing harsher scrutiny, or being placed in precarious positions mirroring Ryan and Haslam’s (2005) “glass cliff” phenomenon. The EEA framework mitigates these risks by embedding transformation into normal organisational processes rather than treating diversity as an isolated or symbolic project. This reduces the backlash and ensures that women are appointed on merit recognised within reformed, equitable structures.

To put the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) into practice, this study proposes a set of SMART actions that move equity work from rhetoric to measurable impact. Within the first year, organisations should introduce Equity Accountability Indices that disaggregate outcomes by gender and race, with progress tied directly to executive bonuses. Alongside this, Networking and Sponsorship Platforms should be launched to ensure that senior male executives actively sponsor at least two women annually into high-visibility projects. Within 18 months, companies should roll out Inclusive Leadership Scorecards for senior managers, ensuring that inclusive behaviours count for 20–30% of performance and promotion criteria. By year two, Feminist Policy Co-Design Labs should be established, creating spaces where women leaders, male allies, and regulators co-develop policies grounded in lived experience. Finally, Narrative Impact Audits must be conducted annually, with the first published within 18 months, to identify and correct biased storytelling that undermines women’s contributions.

By year three, the framework calls for Boardroom Equity Immersions, experiential sessions where executives are confronted with the realities of exclusion, bias, and “glass cliff” dynamics. These initiatives, combined with transparent reporting of recruitment, pay, and promotions, verified by an independent third party at the end of each financial year, create a cycle of accountability that extends beyond symbolic compliance. Taken together, these interventions demand a redesign of structures, a reshaping of leadership culture, and a commitment to accountability at the highest level. The EEA therefore moves the work of equity away from women shouldering the burden of proving themselves, to organisations taking responsibility for dismantling systemic barriers. In this way, equity is not treated as an optional add-on but embedded as a measurable, enforceable, and indispensable driver of organisational excellence.

Contribution

This study makes a substantive and multi-layered contribution to knowledge by interrogating the barriers that women face when aspiring to and holding executive director positions in South Africa's mining sector. Drawing on three interlinked articles, grounded in the lived experiences of respondents and framed through diverse theoretical perspectives, the research demonstrates that gender inequality is not simply the product of individual deficits, but is structurally embedded in organisational systems, cultures, and leadership norms. The study not only illuminates the persistence of visible and invisible barriers but also advances a critical framework—the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA) designed to move equity from compliance-based rhetoric to a deeply embedded organisational practice.

One of the study's central contributions lies in its theoretical synthesis and critique. Human Capital Theory, long used to explain women's underrepresentation, is challenged by respondents' testimonies of being overqualified yet overlooked, exposing its explanatory inadequacy. Social Role Theory is shown to retain relevance in explaining the persistence of gendered expectations, yet insufficient on its own without attention to structural power. Glass Ceiling Theory effectively captures exclusionary practices such as women's exclusion from informal networks, but fails to account for the compounded dynamics of race, gender, and transformation policy. Intersectionality Theory proved indispensable in exposing layered disadvantages, particularly the perception of women as "BEE appointments," while Critical Organisational Theory offered the most robust lens by situating exclusion within entrenched systems of power and masculinised cultures. By integrating and testing these frameworks against lived experiences, this study advances the field by demonstrating that single-theory explanations are inadequate, and that a multi-theoretical approach is essential to capture the complexity of women's exclusion in mining leadership.

The empirical contribution of this research is equally significant. Respondents' voices bring theories of gendered organisations and hidden power relations into sharp relief. The lament, "I have more qualifications than some of my male counterparts, yet I am still not taken seriously," gives empirical weight to Acker's (1990) notion of gendered organisations, while the testimony, "sometimes you realise the decisions were already made; you are just asked to endorse them," animates Ely and Meyerson's (2000) critique of concealed power dynamics that marginalise women's voices. These narratives extend global debates into a South African context marked by the dual legacies of patriarchy and apartheid, demonstrating how systemic exclusion is not only gendered but also racialised. The originality of this contribution lies in bridging theory with lived experience, producing evidence that is contextually grounded yet theoretically generative.

Methodologically, the study contributes by demonstrating the value of a multi-article, multi-theoretical design. By separating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural barriers into discrete but interconnected analyses, the research avoids reductionism and reveals the layered nature of exclusion. The final synthesis, drawing these strands together, underscores how barriers interact dynamically rather than existing in isolation. This design strengthens the empirical credibility of the study, as triangulation between theory and respondents' voices ensures that findings are not abstract but deeply rooted in lived experience. It also

demonstrates the methodological importance of allowing context-specific data to challenge and refine global theories, a practice often overlooked in comparative leadership studies.

The study also advances the literature by identifying critical gaps in both past and current research. While global and local policy frameworks such as B-BBEE have improved representation on paper, they have not transformed organisational cultures. Transformation initiatives risk producing iatrogenic harms such as tokenism, heightened scrutiny, and glass cliff appointments phenomena underexplored in the South African mining context. Moreover, the intersectional experiences of Black women remain insufficiently examined in both academic and policy discourses. This research provides valuable insight into these layered dynamics but also signals the need for comparative studies across industries and regions. In addition, the role of male allies and organisational leadership in driving transformation remains under-researched; yet, respondents consistently stressed that without proactive allyship and board-level accountability, change remains symbolic.

The urgency of this contribution cannot be overstated. Despite decades of transformation policies, the mining sector remains one of South Africa's most male-dominated industries. Respondents' words capture not only exclusion but the emotional toll of navigating cultures where women must continually prove their worth: "It's tiring to always feel like you must prove why you are here." This highlights that the problem is not simply underrepresentation but the lived experience of exhaustion, marginalisation, and exclusionary leadership cultures. By foregrounding these voices, the study expands the conversation from numbers and quotas to lived realities and power relations, offering a more holistic understanding of what transformation must entail.

The final and most significant conceptual contribution is the development of the Embedded Equity Architecture (EEA). Unlike traditional diversity approaches that treat equity as an add-on or compliance requirement, EEA embeds transformation within the structural, cultural, and accountability systems of organisations. It calls for systemic redesign of recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes; cultural transformation that challenges masculinised norms of leadership; and robust accountability mechanisms that tie equity outcomes to board-level oversight and executive performance. Importantly, it also addresses the unintended harms of poorly designed initiatives, moving equity from symbolic gestures to substantive, measurable change. In doing so, this study offers both scholars and practitioners a roadmap for shifting from representation to genuine inclusion, positioning equity not as optional but as central to organisational excellence and sustainability in the South African mining sector and beyond.

Theoretical Implications

The application of Morrison, Randel & Nielson, Wheeler, and EEOC frameworks in this study highlights not only their enduring value but also their limitations. Morrison's focus on accountability and development demonstrates that while training and mentoring are well-recognised strategies, they remain insufficient without institutionalised responsibility for outcomes. Randel & Nielson's primary, secondary, and tertiary

interventions reveal that organisations tend to overinvest in mid-level training programmes while neglecting prevention and repair critical dimensions if transformation is to be sustainable. Wheeler’s Diversity Measurement Model further shows how mining companies are stuck at the “managing diversity” stage, with little progress toward valuing or leveraging diversity, underscoring cultural inertia. The EEOC’s categories of responsibility structures, education, and mentoring confirm this imbalance, showing that networking is better supported than systemic reform. By testing these models against respondents’ voices, this study contributes theoretically by demonstrating that while existing frameworks capture fragments of the problem, none alone can account for the intersectional, structural, and cultural barriers in South Africa’s mining sector. The Embedded Equity Architecture therefore offers an integrative theoretical contribution, advancing the conversation from fragmented models to a systemic, power-conscious framework that acknowledges iatrogenic risks and embeds accountability across organisational life.

Practical Significance

From a practical perspective, the study reveals that the gaps identified in Morrison, Randel & Nielson, Wheeler, and EEOC models are precisely where mining organisations continue to falter. Policies exist on paper, but accountability (Morrison) is absent; training is common, but prevention and redress (Randel & Nielson) are neglected; diversity is managed but rarely valued or leveraged (Wheeler); and mentoring is encouraged, but responsibility structures (EEOC) remain weak. These gaps explain why women in mining continue to feel excluded, tokenised, or over-scrutinised despite apparent progress. The EEA framework addresses these shortcomings by embedding practical interventions such as equity accountability indices, inclusive leadership scorecards, transparent reporting, and board-level oversight. In line with Dobbin and Kalev’s (2016) evidence that accountability mechanisms are more effective than awareness training, the EEA translates theory into measurable, SMART actions. The practical contribution, therefore, lies in providing mining organisations and policymakers with a roadmap that moves beyond compliance and symbolic inclusion to systemic redesign, cultural transformation, and enforceable accountability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study affirms that the barriers facing women in mining executive leadership are neither accidental nor inevitable; they are the product of deeply gendered organisational systems that privilege men and marginalise women. Yet the findings also show that transformation is possible when approached critically, holistically, and with deliberate leadership commitment. This research makes a meaningful contribution by bridging theory and practice, illuminating both the structural roots of inequality and the practical pathways for change. It elevates theoretical insights, grounds them in empirical realities, and proposes actionable solutions that recognise the risks of unintended consequences.

The achievement of the research objective is therefore clear. By critically analysing barriers across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels, synthesising findings with multiple theoretical frameworks, integrating respondents’ voices, and proposing a conceptual architecture for equity, this study advances both

knowledge and practice. It calls upon directors, executives, and policymakers to move beyond rhetoric and compliance, to embrace equity as a strategic and moral imperative, and to commit to building organisations where women not only enter leadership but thrive within it.

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APPENDICES

Addendum A: Research Ethics Clearance Letter



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Senate Committee for Research Ethics
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28 November 2022

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)** on 28/11/2022, the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: Challenges encountered by female directors in the Gauteng Mining Sector
Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Prof L Jackson – PhD in Business Administration
Student: Dube, NT (37203908)

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Institution Study Number Year Status
Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type:

Commencement date: 28/11/2022

Risk:

Low

Expiry date: 28/11/2023

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

•

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the EMS-REC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the EMS-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.

Addendum B: Participation Request



NWU BUSINESS SCHOOL

35 Vivian Road
Equestria
Pretoria

0184

29 November 2022

Dear Human Resources Manager

PhD Research Participation Request: Female Directorship in the Mining Sector

I am writing to formally request permission to conduct research on female directorship within your organisation as part of my doctoral studies towards the PhD in Business Administration at the North-West University (NWU) Business School. The study, titled *"The barriers and challenges that women face in the quest for leadership positions,"* seeks to examine the lived realities of women in executive roles, with a particular focus on female directors within the mining sector of Gauteng Province, South Africa.

The purpose of this research is threefold:

1. To explore the barriers women encounter in their pursuit of directorship positions in the mining sector.
2. To investigate the challenges experienced by women after attaining directorship positions.
3. To examine organisational and individual strategies that may enhance the representation of women in directorship roles.

The study will be conducted through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. Participation will require approximately 30 minutes, and no face-to-face engagement is necessary. To ensure that ethical standards are upheld:

- Informed consent: All participants who indicate willingness to participate will first be provided with a formal consent form. Only individuals who sign the consent form will be provided with the survey link.
- Voluntary participation: Participation in the study will be entirely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any stage without consequence.
- Confidentiality and anonymity: All data collected will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Responses will be reported in aggregated form only, and no individual or organisation will be identifiable in any research outputs.

I respectfully request your permission and assistance in facilitating access to female directors within your organisation by sharing the survey invitation with them. Your support will be invaluable in ensuring the success of this research, which aims not only to contribute to academic knowledge but also to inform strategies for strengthening gender equity in leadership within South Africa's mining industry.

Please indicate your organisation's willingness or otherwise to participate in this study. Should you require additional information, I would be happy to provide further clarification or documentation regarding the research process and ethical clearance.

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NWU BUSINESS SCHOOL

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to your favourable response.

Yours sincerely,
Nomusa Dube
PhD Candidate – North-West University Business School
Tel: 060 310 0412

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Addendum C: Author Guidelines



SA Journal of Human
Resources Managemε



AUTHOR



Instructions for
GUIDELINES_ Gender authors_Journal of Afi

Addendum D: Research Questionnaire



Questionnaire.pdf