# Gender impediments to the South African Executive Boardroom

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**Abstract**

*The research set out to understand why, despite the fact that the laws have changed and access to equal opportunities is available, there are not more women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa. Our qualitative research indicates that it is not appropriate to think of any one theoretical approach in isolation and sheds light on the challenges facing women in executive positions in South Africa. The paper concludes that the glass ceiling is an effect rather than a cause, and that a wholesale societal shift is required with respect to the concept of empowerment in order for greater equality to be achieved in the workplace. This societal cultural underpinning is what differentiates South African gender issues from those in other countries such as the UK and Canada.*

## 1   Introduction

The advancement of women to executive positions in South Africa can no longer be seen as an option; it is a requirement. The South African Employment Equity Act 1988 tipped the balance in favour of previously disadvantaged individuals in respect of access to opportunities in the workplace. Companies came under pressure to meet Employment Equity quotas (Booysen 2007a).

While there is some evidence indicating a continued, albeit nominal, increase in the number of women holding executive positions in JSE-listed companies, the figures indicate that companies are moving at a consistent but moderate pace (BWA 2007). Indeed the incidence of women in executive positions at 19,2% of executive management positions on JSE-listed companies falls far short of expectations, failing even to match the figure of over 30% of all Parliamentary seats that are held by women, the majority of whom are Black women (Myakayaka-Manzini 2002). These figures contradict research in other countries adopting interventionist approaches to employment equity, where they found such approaches reaped better rewards in terms of facilitating women's career progress than countries with non-interventionist approaches (Gunderson 1994a; 1994b; Webb 1997). The reasons cited for the increase in the number of women appointed to government are that women, particularly Black women, have been actively engaged in the liberation struggle for decades and, secondly, that affirmative action policies are having a positive effect (Myakayaka-Manzini 2002:1). Niven Postma, ex-CEO of BWASA, asserts that while there is a focus

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on changing the balance of power, "it's all eyes on racial transformation, and gender transformation is a bit of a poor relation" and that as a result, "where women are being advanced, it's because of regulatory requirements and not because it is seen as a competitive advantage" (Pile 2004:2).

Conventional wisdom suggests that "barriers to entry", at different levels and in various guises, are preventing women from taking up leadership positions in greater numbers (Thompson 2006). However, the fact that a number of women have made it all the way to the top, that is, 6,6% of CEO positions and board chairs are held by women (BWA 2007:16), suggests that barriers are surmountable.

This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the reasons why more women are not taking on executive positions in South Africa, and the extent to which this is a South African phenomenon. There are a number of possible explanations. It could be that formal legislation is not being implemented effectively, because of either structural or cultural factors (Gitlow 1992) or deliberate evasion (Collinson, Knights & Collinson 1990). It could be that the "extreme price" and "extreme demands" that are typical of an executive corporate career in South Africa are too high for most women to consider (Hewlett 2007). It could be that women are encountering barriers to networking in organisations and establishing the necessary connectedness to climb the corporate ladder. There are many possible explanations. Hence this paper explores the dearth of female executives in South Africa in collaboration with a range of different groups: executives themselves, academics and independent consultants.

## 2   Literature review

Equal opportunities in organisations suggest to women that "there's room at the top" (Cockburn 1991:46) and this is supposed to mean "breaking down the barriers that prevent the horizontal movement by women into non-traditional jobs, removing those barriers that confine women to the meanest jobs and prevent their vertical progress to different levels and locations in the hierarchy". Research (Thompson 2006; BWA 2006, BWA 2007; Van der Boom 2003) suggests a host of stumbling blocks to the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership, including education, societal perceptions, the glass ceiling, the queen bee syndrome and work-life balance issues.

### 2.1  *Education*

The need to enhance personal attributes, such as education or management skills, as a way to attain equality and enhance career progress is, according to Simpson, Sturges, Woods and Altman (2004), rooted in liberal feminist assumptions. Entry to equal opportunities in leadership begins with access to education, which should incorporate the raising of awareness through gender-reflective curricula (Muiruri-Mwagiry 2006), competence-stepping skills (Burke & McKeen, 1994) and the acquisition of the right-qualifications (Still 1992). This person-centred approach, when buttressed by a commitment to equal opportunities in the workplace, leads to career enhancement of women (Simpson et al 2004). Although it was beyond the scope of the research to explore the dynamics of "access to education in South Africa", it is apparent that unless an appropriate person-centred approach is adopted, access to an executive career is not even going to get past the starting gate and/or women will stay locked in traditional organisational roles. This is not a wholly South African phenomenon, as Simpson et al (2004) suggest that women in the UK may also lack certain key skills or have inappropriate educational backgrounds to progress.

## 2.2  Societal perceptions

In a recent Accenture study, US and UK executive women felt that the greatest entrenched barriers to entry they face are from society at large, as a result of the perception that women are not cut out for executive management (Adkins 2006). While there is a perception that women in the New South Africa have more opportunities, and therefore potentially more economic power available to them than their male counterparts do (Booysen 2007a), there is also a perception that women have been appointed to executive positions as part of affirmative action initiatives rather than because they have the requisite skills, experience and/or qualifications (Cummings 2004). Additionally, the timing and patterns of career path expectations, and therefore the assumptions about an "ideal worker" within an organisation, can have a differential impact on men and women. According to Williams (2000), the predominant view of the "ideal worker" is someone who enters a career immediately upon attaining the appropriate credentials, and then works his/her way up the corporate ladder with no career interruptions, making substantial time commitments to the organisation and making primarily a financial contribution to family life. When this becomes the "accepted norm/ideal" in the organisation, it has important implications for women who aspire to executive roles. In South Africa, many women take breaks in their careers, work reduced hours, or otherwise contribute large amounts of time to caring for children and responding to family needs. They often do this mid-career, at precisely the time when the "ideal worker" is climbing the career ladder. Such breaks can prevent women from being seen as "ideal workers" and candidates for top positions. The generally accepted norms of South African society are therefore indirectly discriminatory against women.

Even if they do manage to break through the glass ceiling, one of the biggest challenges that South African women executives face is maintaining a balance between career and family (Booysen 2007b; Pile 2004). Where most male executives have partners who play a primary role in managing the family and home, many executive women by contrast have partners who are career-driven. Research in the UK and Canada suggests that work-life balance impacts on organisational retention of female executives (see, for example, Griffith, McBride-King & Townsend 1998; Orser 1998; McLean, Brady & Bachmann 2003). The impact of work-life balance on career decisions is likely to be even greater in South Africa owing to the societal pressures around women's role in child rearing.

## 2.3  Queen Bee syndrome

Solidarity theory (Korabik & Abbondanza 2004; Mavin 2006) would have us believe that women view, and have expectations of, other women as their natural allies regardless of hierarchical differences, and that senior women should take a personal responsibility for the self-confidence and interpersonal concerns of other women through mentoring and role modelling (Okurame 2007; Rains & Cotton 1999; Singh & Vinnicombe 2003). Senior women should modify organisational policies to advance more feminine and acceptable behaviours for future senior roles (McKeen & Burke 1994). There are, however, tensions in the way women perceive senior women in management and the expectations they hold of them (Abramson 1975) which are demonstrated by the contradictions of solidarity behaviour versus the "queen bee syndrome". This was first proposed by Staines, Tavris and Hayagrante (1973), who identified an attitude of reluctance by executive women to risk their own careers by promoting other women. The queen bee can also be described as an executive woman who is "unhelpful to other women, partly because of a desire to remain unique in an organisation"

(Davidson & Cooper 1992:110). It would seem that this syndrome is most prevalent where access to opportunities is limited, which would indicate that it is driven by a fear of competition (Davidson & Cooper 1992). In acknowledgement of previous research on negative relations among women in organisations (Nicolson 1996; Legge 1987; Goldberg 1968), Mavin (2006) argues that, historically, solidarity theorists have covered up the real negative relations between women in management. While queen bee syndrome may exist in South Africa, it is not a phenomenon that is unique to South Africa and hence this study has not pursued it any further.

## 2.4 *Glass ceiling*

Even though an increasing number of women have entered the workplace, Stelter (2002) claims that the vast majority of top leadership positions throughout the world are held by men, while others (Eagly, Wood & Diekman 2003; Oakley 2000; Black & Rothman 1998) assert that even though women are entering management positions in increasing numbers, access to senior leadership positions remain limited. The glass ceiling constitutes for many (Weyer 2007; Ridgeway 2001; Carli & Eagly 2001) an invisible barrier for women, preventing them from moving up the corporate ladder. Mavin (2000 in Van der Boom 2003:132) describes it as "the frustrations of working women at every level who can see where they want to go but find themselves blocked by an invisible barrier". Oakley (2000) lists three categories to explain the barriers that result in a glass ceiling: (1) corporate practices such as recruitment, retention and promotion, (2) behavioural and cultural causes such as stereotyping and preferred leadership style, and (3) structural and cultural explanations rooted in feminist theory. Some authors (see Townsend 1997:6), argue, however, that "obstacles to women's advancement are not intentional". Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo and Lueptow (2001) claim that three theories account for gender-related behaviour in organisations and the subsequent creation of the glass ceiling: (1) biological explanations, resulting from psychological predispositions (Wood & Eagly 2002), (2) socialisation explanations linking gender identity and differences with life-stage developmental processes such as schooling and work life (Bartol, Martin & Kromkowski 2003) or the treatment of young women as high-flyers and a-gendered in the early part of their careers (Simpson & Altman 2000), and (3) social and cultural structures, systems and roles that channel gender differences into stable patterns as a result of discrepancies in status and power (Deaux & Major 1987). While biological explanations are unlikely to be specific to South Africa, the behavioural, socio-cultural and structural explanations for the glass ceiling could manifest themselves in South Africa in ways that are distinct from other countries. The educational and societal impacts mentioned earlier will also impact here, such as that the glass ceiling is more of an outcome of gender inequality than a cause at this stage of South Africa's employment equity development.

## 3   Research methodology

The study was an exploratory study seeking to find possible explanations for the dearth of women in executive positions in South Africa. An early decision was made to include both men and women in the sample to ensure that gender bias did not skew the results.

We were looking to find reasons, not apportion blame, make excuses, or further any particular agenda.

An interview schedule (Appendix 1) was sent to all respondents ahead of the interview in order to give them time to carefully consider their answers. A total of 22 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were held (face-to-face), mainly with people working as executives in large corporations, but also with independent consultants who were following a more personal career path, and with academics, who have chosen an occupation with a different career structure to that of industry, although there is still a hierarchy.

The breakdown of the final sample was as follows:

**Table 1**
**Breakdown of sample according to gender and industry sector**

| Gender | Corporate | Independent | Academic |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Male* | 6 | 2 | |
| *Female* | 11 | 1 | 2 |

The sample was largely a convenience sample, as gaining access to individuals to interview was not easy. This does not, however, detract from the findings as they stem from a range of different corporations and specialisms within the organisations (e.g. Marketing Manager, Portfolio Manager, Directors, CFO and CEOs). While an equal sample was sought in terms of race and gender (there were more White interviewees than Black, and no Indians were included in the study), the analysis has revealed little difference in perceptions between members of the sample, and hence this is no longer felt to be a limitation of the study. The greater number of White respondents is also representative of their dominant positions in the economic strata of South Africa.

The data were analysed using grounded theory, a strategy that falls within the "inductively-based analytic" framework (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2003: 393). This approach was deemed most appropriate as it is best suited to "building an explanation" or "generating a theory" around a core or central theme that emerges from the data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2003: 398).

Yin (1994:98) states that a "tight" data collection and analysis process ensures that no original data or "evidence" gets lost through either "carelessness or bias", resulting in the data receiving "appropriate attention" when considering the "facts" of the issue. Yin (1994:98) further asserts that if these objectives have been achieved, the research would have "addressed the methodological problem of determining construct validity", thereby "increasing the overall value" of the research.

To this end, in order to ensure that the research and data analysis process was as transparent as possible, a "chain of evidence" was established. In order to analyse the data, the four primary processes required to build a chain of evidence were followed (Yin, 1994):

- *Organise the raw data:* all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.
- *Create a code framework:* familiarisation of data, coding of transcripts
  - A computer-aided qualitative data analysis software tool (CAQDAS), Atlas ti, was used to for the coding process.
- *Identify initial patterns:* group statements into themes, subthemes and categories.
- *Synthesise critical patterns through themes:* integrate and summarise data, offer propositions and develop findings.

# 4  Findings

The research showed that although the barriers to entry do play a role in hampering the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership, the barriers alone are not the reason why there are fewer women than expected at executive level. Figure 1 illustrates the hierarchy of barriers that need to be overcome in order for women to reach positions of executive leadership ("the top") in corporate South Africa.
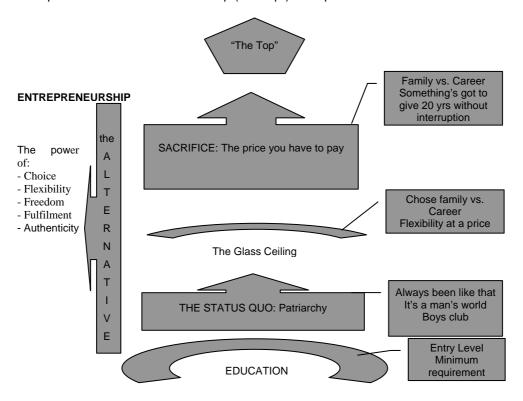


**Figure 1**
**Why there are not more women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa**

## 4.1  *The status quo: patriarchy and the Old Boys' Club*

One of the major shifts required in order for more women to take up executive positions has to come from "a stand-off" with the status quo. Despite the legislative changes, today's business landscape is still reflective of outdated attitudes and practices that mirror men's lives and values, rather than being reflective of women's lives, needs and values (Davidson & Cooper 1992). A recent finding by Hewlett (2007) was that the male competitive model of employment and the resulting predominant corporate culture work against those in "outgroups" (not male and White, in the South African context) as well as those who have traversed less traditional, even though enriching, career paths (such as women who have taken time off for family responsibilities and/or people of colour who are often accused of job-hopping in the South African context).

Top level business has always been the domain of men, particularly White men and, as such, "there are a lot of practices that are entrenched in business that lead to significant barriers" (*Male, Corporate Executive*). Traditionally business deals were concluded in "gentlemen's clubs" and sports-fields, and the boardroom was a mere formality. This practice and its accompanying attitudes are still very much in place today *(Male, Independent Consultant)* and pose a challenge for women not only because they are not part of the inner circle, but also because it is difficult for them to get in *(Male, Corporate Executive).*

The inclusion of women at executive level is seen as a legislative requirement rather than an opportunity for an organisation to capture a competitive advantage. "Women are not seen as equal because the thrust of business is a man's place and not a woman's place" *(Female, Corporate Executive).* Both social role theory and expectation theory suggest that elements of the social structure are reasons for the continued existence of the glass ceiling, which keeps women from advancing to top-level leadership positions (Weyer 2007).

There are likely to be more people [females and males] wanting senior management positions than available positions. Working mothers find that middle management enables them to have both a substantial career and a degree of flexibility *(Female, Corporate Executive).* As such this is not a barrier to advancement, but rather a point at which women have to make a choice: career or family. However, it is unlikely that women have complete freedom in their decision as specific expectations are societally held towards individuals occupying specific social categories (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt & Van Engen 2003).

Two women in the study believe that, because of the type of people they are, if they want something, their perspective-filters, resilience and tenacity almost always enable them to achieve what they put their minds to *(Female, Corporate Executives).* In their careers, they have not allowed "barriers" to stand in their way: "A barrier is only a barrier until you find a way around it" *(Female, Corporate Executive).*

The interviews revealed that the glass ceiling may be more relevant for some practitioner women than for others, depending not only on the mindset of both the organisation and the individual, but also on the individual's personal circumstances. For the glass ceiling to crack, even shatter, it would then seem that a shift needs to come from both sides: organisations need to commit to creating environments that see the advancement of women to senior positions, and women need to have the desire to advance their careers, and be resolute and tenacious about getting where they want to be. These factors contribute to the concept of "empowerment".

## 4.2  *Barriers to entry: education*

The biggest reported threat posed to the advancement of women to positions of executive leadership in South Africa is lack of access to a quality high school and tertiary education. Melamed (1996) points out that qualification levels are objective merits which are likely to enhance credibility, which may be more beneficial to women than to men, who have less difficulty assuming a managerial role. According to Leeming and Baruch (1998), qualification levels can be a vehicle for helping women to break through the glass ceiling. Access to executive opportunities is heavily dependent on an individual's level of education (Still 1992; Burke & McKeen 1994). Historically in South Africa, access to both tertiary and high school education has been the domain of the privileged minority. Consequently, our respondents concur that the selection pool of potential management and executive candidates today is a result of who was educated

10 to 15 years ago. Twenty years ago, only a handful of women saw themselves entering the corporate world. Today this is changing. However, the fruits of this will only be reaped in another 10 to 15 years' time. In the meantime, organisations are faced with the challenge of meeting EE requirements with a limited number of people to choose from. This is the resulting in tokenism.

Token appointments have been one of the unintended consequences of Employment Equity legislation, and as such, the very individuals that the legislation was designed to empower are paying a heavy price. With the emphasis on empowering previously disadvantaged individuals, organisations are clambering to make affirmative action appointments. Consequently, people who do not have the requisite qualifications, networks or experience are being appointed to executive positions, often without any genuine support. As a result, people are being set up to fail *(Female, Corporate Executive)*, "not because they are incompetent, but probably because they have been denied access to education and the accompanying networks of further education" *(Male, Corporate Executive)*. This highlights two burning issues: Firstly, access to education and its complementary social networks and support is not yet equal despite there being a severe shortage of skilled Black men and both Black and White women in South Africa. Secondly, there is the role that organisations are playing in ensuring that the skills gap is closed by emphasising leadership development for Employment Equity candidates – or failing to do so, with the result that the token employees are left to sink or swim.

Tokenism has been responsible for creating a stigma that clings to all previously disadvantaged people, especially women (Maddock 1999). Irrespective of whether Black men or women have the required skills, qualifications and experience, they are judged from the default position that they have been given the job because of the colour of their skin. This also applies to women, White and Black. The consequence is that these executives have to work twice as hard to establish their credibility *(Female, Corporate Executive)*. There was overwhelming agreement that tokenism helps nobody, and fosters a lose-lose environment in which those not affirmed withdraw psychologically, and those who are affirmed feel that they are being viewed by colleagues and employees as having been given their job on the basis of their EE status, and not competence.

The person-centred approach described above is challenged by researchers such as Cassell and Walsh (1994), who claim that cultural factors (such as power in organisational bureaucracy, gender-based power dynamics and men's dominant norms and values) form the bases for restrictive structures and barriers within organisations, particularly in the informal context. And these, they claim, far outweigh any individual differences in attributes, with the result that the power of education alone to affect career progress and overcome career barriers can be neutralised by structural factors. Simpson et al (2004) therefore claim that hidden organisational barriers may override individual characteristics such as qualifications and skills, so that education alone may not be effective in securing career success for women.

Our respondents highlighted the fact that affirmed women either do their best to lose their exaggerated visibility in order to win the dominant group's acceptance, or become mavericks with high levels of visibility, but then embrace growing levels of isolation. Simpson (2000) similarly refers to the predicament which all tokens face regarding their assimilation and disassociation. Because it lacks the dimensions of true empowerment, tokenism ultimately undermines the individual's ability to participate meaningfully in the economy *(Male, Independent Consultant)*.

The impact of the EE legislation and the tokenist response it has generated may be a phenomenon which is peculiar to South Africa. South Africa has a rare combination of an entrenched gendered societal perspective and EE legislation which runs counter to this. Arguably, there is no need for EE legislation if societal values support diversity, but usually there is some societal drive behind the development of diversity legislation, whatever form it may take. In South Africa, the gender legislation seems to have been a by-product of the breaking down of the apartheid regime, and associated with the endeavour to achieve racial equality. The specific national motivation for the gender equality legislation is otherwise unclear.

## 4.3   *Sacrifice: the price you have to pay*

Work-life balance has been consistently cited as one of the biggest challenges faced by corporate executives, particularly executive women (Booysen 2007a; Myakayaka-Manzini 2002; Stuart 2006) because over and above their level of responsibility in the workplace, they are the primary "care-givers in the home" to both children and ageing parents and often have spouses who are also corporate executives *(Male, Corporate Executive)*. There appears to be a perception that women who want to have executive careers have to sacrifice having a family; however, policies of statutory maternity leave and other family-friendly policies have benefited some women by enabling them to maintain continuous employment (Waldfogel 1998), and our research respondents all believe that it is possible to have both. However, there is also the awareness that balancing family-time against the demands of a corporate career means that some sacrifices will have to be made. The respondents agreed – inevitably this means less family-time *(Female and Male Corporate Executives, Female Academic)*. Evans (2001) found that fifteen percent of employers view workers who use personal or family-support benefits less favourably than those who do not, with accompanying wage differentials. There has also been little improvement in the terms on which the average mother enters the workplace (Joshi, Paci & Waldfogel 1999). This is in line with Hewlett's (2007) claims regarding the stigma associated with undertaking flexible work arrangements, and the real reasons why men and women leave their careers, and how and why they might choose to re-enter.

Our research shows that deep-rooted definitions within a culture of what it means to be "serious" about the job, why one is motivated to do it, and committed to it and the organisation, reflect assumptions about the "ideal worker". One Female Corporate Executive stated that the "implicit gendered-definitions of 'seriousness on the job' and 'ideal worker', have significant impacts on the use, and frequency of use, of work-life programs and initiatives by executive women". Additionally, the "use-dilemma" is exacerbated if executive men do not make use of work-life programmes and initiatives, or only do so infrequently. Women who have made it up the ranks in their organisations rely heavily on a home support structure: au pairs, full-time domestic help, husbands/partners who play a major home role, and involvement from extended families. These people all make it possible for executive women to focus on their careers in "serious ways", and they acknowledge that without these support structures, they "could not have done what [they are] doing" *(Female, Corporate Executive)*.

What this highlights is that "getting to the top" takes more than qualifications, experience and tenacity. Without the right support structure in place and men/husbands/partners who are empowered in the home, women who are also mothers will find it seemingly impossible to succeed at the very top of business.

The first question that any aspiring CEO, male or female, needs to answer is: "Are you in it for the long haul?" All our research respondents who had reached executive level have "done their time" and in doing so, have paid the price: "There is no doubt that if you want to achieve executive status, you have to put in the blood hours" *(Male, Corporate Executive)*. There was agreement between the respondents that "to get on to the Board of a company, you have to have a track record, you need to have 20 years of experience" *(Male, Corporate Executive)*. Although the journey to the top requires hard work, intelligent career planning and sacrifice, the price an individual is required to pay does not stop once they have reached executive level. "To have an executive career, you must be prepared to travel, work long hours and there is also a certain amount of being 'on call' that needs to be factored in. If you can't meet these requirements, then an executive career is not for you" *(Female, Corporate Executive)*.

It would be comforting to think that an executive position is available to everyone. However, it would seem that "the brass ring" is only for the taking by those who are prepared to pay the (high) price. It would appear that the extreme demands, and huge personal toll, of extended work weeks, unrelenting responsibilities and the expectations of continuous availability through modern technology are currently part and parcel of succeeding at the top (Hewlett, 2007). This was verbalised by one Female Corporate Executive, who claimed that "the legislation is not going to get you an executive career; first you have to understand what sacrifices you are going to *have* to make, and then you can decide if it's really what you want".

While this may all sound negative at first appearance, there is something somewhat liberating about this view. It is for women to choose – and many would appear to be choosing not to. Opting out of this oppressive work culture could be seen as a successful outcome rather than a failure. It is when women choose to engage and then do not make it to the top that it becomes a concern. Until South Africa genuinely changes its work culture to make it more attractive to women, many may simply choose not to play this game and fulfil their ambition elsewhere. One such alternative is the entrepreneurial route of going it alone.

### 4.4   *An alternative: entrepreneurship*

Hewlett (2007) presents an engaging account of alternative career paths for women in America which has lots of parallels with the situation of professional women in South Africa. Our research indicates that many South African women are turning their backs on corporate careers in favour of entrepreneurship. "The other problem is that while women are getting to [senior and executive levels], they are not staying there, simply because the environment is not conducive" *(Female, Corporate Executive)*. Eagly et al (2000) and Wigfield and Eccles (2002) suggest that women have different aspirations from men, and may be less likely to have senior executive roles as a goal whereas Powell and Butterfield (2003) contend that there are fewer gender differences in this respect.

One of the primary motivations for women choosing entrepreneurship over a corporate career that emerged from our research was that "they would rather have quality of life; to women the money is just not enough in itself, the work hours, what goes into being a top executive. They don't think the sacrifice and price you have to pay is worth it" *(Female, Ex-Corporate Executive)*.

This option offers women the opportunity to be empowered, to find fulfilment and meaning through their work, and it enables them to have the flexibility they need. In essence this means that career-oriented women can still pursue their careers, but not

at the expense of their families or their health *(Female, Independent Consultant)*, and that they can do it with a leadership style that is authentic *(Female, Ex-Corporate Executive)*. Entrepreneurship offers women the opportunity to use their skills and experience, but allows them to opt out of the rat race *(Female, Corporate Executive)*.

## 5   Conclusion

This paper set out to explore why, despite the fact that the laws have changed and access to equal opportunities is available, there are not more women holding executive positions in corporate South Africa. It would appear that an executive career is currently only available to those (a few) who are resilient, are willing to work extreme hours, are willing to develop appropriate informal connectedness, and who really want an executive career, albeit at a price.

For the majority of women in organisations, the greater social significance and general competence attributed to men are still everyday realities in modern South African organisational life, thereby reinforcing evaluation bias towards women and embedding the glass ceiling. Our research highlighted the fact that social structures are preventing organisations from changing. This includes ideals around the nature of work and what it means to be a "good employee", both inside and outside the workplace. We would encourage further research into possible ways of enhancing and embedding the new social structures as they relate to women's work, so that greater social significance can be attributed to the ways in which women choose to work, and working women can be credited with greater general competence.

Our research has also shown the continued prevalence in modern South African society of roles allocated on the basis of gender. In particular we noticed that family and occupational settings contribute to and set expectations relating to the allocation of roles defined solely on the basis of gender.

The findings of our research additionally suggest that we need to reconceptualise the role of ambition, as well as the nature of motivation, as the diversity of workers means that females when compared to males may be driven by very different factors. Moreover, among women themselves, ambition and motivation vary, depending on life phases and individual preferences.

The root cause of the failure of the EE legislation to produce more women executives can be encapsulated in the notion of empowerment, and how this is enacted in South African society, South African organisations, and within the female South African population itself. It would appear that some South African women are taking this responsibility, and empowering themselves not to make the sacrifices necessary for executive positions. Arguably, South African men need to become similarly empowered if the organisational system is to change. As long as men are happy with sustaining the status quo, the system will not change and women will be excluded, whether through choice or circumstances.

This is not to say that there are not barriers to women's embarking executive careers – there are. However, the factor that appears to be uniquely South African is the societal values and expectations to which women are subject, and how women respond to them. Many women acquiesce and abandon their ambitions, resulting in organisations losing a valuable talent pool for the future. Others will make a choice to follow an alternative career path, and fulfil their ambition and potential through other avenues, again denying organisations a valuable talent pool in the future. Some, the tenacious and particularly driven, will fight, and some of them will even succeed (regardless of the EE legislation).

Our research sample was particularly positive in terms of ways forward, viewing empowerment as the result of individual choice, and something within their span of control. However, our research sample consisted of a group of "successful" women and men. A similar group of women and men who had not achieved executive employment might provide a startling contrast.

Organisations that are heeding the Employment Equity call are finding that appointing previously disadvantaged individuals does not automatically ensure a culture of empowerment. For empowerment to take place at an organisational level, there needs to be a structure to support decision making in terms of authority, accountability and the boundaries to the span of control of various roles and levels in the organisation.

Our research has revealed that the issue of empowering women cannot be addressed without also considering the holistic empowerment of men, and restructuring traditional family scenarios (Stoner & Hartman 2001). One of the greatest restrainers cited for women wanting to advance their careers is their situation at home. If women's position is to change in the workplace, men's position in the home is likely to change as well. This is in line with Hewlett's (2007) conclusion that we are on a journey of change, and that a big part of the journey's success lies in transforming the lives of men as well.

Although women, particularly Black women, have been engaged in the liberation struggle for decades, the battle for empowerment in South Africa has first and foremost been about racial equality, and gender has been secondary. With the advent of democracy, however, a separate focus is now being placed on gender empowerment. The passing of the Employment Equity Act in 1998 has created an institutionalised structure that provides a legitimate space for women to move into. Empowerment is now necessary for that space to be populated.

If we take a broader view of advancing empowerment for women, it would seem that a unified, more collaborative stance, where Black and White women stand together on the issue, could prove to be most effective. Redefining empowerment for women in South Africa is essential if the EE legislation is ever to achieve its aims. This in turn means redefining empowerment for men, organisations, and South African culture and society.

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## Appendix: Interview Schedule

### 1  *Empowerment*

*The definition of empowerment is elusive, literature has revealed that each person must define and direct what empowerment means to them.*

**Q:** How would you define empowerment, what does being empowered mean to you? And conversely, what would not being empowered mean?

**Q:** Men hold a position of power by default, but are they empowered?

### 2  *Gender empowerment in SA*

*Women represent 52% of the population but only represent 41% of the workplace. Only 16,8% of all executive managers and 11,5% of all directors are women (Thompson 2006) – Government is doing better with a 30% representation in parliament (Myakayaka-Manzin 2002). However, gender & race are not seen as being independent from each other, "it's all eyes on racial transformation & gender transformation is seen as "the poor relation" Niven Postma BWA-CEO (Pile 2004a:2).*

**Q:** What is your viewpoint on this, based on your experience?

### 3  *Women as Leaders*

*One of the main reasons given why women are being appointed to executive positions is that they have a leadership style that is best suited to the changing dynamics of the $21^{st}$ century organisation.*

**Q:** What qualities do you think leaders should have?

**Q:** Is the quality either typically male or female or neither.

**Q:** Is it important or not for a leader to have that characteristic?

**Q:** Are you living it, is it important to you?

### 4  *Leadership Style*

**Q:** How would you describe your leadership style?

**Q:** How does this differ, if at all from your male counterparts?

**Q:** Besides leadership style, are there other reasons that women should be appointed to executive positions?

*One of the reasons cited for the fact that changes are taking longer in the corporate world is that companies are not seeing women as a competitive advantage.*

**Q:** Do you think that having women in a company's executive management structure adds value to the company and provides the company with a competitive advantage?

**Q:** Is it a woman's world?

### 5  *Barriers to Entry*

*Recent research has shown that perceptions of barriers to entry vary from country to country (Accenture, Adkins 2006).*

**Q:** What do you think the perceptions of the barriers to entry in SA are, and do they exist?

**Q:** What barriers if any, have you experienced in your career.

**Q:** What are the main barriers, as you perceive them?

## 6    *The Glass ceiling*

*The glass ceiling can be described as "the frustrations of working women at every level who can see where they want to go but find themselves blocked by an invisible barrier" (Mavin, 2000 in Van der Boom 2003:132).*

**Q:** How relevant is the glass ceiling in your organisation, and what keeps it in place?

## 7    *Role Identification*

*The literature has revealed a perspective that women are expected to behave in a certain manner and stepping out of this "pigeon hole" could result in non-acceptance in* the higher echelons of management.

**Q:** As a women leader, do you feel pressure to "behave" in a certain way?

**Q:** Do you feel that as a woman you are expected to take on soft feminine, caring, almost motherly/maternal roles in the workplace?

**Q:** Are you "judged" when you exhibit leadership qualities that are considered to be typically masculine, e.g., competitiveness?

## 8    *The Queen Bee Syndrome*

*This syndrome is defined as "creating an organisational climate that is not very hospitable to women" and is practised by women who are reluctant to risk their careers by promoting other women.*

**Q:** How relevant is this barrier to entry in your organisation?

**Q:** Have you experienced it previously?

**Q:** How relevant is this barrier to entry in South Africa?

**Q:** What role do you think women executives should play in the development of other women?

## 9    *Scarifies and the price you have had to pay*

*Life balance has consistently been cited as one of the major challenges faced by corporate executives.*

**Q:** What scarifies have you had to make to reach your position?

**Q:** What support structures do you have in place which have enabled you to climb the corporate ladder?

**Q:** What does it "take" to have a corporate executive career?

## 10    *Opportunities*

**Q:** What opportunities do you think are open to you in South Africa as a female executive?

**Q:** What do you feel could be done to create more opportunities for women in South Africa?

## 11    *Other*

**Q:** Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not touched on yet?