

A Thematic Review of Women's Career Advancement and Leadership Development in the South African Context

Karen Stander ¹, Minnie Labuschagne ², Karla Le Roux ³, Unathi Norobolo ⁴,
Quewan King ⁵, Neftali Nguema Anguesom ⁶, Adedotun Adetunla ^{7*}

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} Department of Business Management, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa

*Corresponding Author: dotunadetunla@gmail.com

© Author (s)

OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, Ontario International Development Agency, Canada.

ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online) www.oidaijsd.com

Deposited in SSRN repository: <https://www.ssrn.com/ssrn/>

Abstract: Despite global commitments to gender equality, significant disparities persist in women's career progression and leadership representation, particularly in the South African context. This study investigates the structural, institutional, and societal barriers that hinder women's advancement and evaluates the effectiveness of interventions aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). Using a rapid literature review methodology, the study analyzed 21 peer-reviewed articles from Sabinet and Web of Science, published post Covid (2020-2024). Through deductive thematic coding, five key themes emerged: ineffective or poorly implemented gender policies; systemic career advancement barriers including lack of sponsorship and work-life imbalance; persistent gendered norms in male-dominated sectors; strategic empowerment initiatives such as mentorship and leadership pipelines; and the influence of regional and sector-specific dynamics. The findings highlight that while some strategies like mentoring, inclusive policy design, and institutional support are effective, their implementation remains uneven and often superficial. This research contributes to policy and managerial discourse by offering evidence-based insights into which practices hold transformative potential and where further development is needed. It concludes with recommendations for longitudinal tracking, AI-human integrated reviews, and policy co-creation to foster equitable leadership pathways for women in Africa.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women in Leadership, Career Advancement, Sustainable Development Goal 5, Organizational Strategy

Introduction

Although the pursuit of gender equality in leadership and career development has gained global momentum through frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), substantial gaps remain especially in the Global South (Alesanco-Llorente et al., 2023; Filippi et al., 2023). In South Africa, despite progressive constitutional and policy instruments aimed at promoting women's empowerment, female representation in senior leadership roles across public and private sectors remains disproportionately low. The barriers to career advancement are multi-layered, shaped by entrenched societal norms, organizational culture, and insufficient or ineffectively implemented institutional support mechanisms.

Globally, empirical studies have consistently identified common challenges facing women in the workplace: limited access to mentorship and sponsorship, work-life imbalance, gender stereotyping, and discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices (Burgelman et al., 2018; Robson & Bigelow, 2010). However, in emerging economies like South Africa, these challenges are compounded by intersectional dynamics such as racial inequality, socio-economic disparity, and sector-specific gender rigidity especially in male-dominated industries such as engineering, finance, and public administration.

This study aims to explore the structural, institutional, and cultural factors that either hinder or promote women's career advancement and leadership development in South Africa. It focuses exclusively on peer-reviewed academic literature published between 2020 to 2024, thereby capturing recent post-COVID policy shifts and workplace

dynamics. Using a rapid literature review methodology and deductive thematic analysis, the study synthesizes findings from 21 articles that address women's leadership development across sectors, including education, corporate business, and public service. The goal is to offer evidence-based insights and practical recommendations for strategic interventions that support SDG 5 and inclusive leadership outcomes

Methodology

This study employs a Rapid Literature Review (RLR) methodology to synthesize recent and contextually relevant evidence on women's career advancement and leadership development in South Africa. RLRs are designed to provide timely yet structured evidence by using focused search strategies, streamlined selection processes, and transparent analytical procedures (Gunasekara et al., 2025; Munyaka & Yadavalli, 2022). In this study, the review is guided by a clearly defined research focus: to examine the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors influencing women's leadership progression in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). This focused scope informed the selection of databases, search terms, and thematic categories, ensuring analytical coherence and relevance.

A targeted search strategy was adopted to balance efficiency with depth. Rather than conducting an exhaustive search, the study focused on three key academic databases such as Sabinet, Web of Science, and Scopus, selected for their strong coverage of African and international scholarly outputs. Search queries were constructed using Boolean logic and included terms such as "women in leadership," "gender equity," "career development," "promotion," "disparities," and "South Africa." Filters were applied to include only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2020 and 2024, thereby capturing recent post-COVID developments in workplace dynamics and policy shifts.

The study selection process followed a structured but streamlined approach consistent with RLR principles. Inclusion criteria required that articles be peer-reviewed, written in English, explicitly situated within the South African context, and focused on women's leadership, gender equity, or career advancement. Following the initial search, duplicate records were removed and abstracts were screened for relevance. Full-text screening resulted in a final sample of 21 articles. The screening and eligibility process is illustrated using a PRISMA flow diagram as shown in Figure 1, ensuring transparency while maintaining efficiency.

Next page

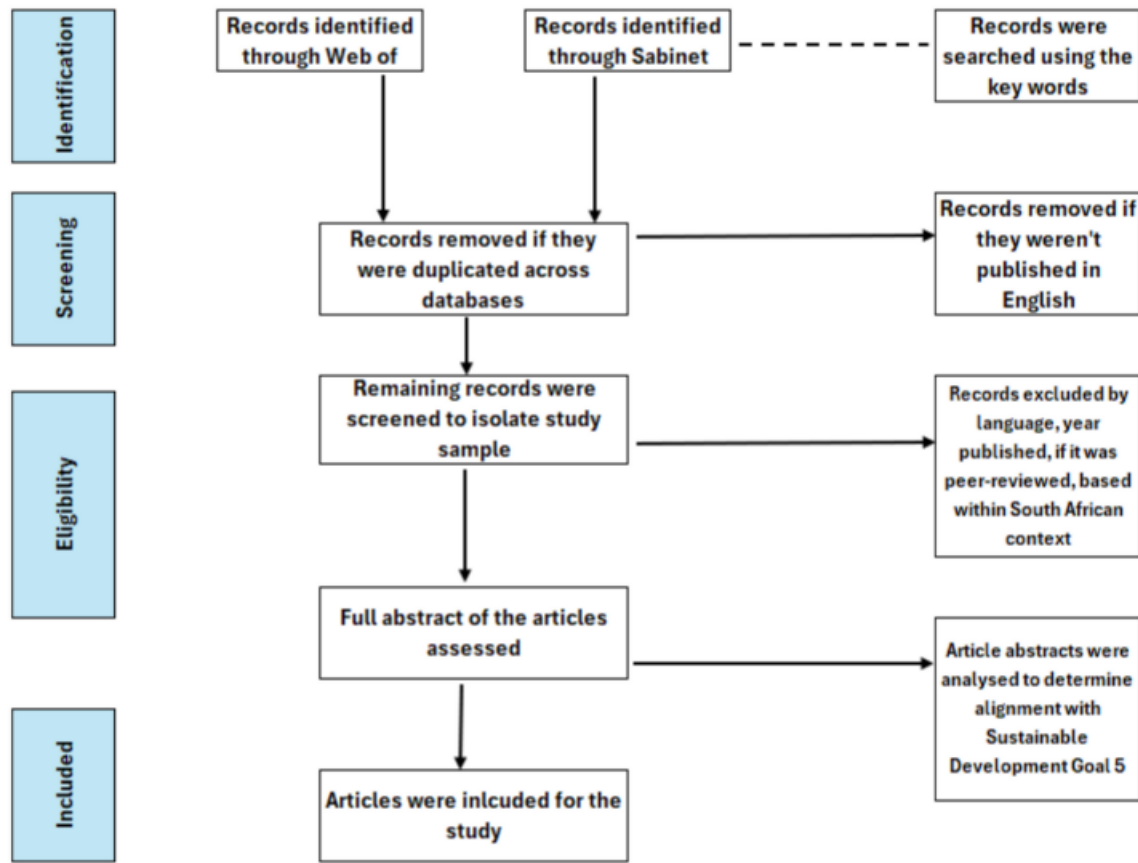


Figure 1 - Prisma Flowchart Inclusion/Exclusion
(Source: Author's own work)

Data extraction was conducted using structured templates to capture key study characteristics, including research objectives, methodologies, and principal findings. Extracted data were consolidated into tabular formats to enhance comparability and transparency across studies. To analyze the data, a deductive thematic approach was applied, guided by concepts from gender equality and Strategy-as-Practice literature. Initial coding categories included policy effectiveness, structural and organizational barriers, socio-cultural norms, empowerment strategies, and contextual leadership dynamics.

To enhance analytical efficiency and depth, the study integrated AI-assisted tools alongside manual qualitative analysis. Specifically, Elicit was used for preliminary summarization and keyword identification, while manual coding and interpretation ensured contextual accuracy and thematic richness (Fakhar Manesh et al., 2021). Keyword frequency mapping supported the identification of dominant concepts, while iterative coding enabled the development of five core themes. These themes were validated through collaborative review and cross-checking among researchers, ensuring consistency and reducing individual bias. Although RLRs prioritize timeliness, several measures were implemented to ensure methodological rigor. Only peer-reviewed sources were included, and triangulation techniques were applied, including investigator triangulation (multiple researchers reviewing findings), data triangulation (use of multiple databases and disciplinary perspectives), and tool triangulation (integration of AI-assisted and manual analysis). This multi-layered approach enhanced the credibility and robustness of the findings and studies were conducted within three months.

Literature Selection Strategy

This study employed a structured literature selection strategy to identify relevant academic work on women's leadership development and career progression in South Africa. The aim was to synthesize empirical evidence and strategic interventions aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) – Gender Equality. A preliminary scan of the literature indicated a growing number of peer-reviewed studies focusing on the barriers and enablers of women's

leadership in academia, corporate sectors, healthcare, and public institutions. For example, a research documented persistent institutional barriers and insufficient support systems for women in academia (Vimal & Rajamannar, 2025). Similarly, another study demonstrated how gender biases influence negative market reactions to the appointment of female directors in South African companies, suggesting that discriminatory perceptions continue to shape leadership trajectories (Govender et al., 2024). Other studies provided insight into targeted interventions. An argument for enhanced professional networking and mentoring to address structural constraints in higher education (Khumalo & Ndlovu, 2024), while (Agherdien et al., 2024) highlighted the need to foster inclusive workplace cultures as a pathway to empowerment. Although these studies are grounded in African contexts, they also raise questions about transferability and practical implementation in diverse sectors.

To further assess operational challenges in achieving SDG 5, (Agherdien, 2025) proposed improving resource allocation and staffing models to enhance retention among female surgical trainees. Meanwhile, (Alawode, 2020) called attention to the enduring policy gaps and governance issues impeding gender transformation efforts in both public and private institutions. These initial insights reinforced the need for a focused, evidence-based review. Figure 1 presents the Flow Diagram Illustrating the Screening and Eligibility Process for Literature Inclusion Based on PRISMA Guidelines. The inclusion criteria were therefore defined as follows:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Published in English
- Dated between September 2020 to December 2024
- Explicitly situated within the South African context
- Addressing women's leadership, career advancement, or organizational gender equity strategies

Emphasis was placed on identifying recurring themes, evaluating the effectiveness of leadership interventions, and understanding how organizations interpret and implement gender transformation within strategic frameworks. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the twenty-one relevant selected articles.

Table 1. Relevant articles used in this study

No.	Title	Year
1	An Analysis of Gender Equality Provisions in Political Parties' Manifestos for Lesotho's 2022 General Elections	2023
2	Women development and empowerment in South Africa	2024
3	Gender Differentials and Women's Access to the STEM Fields: A Policy Appraisal of South Africa's Progress in Reaching the SDGs	2023
4	Gender Equity in South African Public and Private Domains: A Theoretical Discriminatory Perspective	2020
5	An interaction of patriarchy and female leadership: A synthesis of literature on women leadership in Eswatini	2021
6	Advancing women entrepreneurship in a developmental state: an agenda for higher education institutions	2024
7	Exploring the intersection of social class and technological change, a study of South African	2023
8	Factors influencing the experienced career success of Muslim women in the South African workplace	2022
9	Conflict and security challenges in the semi arid region of Sahel: implications for Sahel women	2022
10	Prospects of addressing the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions	2024
11	Achieving Gender Equity in South African Local Government: Exploring the Synergies between Participatory Budgeting and Gender Responsive Budgeting	2021
12	Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Mentoring as Support for African Women's Academic Career Trajectories	2022
13	Mentoring as a Form of Transformation in Academia	2023
14	Interventions on gender equity in the workplace: a scoping review	2022
15	The Effects of Demographic Factors on Professional Career Success: An Investigation of Higher Education Staff in South Africa	2020
16	Gendering the Decision-Making Positions in Higher Education: A Cross-Sectional Gender Audit in Three Selected Universities in Malawi	2021

17	Resource allocation for the realisation of women’s rights: Building on previous gender budgeting initiatives in South Africa	2020
18	Gender, Employee Green Intrinsic Motivation and Green Behaviour in South Africa	2023
19	Geshiedenisvak in opvoedkundiger curriculum en praktyke: ‘n feministiese-pedagogiese ondersoek	2023
20	Market responses to appointment of women and men as directors: A study of top 40 Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies	2024
21	The academic progress of female general surgery and orthopaedic surgery trainees in South Africa	2024

(Source: Author’s own work)

Search Terms and Database Selection

To ensure both depth and recency of coverage, three major academic databases were used, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and Sabinet African Journals. These platforms were selected for their advanced indexing capabilities, citation analysis features, and regional focus. Scopus and Web of Science offer comprehensive access to international research trends, while Sabinet provided essential insights into regionally grounded studies that are often underrepresented in global databases.

Search queries were constructed using Boolean logic and included the following terms:

- “Women in leadership”
- “Gender equity”
- “Gender inequality”
- “Promotion”
- “Disparities”
- “Career development”
- “SDG 5”
- “South Africa”

Filters were applied to limit results to articles published between 2020 to 2024, in peer-reviewed journals, and written in English. Sabinet proved particularly valuable in capturing research grounded in the South African experience. Its local coverage offered critical perspectives on institutional reform, leadership norms, and culturally embedded gender dynamics. Scopus facilitated advanced citation tracking, enabling the identification of high-impact articles. Web of Science’s AI-driven filtering tools improved efficiency in locating articles most relevant to the CIMO framework (Context–Intervention–Mechanism–Outcome), which guided the broader analytic structure of this study.

Study Selection and Triangulation

The search process initially yielded 48 articles. After deduplication and screening based on relevance, 21 studies were selected for full-text analysis. Relevance was determined by the article’s alignment with the study’s core themes: barriers to leadership, career advancement strategies, gender equity policies, and organizational practices within South Africa. To enhance credibility and reduce selection bias, the study employed triangulation techniques (Bawa et al., 2022).

Specifically:

- Investigator triangulation was applied through multiple researchers independently reviewing and validating selected articles.
- Data triangulation involved sourcing literature from different databases, disciplines, and institutional contexts to capture a range of perspectives across time, space, and sector.

The selected articles represent a well-balanced cross-section of empirical and conceptual research and reflect both challenges and emerging practices related to women’s leadership in the South African context. Table 2 presents an overview of the selected studies and their alignment with the thematic categories identified in this review.

Next page

Thematic Coding Process and Analytical

Table 2. Overview of Selected Studies (search results yielded by Web of Science, Scopus & Sabinet)
(Source: Author's own work)

Database	Web of Science	Sabinet	Scopus
Date of search	18/05/2024	12/05/2024	13/05/2024
Search Term used	Inequality, Gender equality, Promotion, Disparities, Development, Women in leadership	Inequality, Gender equality, Promotion, Disparities, Development, Women in leadership	Inequality, Gender equality, Promotion, Disparities, Development, Women in leadership
No Filter: Date 2024	Number of results: 83,391	Number of results: 24	Number of results: 0
Filter: English	Number of results: 82,461	Number of results: 23	Number of results: 0
Filter: South Africa	Number of results: 2,879	Number of results: 5	Number of results: 0
Filter: Research Article	Number of results: 263	Number of results: 5	Number of results: 0
Final number of results included	263	5	0

Framework

The thematic analysis for this review was underpinned by a structured and iterative coding process. This process was designed to extract patterns, meanings, and recurring concepts from a purposive sample of 21 peer-reviewed articles focusing on women's leadership development and gender equity in South Africa. The schematic of the thematic coding process is shown in Figure 2. The process combined both human-led qualitative analysis and AI-supported tools to enhance analytical efficiency and thematic depth, in line with rapid review best practices(Schiavenato & Chu, 2021).

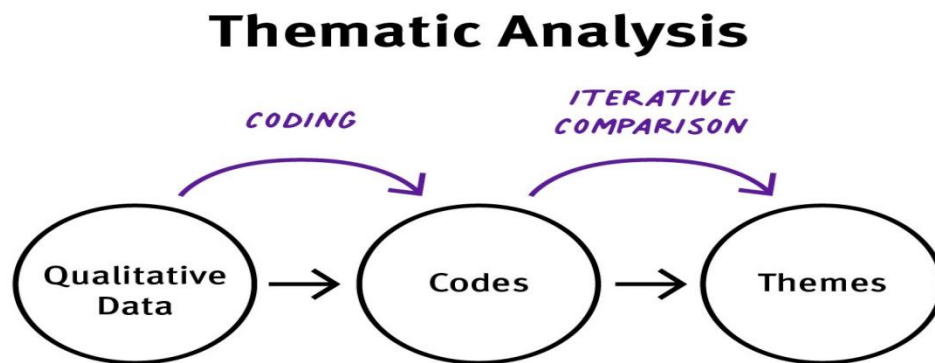


Fig 2. Thematic coding process.
(Source: Author's own work)

Data Preparation and Consolidation

Following the literature selection and screening phase, the final 21 articles were consolidated into a desktop folder for analysis. All files were in PDF format to ensure compatibility with digital analysis tools. These articles were reviewed by multiple members of the research team to ensure accuracy, thematic saturation, and alignment with the study's inclusion criteria. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the geographic coverage of the publications. This table presents the narrative synthesis of the main themes from the collected data.

Table 3. Geographic distribution of the research

Continent	Country	No of Studies
Africa (21 Studies All together)	Malawi	1
	South Africa	8
	Swaziland (Eswatini)	1
	Malawi	1
	Nigeria	1
	Lesotho	2
	Zimbabwe	1
	Botswana	1
Sub-Saharan Africa Region	Region	4

(Source: Author's own work)

Data cleaning and standardization were necessary to address inconsistencies in formatting and metadata between articles sourced from Web of Science and Sabinet. All bibliographic data were exported to Microsoft Excel, where missing information was manually completed, and structural formatting issues were corrected. This step ensured the comparability of results across the dataset. The research leader oversaw the creation of a master dataset, combining all researcher inputs in a password-protected Excel file. This file served as the central repository for subsequent coding, frequency analysis, and triangulation.

AI-Supported Thematic Pre-Coding

To enhance the efficiency of the initial thematic exploration, researchers utilized Elicit, an AI-powered research assistant (Schardt et al., 2007). Elicit was employed to:

- Summarize article content
- Extract study objectives and findings
- Identify potential thematic keywords

Each article was uploaded to Elicit, which produced concise summaries, key points, and metadata for each study. These outputs were exported to Excel, where researchers structured the summaries according to preliminary codes reflecting the study's objectives. These codes included terms such as inequality, gender equality, development, promotion, mentorship, and policy, the snapshot is presented in Figure 3.

Next page

Article Title	Summary	Codes						Total
		Inequality	Gender equality	Promotion	Disparities	Development	Women in leadership	
An Analysis of Gender Equality Provisions in Political Parties' Manifestos for Lesotho's 2022 General Elections	The paper analyzes the challenges of gender inequality in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria and proposes ways to address the issue in order to help missionary expansion in the region.	29	74	1	2	26	14	146
Women development and empowerment in South Africa	This paper examines the underlying factors behind power differentials between men and women in leadership in South Africa and how these contribute to gender inequality, using a qualitative, multi-disciplinary approach to assess the progress made in addressing women's development and empowerment within the country's policy platforms.	7	33	6	2	90	6	144
Gender Differentials and Women's Access to the STEM Fields: A Policy Appraisal of South Africa's Progress in Reaching the SDGs	This paper examines the issue of gender inequality in the South African education system and calls for a feminist, transformative approach to address this problem and empower girls and women.	22	37	3	2	17	1	82
Gender Equality in South African Public and Private Domains: A Theoretical Discriminatory Perspective	The study examines the effect of gender on green intrinsic motivation and green behavior of hotel employees in South Africa, finding that women exhibit higher levels but the differences are not statistically significant.	17	21	2	1	18	0	59
An interaction of patriarchy and female leadership: A synthesis of literature on women leadership in Eswatini	The paper examines the complex relationship between technological change, particularly the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and inequality in Africa, arguing that inequalities in power and influence can shape technological development in ways that benefit dominant groups over marginalized ones.	15	7	3	2	7	18	52
Advancing women entrepreneurship in a developmental state: an agenda for higher education institutions	This paper examines the gender representation of women in decision-making positions in three universities in Malawi and discusses the challenges and barriers that inhibit equitable gender distribution in decision-making in these higher education institutions.	0	7	3	1	37	0	48
Exploring the intersection of social class and technological change, a study of South African	This paper examines the underlying factors behind power differentials between men and women in leadership in South Africa and how these contribute to gender inequality, using a qualitative, multi-disciplinary approach to assess the progress made in addressing women's development and empowerment within the country's policy platforms.	22	0	0	5	22	0	49
Factors influencing the experienced career success of Muslim women in the South African workplace	This paper examines the experiences and challenges faced by female general surgery and orthopaedic surgery trainees in South Africa, finding that while most chose the field due to passion, they faced significant challenges related to work-life balance and working conditions, and suggesting that training programs need to address these issues to improve the recruitment and retention of female surgeons.	7	7	1	0	28	0	43
Conflict and security challenges in the semi arid region of Sahel implications for Sahel women	The paper proposes sustainable gender budgeting initiatives to help South Africa better realize women's rights and address the challenges in integrating gender budgeting into the national budgeting process.	2	7	1	1	35	0	46
Prospects of addressing the challenges of gender inequalities in christian missions	The paper explores the challenges faced by women in academia, particularly in advancing to leadership positions, and proposes a model of mentorship, collaboration, and self-care to support women's career advancement and personal/professional development.	25	8	0	4	3	2	42
Achieving Gender Equity in South African Local Government: Exploring the Synergies between Participatory Budgeting and Gender Responsive Budgeting	This scoping review summarizes the evidence from randomized controlled trials on gender equity interventions in workplace settings, finding that such interventions largely succeed and have positive outcomes across a variety of measures.	1	9	0	4	28	2	44
Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Mentoring as Support for African Women's Academic Career Trajectories	This paper presents a systematic review of 23 studies on female leadership in Eswatini, identifying three main themes: gender inequality, challenges for women leadership, and women empowerment.	1	1	2	1	31	3	39
Mentoring as a Form of Transformation in Academia	The paper examines the persistent gender discrimination against women in both the public and private domains in South Africa, despite the existence of measures and policies aimed at combating such discrimination.	2	5	2	3	17	5	34
Interventions on gender equity in the workplace: a scoping review	This paper identifies the key factors influencing the experienced career success of Muslim women in the South African workplace, with internal factors like motivation and organizational factors like top management commitment being the most influential.	4	8	0	2	16	5	35
The Effects of Demographic Factors on Professional Career Success: An Investigation of Higher Education Staff in South Africa	The paper explores how mentoring can be used as a tool to enhance diversity, equality, and inclusion for Black African women and underrepresented minority groups in academia, and how mentoring and professional networks can be used to challenge and dismantle the culture of exclusion of women, particularly Black African women, in South African higher education institutions.	0	1	5	2	24	0	32
Gendering the Decision-Making Positions in Higher Education: A Cross-Sectional Gender Audit in Three Selected Universities in Malawi	This paper examines the contributions of various stakeholders, especially the government and higher education institutions, to promoting women's entrepreneurship in South Africa, and proposes a framework to motivate universities to actively support and promote the advancement of women in entrepreneurial endeavors.	0	11	5	1	10	0	27
Resource allocation for the realisation of women's rights: Building on previous gender budgeting initiatives in South Africa	The paper examines the effects of conflict and insecurity in the Sahel region on women's empowerment and the demographic dividend, and discusses the World Bank's SWEDO initiative to address these issues.	0	7	2	0	18	0	27
GENDER, EMPLOYEE GREEN INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND GREEN BEHAVIOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA	The study found a significant negative market reaction to the appointment of women as directors on the top 40 JSE-listed companies, potentially due to gender bias.	0	7	0	0	12	0	19
Geslagsgelykheid in opvoedkundige ruimtes en praktyke: 'n feministiese-pedagogiese ondersoek	This paper analyzes policies in South Africa that aim to facilitate the inclusion of women, especially Black women, in STEM fields in higher education and the workplace, in order to identify areas where the government can readjust to achieve gender equality and meet the SDGs.	4	4	0	3	9	1	21
Market responses to appointment of women and men as directors: A study of top 40 Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies	This study examines the factors that contribute to the professional career success of academics, finding that job classification and professional experience are significant predictors, while gender and age do not have a significant impact.	1	4	2	3	0	0	10
The academic progress of female general surgery and orthopaedic surgery trainees in South Africa	This paper examines the relationship between participatory budgeting and gender-responsive budgeting in South African local government, finding that participatory budgeting processes have not adequately incorporated gender dimensions, and suggesting the establishment of a synergy between the two concepts to ensure budget allocations reflect the interests of both men and women.	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
		159	259	38	39	448		57

Figure 3. A Snapshot Thematic Keyword Frequency in Reviewed Articles on Gender Equity and Leadership (Source: Author's own work)

Each team member independently reviewed the PDFs and used keyword-counting methods to quantify the frequency of specific terms across the articles. The cumulative counts were used as one dimension of thematic relevance, helping the team assess which concepts were most dominant and how they aligned with the overarching research objectives.

Next page

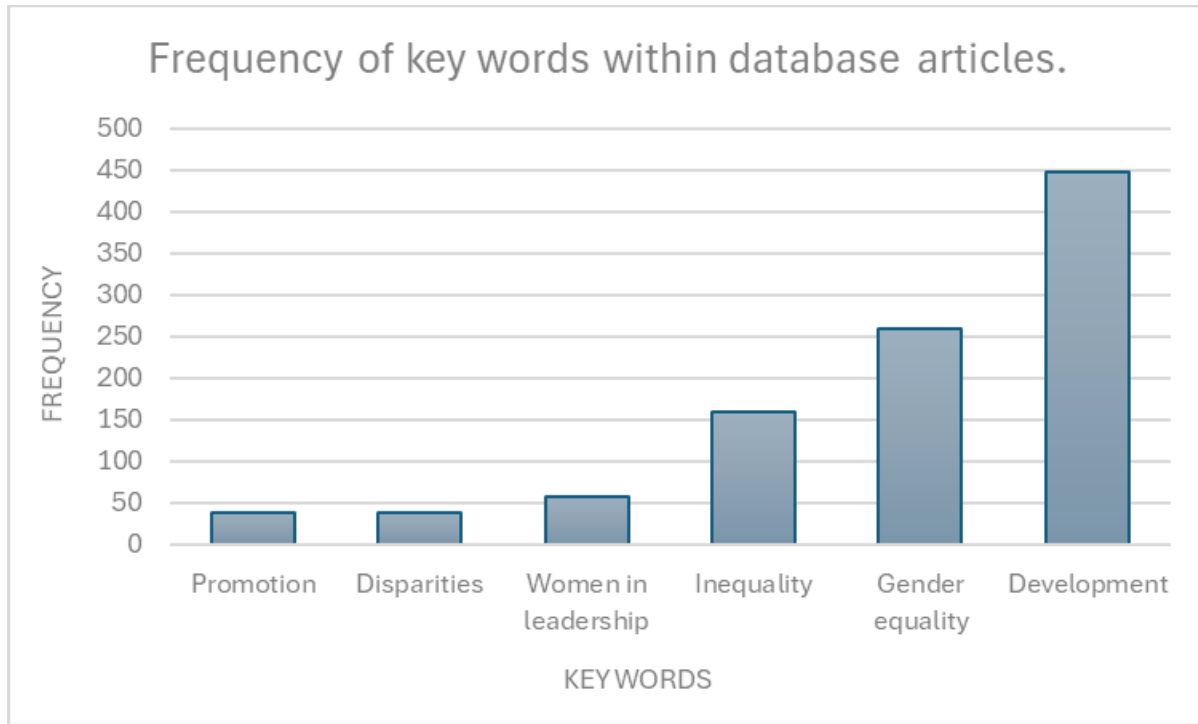


Figure 4. Keyword Frequency Across Gender Equity and Leadership Studies in South Africa
(Source: Author's own work)

As shown in Figure 4, the three most frequently occurring codes were, Development, Gender Equality and Inequality. These high-frequency terms directly map to the study's key research objectives:

- Objective 1: Understand the persistence of gender inequality.
- Objective 2: Identify effective strategies for promoting women's career advancement.
- Objective 3: Examine institutional and cultural barriers to leadership progression.
- Objective 4: Investigate the underlying causes of male-dominated promotion patterns.

Integration with Thematic Coding and Human Interpretation

While frequency counts and keyword tagging provided a useful starting point, thematic richness required interpretive coding based on meaning, not just volume (Alawode, 2024). To refine the themes further, AI-supported summarizations were supplemented with qualitative interpretation, guided by the following prompts:

1. "Can you return the central theme of each article?"
This yielded focused thematic summaries per article (e.g., for a study on Muslim women's career success: "The challenges and factors affecting the career success of Muslim women in South Africa, with a focus on both personal and organizational influences.")
2. "What ties the themes together?"
Common threads identified included:
 - Gender inequality and discrimination
 - Empowerment and development
 - Intersectionality and contextual challenges
 - Institutional and policy reform
 - Mentoring and support structures

- Sectoral and regional dynamics
- 3. “Which themes are most relevant to women’s empowerment and development?”
Based on content convergence, the most salient themes identified included:
 - Structural and organizational barriers
 - Context-specific leadership challenges
 - Mentorship and capacity-building interventions
 - Policy implementation gaps
 - Gendered norms and stereotypes

These insights were consolidated into a thematic framework, cross-validated by all research team members, and captured in a shared, secure Excel file. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus in group meetings, enhancing inter-coder reliability.

Trustworthiness and Triangulation

To ensure analytical rigor, the study applied two forms of triangulation:

- Investigator triangulation: Multiple coders reviewed the data independently and compared findings to reduce individual bias.
- Data triangulation: Literature from different disciplines, institutional types, and sectors was analyzed to ensure thematic generalizability across the South African context.

The thematic coding process was not only a technical procedure but also a meaning-making exercise involving both automated and human insight (Ahmed et al., 2025). This dual approach allowed for efficient data processing while preserving the depth and interpretive nuance critical to qualitative synthesis. The result was the identification of five robust and recurring themes, discussed in detail in the following section.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

Building upon the AI-supported pre-coding and manual triangulation outlined in Section 3, five core themes were finalized through interpretive synthesis. These themes reflect recurring patterns in women’s leadership development across sectors and directly align with the study’s four research objectives. The following discussion elaborates on these themes, their empirical grounding, and their strategic implications for advancing gender equity in South Africa. The thematic analysis identified five core themes across the selected literature, reflecting recurring patterns in women’s career development and leadership challenges in the South African context. These themes are: (1) Policy Implementation Gaps, (2) Structural and Organizational Barriers, (3) Gendered Sectoral Norms and Stereotypes, (4) Empowerment and Capacity-Building Strategies, and (5) Context-Specific Leadership Dynamics.

Policy Implementation Gaps

Despite the presence of gender equity policies in many institutions, several studies highlight a lack of commitment to implementation and a disconnection between policy design and execution. For instance, (Agherdien et al., 2024) note that policy documents often exist as symbolic instruments rather than operational frameworks, resulting in limited impact on gender transformation at leadership levels. Similarly, (Sadok & Assadi, 2023) argue that although policies promoting gender equality exist in the South African public sector, they are rarely translated into actionable strategies. The existence of progressive legal frameworks is therefore insufficient without institutional accountability and measurable implementation metrics.

Structural and Organizational Barriers

A dominant theme across the literature is the persistence of structural inequalities and institutional biases that hinder women’s progression. For example, (Pierli et al., 2022) explore the lived experiences of female academics, revealing that limited mentorship, tokenism, and unequal access to leadership development programs continue to marginalize women within higher education. (Rasool & Shoukat, 2021) echo these findings, emphasizing that women in senior academic roles are frequently overburdened with administrative responsibilities while being excluded from strategic decision-making. This reinforces the “glass ceiling” effect, where women may attain mid-level roles but struggle to reach executive leadership due to organizational cultures resistant to transformation.

Gendered Sectoral Norms and Stereotypes

Sector-specific cultural and gender norms significantly shape the leadership opportunities available to women. For instance, (Rampersad, 2024) report that in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as agriculture, leadership remains racialized and masculinized, despite increasing female participation at lower levels. Similarly, (Moraka Shopola et al., 2023) identify deep-seated patriarchal norms within both public and private organizations that normalize male dominance in strategic decision-making, often undermining women's leadership capabilities. These findings reflect the broader challenge of gendered organizational logic, where leadership is implicitly coded as masculine, reinforcing stereotypes that dissuade or disadvantage female aspirants.

Empowerment and Capacity-Building Strategies

Some studies document empowerment-focused interventions aimed at increasing women's leadership participation. Notably, mentoring, sponsorship, and formal leadership pipelines are frequently cited as effective strategies when supported by institutional commitment. For example, (Irby & Polnick, 2021) examine mentorship programs in public education and report positive outcomes when such initiatives are strategically aligned with career development goals. Similarly, a study by (Wild et al., 2020) shows that leadership training workshops, when conducted in a collaborative and inclusive environment, enhance women's confidence and strategic agency. However, the success of these interventions depends on organizational readiness, cultural receptivity, and the presence of gender-sensitive leadership.

Context-Specific Leadership Dynamics

The final theme emphasizes the importance of regional, institutional, and socio-political context in shaping the experiences of women in leadership. For example, (Bradley et al., 2025) highlight how rural-urban dynamics influence access to leadership positions in local government, where rural women often face greater barriers due to traditional hierarchies and lack of professional networks. In higher education, (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2021) report that intersectional factors such as race, language, and age intersect with gender to produce unique barriers for black female academics. This highlights the need for nuanced, context-sensitive strategies that acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences across South African institutions.

Synthesis of Insights

Across the reviewed literature, it is evident that achieving sustainable development through gender equality requires more than policy formulation; it demands systemic, practice-based transformation. The study contributes to the understanding of sustainable development by demonstrating that organizational practices, leadership norms, and institutional accountability mechanisms are central to translating gender policies into measurable outcomes. While interventions such as mentorship and leadership pipelines show promise, their effectiveness depends on integration into broader organizational strategies and alignment with sustainability goals. The findings further reveal that sustainable development is constrained by deeply embedded structural and cultural barriers, highlighting the need for coordinated, multi-level interventions that address both institutional systems and societal norms.

Data Analysis

The analytical process was designed to identify core thematic patterns from 21 peer-reviewed articles examining women's leadership development and career progression in South Africa. A structured qualitative approach was employed, integrating manual coding, keyword frequency analysis, and AI-assisted synthesis, aligned with the study's four research objectives. All selected articles were systematically reviewed and consolidated in PDF format. Initial data extraction was conducted using Elicit, which generated structured outputs including study objectives, summaries, and key thematic insights. These outputs were exported into Excel to support organized coding and comparative analysis across studies.

A keyword-based coding framework was then applied, where relevant terms such as gender equality, inequality, empowerment, mentorship, career advancement, and policy were assigned to each article based on their alignment with the research objectives. The frequency and distribution of these keywords across the dataset were analyzed to identify areas of conceptual concentration and recurring patterns. To enhance analytical depth, AI-assisted synthesis using ChatGPT was employed to further interpret article summaries, identify conceptual overlaps, and highlight emerging thematic relationships. These insights were triangulated with manual readings and coding to ensure consistency, minimize bias, and strengthen the reliability of the analysis. The keyword frequency mapping revealed three dominant conceptual clusters: gender equality, inequality, and development. These clusters served as guiding

anchors for deeper interpretation. However, theme development was not based solely on frequency but on the explanatory relevance of concepts to the study objectives and their recurrence across multiple sources.

Through iterative coding, cross-validation, and thematic consolidation, five overarching themes were identified:

1. Policy Implementation Gaps
2. Structural and Organizational Barriers
3. Gendered Sectoral Norms and Stereotypes
4. Empowerment and Capacity-Building Strategies
5. Context-Specific Leadership Dynamics

These themes provide the analytical foundation for the subsequent results and discussion, directly addressing the study's aim of identifying the contributions and challenges associated with women's leadership development in the South African context.

Linking Themes to Research Objectives

The identified themes as shown in Table 4 directly address the study's research objectives by capturing both the structural challenges and enabling factors influencing women's leadership development in South Africa. Specifically, themes such as *policy implementation gaps* and *organizational barriers* reflect systemic constraints, while *empowerment strategies* and *context-specific leadership dynamics* highlight pathways for advancement. This alignment ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the study's central aim of understanding contributions and challenges within the leadership development landscape (Krome & Pidun, 2023).

Table 4. Mapping of the Objectives to the Themes
(Source: Author's own work)

Research Objective	Corresponding Themes
1. Why does gender inequality persist today?	Theme 1 (Policy Gaps), Theme 3 (Gendered Environments), Theme 5 (Context-Specific Challenges)
2. What strategies can support women's promotion and development?	Theme 4 (Empowerment Strategies)
3. What processes hinder women's career advancement?	Theme 2 (Organizational Barriers), Theme 3
4. Why are men still promoted over women despite formal equity measures?	Theme 3, Theme 5

Validity, Limitations, and Triangulation

To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, a triangulated approach was adopted, combining manual coding, keyword frequency analysis, and AI-assisted synthesis. Insights generated were cross-verified through iterative manual review to ensure consistency and reduce interpretive bias. Despite these measures, the study has some limitations. The analysis is based on a relatively small sample of 21 peer-reviewed articles, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives on women's leadership in South Africa. Additionally, while AI tools supported efficiency and pattern recognition, their outputs remain dependent on input quality and were therefore used as complementary rather than primary analytical instruments (Shiribaiev, 2024). Overall, the integration of multiple analytical approaches strengthens the robustness of the findings while maintaining transparency regarding methodological constraints.

Discussion and Findings

This study set out to identify the contributions and challenges associated with advancing sustainable development, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), through women's career advancement and leadership development in South Africa. The findings demonstrate that while significant progress has been made in establishing gender equity frameworks, the translation of these frameworks into sustainable organizational and societal outcomes remains uneven. The five themes identified policy implementation gaps, structural barriers, gendered norms, empowerment strategies, and context-specific dynamics collectively illustrate both the enabling mechanisms and persistent constraints shaping sustainable development in practice. From a sustainable development perspective, these

findings highlight that gender equality is not only a social objective but also a strategic driver of inclusive growth, institutional resilience, and long-term organizational performance. However, the persistence of systemic barriers and inconsistent policy implementation indicates that current approaches often fall short of delivering transformative and sustainable impact.

Linking Themes to Research Objectives

(a) Objective 1: Why does gender inequality persist in contemporary professional environments?

Themes 1 (Policy Implementation Gaps) and 3 (Gender Inequality in Organizational Contexts) directly address this question. While many South African institutions have adopted gender equity frameworks, the literature consistently shows a gap between policy intent and execution. Several studies note that gender policies exist more as symbolic gestures than enforceable tools, lacking operational guidelines, accountability structures, or performance indicators. This leads to limited measurable impact on career progression or representation in leadership roles (Kaur & Singh, 2025). Furthermore, persistent workplace barriers such as biased recruitment practices, exclusion from decision-making circles, and disproportionate administrative burdens continue to reproduce gendered outcomes. These structural inequalities are compounded by workplace cultures that often reward masculine-coded behaviors and penalize work-life integration needs more commonly experienced by women (Leuhery et al., n.d.). Together, these two themes show that gender inequality is not simply a matter of outdated policy but a result of entrenched organizational practices and leadership norms that systematically disadvantage women. This limits the realization of sustainable development outcomes by weakening accountability and reducing the long-term impact of gender equity initiatives.

(b) Objective 2: What are the most effective strategies for promoting women's career advancement?

Theme 4 (Empowerment and Capacity-Building Strategies) offers compelling insights into successful interventions that have been empirically tested or conceptually proposed. Strategies such as structured mentorship programs, formal sponsorship pathways, inclusive leadership training, and internal leadership pipelines have shown positive results in creating enabling environments for women (Marukhlenko et al., 2024). Mentorship and sponsorship were particularly emphasized as critical enablers of career mobility, offering not just skills development but also access to strategic networks, career visibility, and support in navigating gendered organizational landscapes. These findings suggest that development-oriented interventions must be embedded in institutional strategies, rather than treated as isolated or compliance-driven initiatives.

(c) Objective 3: What are the key processes hindering women's advancement?

Theme 2 (Structural and Organizational Barriers) directly corresponds to this objective. The reviewed literature highlights several hindering processes: implicit bias in promotion criteria, lack of inclusive performance evaluation systems, insufficient access to leadership training, and weak succession planning mechanisms. Women also face challenges balancing professional roles with caregiving responsibilities, particularly in rigid work environments lacking flexible policies. These barriers, while often discussed separately in organizational discourse, are interconnected and reinforce each other to produce cumulative disadvantage over the course of a woman's career. Addressing them requires systemic transformation in how organizations define, support, and evaluate leadership readiness. These barriers undermine sustainable development by restricting equitable access to leadership and limiting the full utilization of human capital.

(d) Objective 4: Why are men still promoted over women in many organizations?

Themes 3 (Gender Inequality in Organizational Environments) and 5 (Regional and Sector-Specific Issues) offer explanations for this persistent disparity. While formal qualifications may be equivalent, male candidates often benefit from informal networks, unconscious bias, and sector-specific norms that align leadership traits with male archetypes, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields like medicine, agriculture, and engineering (Olufemi, 2021). In some sectors, leadership is still implicitly associated with masculinity, and decision-makers may exhibit bias either conscious or unconscious against female candidates, especially in strategic or technical leadership roles. Additionally, the intersection of geography and culture, especially in rural or conservative regions, exacerbates inequality, limiting access to mentorship and policy support for women in leadership roles (Dlamini & Mthembu, 2024). These findings suggest that sectoral transformation must be contextualized, taking into account local cultural, institutional, and policy realities. Such norms perpetuate inequality and hinder inclusive development, reinforcing systemic imbalances incompatible with SDG 5.

Practical Implications

The alignment between the themes and research objectives reveals several actionable implications:

Policy reform must go beyond compliance, incorporating gender-responsive budgeting, accountability metrics, and policy enforcement mechanisms.

Leadership development initiatives should prioritize mentorship and sponsorship, supported by measurable outcomes and integration into institutional talent management systems.

Organizations must critically examine structural barriers, including recruitment, promotion, and workload distribution practices that disadvantage women.

Context-sensitive strategies are essential, particularly in sectors and regions where traditional gender norms are deeply entrenched.

Collectively, these measures contribute meaningfully to advancing SDG 5, not only by increasing representation but also by transforming the underlying systems that produce gender inequities.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable development by critically examining how women's leadership advancement intersects with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) in the South African context. The findings reveal that while organizations and institutions have made progress in developing gender equity policies and empowerment initiatives, significant challenges remain in achieving sustainable and transformative outcomes. Key constraints include policy implementation gaps, persistent structural inequalities, and deeply embedded gender norms that continue to limit women's leadership progression.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that advancing sustainable development requires a shift from symbolic compliance to systemic integration of gender equity into organizational strategy and practice. Empowerment initiatives such as mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development programs offer meaningful contributions; however, their long-term sustainability depends on institutional commitment, accountability, and contextual adaptation.

By linking thematic findings directly to sustainable development outcomes, this study advances understanding of how gender equality functions as both a social imperative and a strategic enabler of inclusive growth. It highlights that achieving SDG 5 is not an isolated goal but a catalyst for broader sustainable development, influencing organizational performance, innovation, and societal transformation. Future research should focus on longitudinal evaluation of gender interventions and the development of context-sensitive frameworks that can drive sustainable and equitable leadership pathways across diverse sectors.

References

- Agherdien, N. (2025). *SA Journal of Human Resource Management Affiliation*. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm>
- Agherdien, N., Mey, M. R., & Poisat, P. (2024). *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm>
- Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., M. Ameen, B. M., & Khahir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, 6, 100198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>
- Alawode, A. O. (2020). Challenges and prospects of partnership among local and foreign christian missionaries in Nigeria. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 76(3), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5983>
- Alawode, A. O. (2024). Prospects of addressing the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 80(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9358>
- Alesanco-Llorente, M., Reinares-Lara, E., Pelegrin-Borondo, J., & Olarte-Pascual, C. (2023). Mobile-assisted showrooming behavior and the (r)evolution of retail: The moderating effect of gender on the adoption of mobile augmented reality. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 191(February), 122514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122514>
- Bawa, R. K., Kathuria, K., & Dhiman, R. (2022). Green Human Resource Management: Proposed Conceptual Model Through Systematic Literature Review. *ECS Transactions*, 107(1), 3429–3448. <https://doi.org/10.1149/10701.3429ecst>

- Bradley, T., Conroy, K., Zaki, M., & Suleiman, N. (2025). The Role of Education in Promoting Empowerment as Agency in the Lives of Women and Girls in Somaliland. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 60(6), 3704–3718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241243057>
- Burgelman, R. A., Floyd, S. W., Laamanen, T., Mantere, S., Vaara, E., & Whittington, R. (2018). Strategy processes and practices: Dialogues and intersections. *Strategic Management Journal*, 39(3), 531–558. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2741>
- Coetzee-Van Rooy, S. (2021). Being English in multilingual South Africa. *World Englishes*, 40(1), 98–120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12475>
- Fakhar Manesh, M., Pellegrini, M. M., Marzi, G., & Dabic, M. (2021). Knowledge Management in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Mapping the Literature and Scoping Future Avenues. In *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* (Vol. 68, Number 1, pp. 289–300). Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TEM.2019.2963489>
- Filippi, E., Bannò, M., & Trento, S. (2023). Automation technologies and the risk of substitution of women: Can gender equality in the institutional context reduce the risk? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 191(February). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2023.122528>
- Govender, S., Naidoo, R., Ebrahim, S., & Singh, B. (2024). The academic progress of female general surgery and orthopaedic surgery trainees in South Africa. *South African Journal of Surgery*, 62(1), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.36303/SAJS.00194>
- Gunasekara, L., El-Haber, N., Nagpal, S., Moraliyage, H., Issadeen, Z., Manic, M., & De Silva, D. (2025). A Systematic Review of Responsible Artificial Intelligence Principles and Practice. In *Applied System Innovation* (Vol. 8, Number 4). Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI). <https://doi.org/10.3390/asi8040097>
- Irby, B. J., & Polnick, B. (2021). ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP Rethinking the Impact of Organizational Sponsorship with Lacanian Theory. *NAHED ABDELRAHMAN Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 40, 1–12. <http://www.awlj.org/>
- Kaur, J., & Singh, R. (2025). Effectiveness of Diversity Training Initiatives in Fostering Inclusive Workplaces. *Shiv Shakti International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Academic Research*, ISSN(3), 2278–5973. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15422879>
- Khumalo, H., & Ndlovu, A. (2024). Mentoring as a Form of Transformation in Academia. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v6i1.1425>
- Krome, M. J., & Pidun, U. (2023). Conceptualization of research themes and directions in business ecosystem strategies: a systematic literature review. In *Management Review Quarterly* (Vol. 73, Number 2). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-022-00306-4>
- Leuhery, F., Salu Padang, N., Puspitasari, D., & Judijanto, L. (n.d.). *Workplace Diversity and Inclusion: Strategies for Effective Implementation and Benefits to Organizational Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijefa.v5i4>
- Marukhlenko, O., Sidelnikova, L., Mazur, H., Kozachenko, R., & Aksonova, V. (2024). EVALUATION OF THE RESULTS OF GENDER BUDGETING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE SOCIAL SPHERE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. *Financial and Credit Activity: Problems of Theory and Practice*, 6(59), 567–576. <https://doi.org/10.55643/fcaptop.6.59.2024.4547>
- Moraka Shopola, A., Malapane, M., & Nokele, K. (2023). Women Development and Empowerment in South African Polity. *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development (Formerly Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa)*, 12(2), 163–185. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2023/v12n2a7>
- Munyaka, J. B., & Yadavalli, V. S. S. (2022). INVENTORY MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS AND IMPLEMENTATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW. *South African Journal of Industrial Engineering*, 33(2), 15–36. <https://doi.org/10.7166/33-2-2527>
- Olufemi, Lola. (2021). *Experiments in imagining otherwise*. Hajar Press.
- Pierli, G., Murmura, F., & Palazzi, F. (2022). Women and Leadership: How Do Women Leaders Contribute to Companies' Sustainable Choices? *Frontiers in Sustainability*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2022.930116>
- Rampersad, R. (2024). Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Mentoring as Support for African Women's Academic Career Trajectories. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v6i1.1423>
- Rasool, Z., & Shoukat, R. (2021). Organization Culture Change and its Effect on Women's Motivation. *ANNALS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PERSPECTIVE*, 2(2), 269–285. <https://doi.org/10.52700/assap.v2i2.84>
- Robson, L. S., & Bigelow, P. L. (2010). Measurement properties of occupational health and safety management audits: a systematic literature search and traditional literature synthesis. *Canadian Journal of Public Health. Revue Canadienne de Santé Publique*, 101 Suppl. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03403844>

- Sadok, H., & Assadi, D. (2023). The Contribution of AI-Based Analysis and Rating Models to Financial Inclusion The Lenddo Case for Women-Led SMEs in Developing Countries. In *Artificial Intelligence, Fintech, and Financial Inclusion* (pp. 11–25). CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003125204-2>
- Schardt, C., Adams, M. B., Owens, T., Keitz, S., & Fontelo, P. (2007). Utilization of the PICO framework to improve searching PubMed for clinical questions. *BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6947-7-16>
- Schiavenato, M., & Chu, F. (2021). PICO: What it is and what it is not. In *Nurse Education in Practice* (Vol. 56). Elsevier Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2021.103194>
- Shiribaiev, B. (2024). *Shiribaiev 1 How AI Tools can Improve Productivity and Project Management*.
- Vimal, M., & Rajamannar, N. (2025). EFFECT OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION POLICIES ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE AND ENGAGEMENT. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 13(10), 1222–1228. <https://doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/22016>
- Wild, D., Jurcic, M., & Podobnik, B. (2020). The gender productivity gap in croatian science: women are catching up with males and becoming even better. *Entropy*, 22(11), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/e22111217>

Authors' Biographical Note

Karen Stander is an academic in the Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research focuses on business intelligence and Strategy-as-Practice, with an emphasis on data-driven decision-making and organizational strategy in dynamic environments.

Minnie Labuschagne is a graduate of the Department of Business Management at UNISA. Her interests include leadership development, organizational behavior, and gender equality in workplace contexts.

Karla Le Roux is a UNISA Business Management graduate with research interests in strategic management, organizational effectiveness, and inclusive leadership practices.

Unathi Norobolo focuses on human resource management, leadership development, and workplace transformation, particularly in relation to equity and inclusion.

Qewwan King is interested in strategic management and organizational performance, with a focus on applying business strategies to improve outcomes.

Neftali Nguema Anguesom explores leadership and organizational strategy within diverse and emerging market contexts, with an interest in inclusive and sustainable business practices.

Adedotun Adetunla is a multidisciplinary researcher specializing in robotics, automation, and Strategy-as-Practice. His work integrates intelligent systems with business and management applications to support innovation, operational efficiency, and strategic decision-making.