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Enhancing Skills Development for Women: A Developmental Approach to Promoting Inclusivity in Municipalities

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Abstract
Purpose: The aim of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of skills development programs aimed at improving gender inclusion in municipal leadership positions in South Africa. The study particularly focused on identifying best practices and challenges associated with these programs to promote women's representation and empowerment in local government sectors.
Design/Method/Approach: A qualitative research methodology was used, adopting an interpretive paradigm. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with managers and key stakeholders in a selected community in the Eastern Cape. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun & Clarke, was used to analyse the data and derive insights.
Findings: The findings revealed no tailored programs explicitly designed to capacitate and empower women for management roles in the municipality. This gap in specialised programs hinders the progress of women aspiring to take on leadership positions. Moreover, the study identified several challenges, including a lack of dedicated resources and insufficient support structures for women in municipal management.
Theoretical Implications: The study challenges existing theories on gender integration in public sector management by highlighting the need for more specific and targeted programs to address gender disparities. It also contributes to the broader theory of gender empowerment by suggesting that without institutional support for women in leadership positions, the broader goals of gender equity may remain unachieved.
Practical Implications: Management and policy development practitioners can learn from the study results to design more effective skills development programs that focus on gender inclusion. The results suggest that municipalities should implement gender-sensitive strategies that specifically address women's professional development needs in leadership positions.
Originality/Value: This paper is original as it focuses on gender integration in local government in South Africa, a topic that has not been thoroughly examined in the context of local government. The study's findings are important because they provide valuable insights into how municipalities can better support the advancement of women in management, a crucial aspect of achieving broader gender equality goals in South Africa.
Research Limitations/Future Research: The results of the study may differ in municipalities with more established gender-inclusive practices or in regions with different sociopolitical dynamics. Future research could examine the impact of specific gender-specific programs on women's career advancement in local government and extend the study to include quantitative data or comparisons with other regions in South Africa.

Keywords
Training, Skills Development, Inclusivity, Empowerment, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) of the United Nations emphasizes the significance of achieving gender equity and equality and empowering women in all spheres of governance. This goal emphasizes inclusiveness and underscores the organizational processes, such as human resources practices, which include employee capacity building. Despite significant progress in many areas of work, women remain underrepresented in management positions in many municipalities of South Africa. This underrepresentation of women in management positions undermines their significant contribution at work and hampers the effectiveness and inclusivity of municipality governance. Therefore, investing in women's skills development helps close gender parity and inclusivity, thereby contributing to organizational success.

BACKGROUND

Skills development is a crucial human resources activity that involves improving employees' skills and competencies to achieve the organization's goals. For women in municipal management positions, tailored skills development initiatives can play a transformative role in bridging gender gaps. These programs aim to eliminate barriers specific to women, such as limited access to management training, mentoring opportunities, and professional networks. Developing practical skills can, therefore, be instrumental in preparing women for advanced management positions and promoting their involvement in local government (Mendes & Machado, 2015).

Many studies continue to suggest the importance of skills development for employee growth and organizational performance. However, the specific effectiveness of these programs in promoting gender integration in community settings has not been adequately studied. There is an urgent need for further research to understand how skills development programs can be tailored to support the advancement of women into management positions and thereby improve their participation in municipal governance (Gouws, 2019; Titi, 2021).

AIM OF THE STUDY

This paper aimed to assess the effectiveness of skills development programs designed to enhance gender inclusivity in municipal management positions in South Africa, focusing on identifying best practices and challenges associated with these programs in promoting women's representation and empowerment. This study was guided by the following questions:

1) What are the barriers that impede women from occupying senior management positions in the selected municipality?
2) What are the key Human Resources Management practices that can be implemented to effectively enhance gender inclusivity and empower women in municipal management roles?

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Historically, women's roles in public administration have been marginalized, a reality that can be traced back to the early 20th century when men predominantly occupied leadership positions in municipal governance. This gender disparity reflected societal norms that relegated women to domestic roles, reinforcing a public-private divide that still resonates today.

The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge these entrenched norms, advocating for equal rights and opportunities across various fields, including public service. Scholars like Kramarae & Treichler (1991) argue that these movements were pivotal in reshaping perceptions of women's capabilities and rights within the workforce, including in government roles. However, despite these advances, systemic barriers continued to hinder women's progress, as discussed by Eagly & Carli (2007). Their research identifies persistent gender stereotypes that shape perceptions of leadership qualities and influence hiring and promotion practices (human resources management practices) within organizations.

A key idea that cuts beyond national boundaries, cultural norms, and industry boundaries is gender equality in the workplace (Sultana et al., 2021). It expresses that all persons, regardless of gender, should have equal chances, rights, and treatment in professional domains. In addition to addressing gender equality, this thorough survey of pertinent literature compares various African practices with those in the United States. As workplaces continue to grow, acknowledging the need of gender equality becomes vital not only for social justice but also for unlocking the full potential of varied skills and views (Haar et al., 2022).

The goal of gender equality in the workplace is to eradicate bias and discrimination based on gender by pursuing justice and fairness (Clavero & Galligan, 2021). It involves providing everyone, regardless of gender identity, equal access to opportunities, pay, and professional growth (Hartman & Barber, 2020). Beyond moral issues, gender equality is vital because it fosters creativity, boosts output and builds inclusive work cultures that are advantageous to both people and businesses (Gutirrez & Castao, 2021). Issues that prohibit women from assuming leadership roles in municipalities are covered in the following:

Barriers to women in leadership positions

Although women are making inroads into the boardrooms, they are still underrepresented in higher management positions in companies, politics, and higher education institutions. This assertion is the consensus view of social and organizational researchers and women who have accrued substantial experience as leaders.

Systemic issues in social and corporate settings

Women face two types of structural problems; Some are found in society at large, while others are found in corporate environments. Social problems are forces deeply rooted in culture and public policy. Factors that contribute to women's limited career advancement include some aspects of social programs and policies, limited human capital, and societal expectations for women's participation in service industries such as education, health services, and social and community services (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 34).

Policies aimed at promoting women's rights sustain disparities in household duties (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 39). Society is led to believe that it is more appropriate for women to fulfil their obligation by taking care of their families

more frequently than men when maternity leave is prioritized over paternity leave or when women are encouraged to work part-time after giving birth while men are not given the same opportunities to do so. Women now make up a larger portion of the labor force, but their household duties have decreased somewhat in recent years. The average American woman spends 13.2 hours a week on housework, whereas her partner works roughly 6.6 hours (according to research by Fuwa & Cohen; see Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010, p. 768). This disparity results in an undesirable scenario for women forced to choose an unhealthy work-life balance to pursue their careers (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 39).

Another social problem for women is their limited human capital. Human capital refers to the skills, experience and knowledge an employee brings to a position (Abbas, Ekowati, Suhariadi & Anwar (2024). Due to cultural expectations, women take leave when they have family duties like caring for others. Furthermore, it is promoted that women work in departments that offer fewer prospects for professional growth or do not promote women to executive positions (Schwanke, 2013). Broughton & Miller observed that women in management positions are more likely not to have prospects for growth and a business background that limits their chances of success since they have little or no leadership experience in business (Broughton & Miller, 2009, p. 14).

On the one hand, corporate structure issues have a much more direct impact on women's potential. Organizational structures can hinder and hinder women's advancement. These structures include male-dominated old boy networks, increasing promotions and glass cliffs insecurity. Existing networks in organizations can often be homogeneous and long-lasting. Women find it difficult to penetrate because they are often uncomfortable networking in the social context of these environments and because their responsibilities at home prevent them from spending additional time outside of work hours (Broughton & Miller, 2009, p. 17).

Male chauvinism

Male chauvinism is also a factor hindering the advancement of women in organizations. It is more difficult for women to advance into leadership and management positions in a heavily male-dominated environment (Piterman, 2008). Male chauvinism has greatly influenced the culture, social, economic and political structure of the world (Grant Thornton Report, 2013). Existing attitudinal misconceptions hinder the performance of well-educated and educated women who may currently hold management and leadership positions at the level of national and international organizations (Altman & Shortland, 2008). Women have limited access to formal education in most developing countries, such as Malawi (Kiamba, 2008).

Gender stereotypes

For many women, gender stereotypes and sexual tensions are the biggest obstacles to top management positions (Piterman, 2008). The problem of women playing second fiddle to men is gradually disappearing, and women are beginning to gain a foothold in companies and institutions around the world. More and more women are appearing in executive committees and boardrooms and even acting as role models for women lower down the corporate hierarchy. Therefore, they influence corporate decision-making (McKinsey & Company, 2012). The evidence suggests that women are just as qualified as men to contribute to achieving organizations' stated financial and strategic goals.

Glass ceiling

The term “glass ceiling” generally refers to the invisible barriers within an organization that prevent women from being promoted to leadership positions (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Dreher, 2003). This tendency presents a particular challenge for women, impeding their ability to rise to leadership roles and restricting their access to positions of power and influence at higher organizational levels. The glass ceiling is a persistent and systematic barrier women leaders frequently have to break through to assert themselves (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). The sticky floor phenomenon, which confines women unable or unwilling to break through the glass ceiling to low-paying, predominately female employment with little flexibility and no opportunity for development, can also be used to explain this issue (Dawson, 2023).

Implementation of the legislative framework

Women remain trapped in the masculinised male-dominated world where men take charge of politics, management roles and the economy. Discrimination against women in political jobs may be rife in South Africa as many of them lack the basic political knowledge and confidence to stand for political offices. Furthermore, this is caused by poor implementation of gender equity and equality policies in municipalities. The employment equity plan aims to enable the employer “to achieve reasonable progress towards employment equity” to assist in eliminating unfair discrimination in the workplace and achieve equitable representation of employees from designated groups using affirmative action measures. However, developing and implementing policies and legislation such as employment equity policies and affirmative action have only ensured the minimum equity targets as the indicator for gender mainstreaming (Public Service Commission (PSC), 2006, cited in Nhlapo, 2020:216). Therefore, this is one of the barriers to achieving gender equity, and it prevents women from occupying management positions in organizations.

Window dressing

For the purposes of this study, window dressing refers to the practice of employing many women in low-paying professions to give the impression that the organisation employs more women, giving a false interpretation of fairness in the recruitment and selection of women. Usually, this is done to reach quota goals and compliance with labour laws.

Window dressing has many implications regarding women occupying management positions. Under this factor, the present study delves into the following implications:

- ***Perpetuation of gender stereotypes***

Window dressing reinforces existing gender stereotypes by limiting women to management roles. Carpini, Luksyte, Parker & Collins (2023) found that when organizations hire women primarily for support positions, they perpetuate the narrative that women are less suitable for leadership positions. This impacts women's self-perception and shapes the perception of decision-makers within the organization, further entrenching stereotypes about leadership qualities.

- ***Lack of real advancement opportunities***

By filling positions with women at lower levels, companies create the illusion of diversity without offering real opportunities for advancement. Seun, Awodun, Chiwetu & Oluwatimileyin (2023) emphasize that real organizational change requires not only the inclusion of women but also their promotion to leadership positions. This need is circumvented, resulting in stagnant careers where women remain in low-paying positions with minimal opportunities for advancement.

- ***Compliance over commitment***

Organizations that engage in window dressing may do so primarily for compliance rather than a true commitment to diversity and inclusion. Seun, Awodun, Chiwetu & Oluwatimileyin (2023) point out that such a superficial approach can lead to complacency when organizations feel they have fulfilled their commitments without achieving meaningful change. This lack of commitment hinders the development of supportive policies and practices that could facilitate the advancement of women into leadership positions.

Skills development

Skill development programs tailored for women help them gain the abilities and self-assurance necessary to assume leadership roles. Therefore, women must participate in development activities that will open doors to higher professional levels if they are to advance. According to Nwaeke and Onyebuchi (2017), competence development is the culmination of all procedures or initiatives to enhance human knowledge, proficiency, interpersonal connections, and output. Therefore, enhancing performance, personal development, and progress are the main priorities (Fitong & Dzansi, 2023). Developing one's skills can help an organization's human capital and potentially help women's careers progress. Nonetheless, women are sometimes less qualified than their male coworkers or lack the abilities required for leadership roles (Juregui & Olivos, 2018). Unlike men, women are typically not given the same development opportunities and are frequently ill-prepared for leadership roles.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The theory underlying this work is human capital theory. Human capital theory begins with the premise that training and education play a critical role in an individual's capacity and growth. By gaining relevant knowledge, education boosts worker productivity and efficiency (Wuttaphan, 2017; Hung & Ramsden, 2021). The human capital theory states that investing in human capital enhances economic growth and promotes productivity (Rycx, Saks, & Tojerow, 2015; Fix, 2018). Workplaces should invest in their human resources because they are a priceless resource (Wuttaphan, 2017). People are immediately barred from entering a certain professional field if their qualifications are lower (Hung & Ramsden, 2021). Similarly, Senapati & Ojha (2019) connect women's lack of requisite skills to financial reliance.

Human capital theory is best suited for this study. According to Borkowski (2016), the supply of qualified labour is crucial for economic growth. In this situation, women in resource-limited rural areas cannot compete in the labour market because they lack the necessary skills. Furthermore, human capital theory does not consider life's social, cultural and other intangible dimensions. However, this study argues that if rural women are empowered and able to compete in the labour market, their social lives as human beings can be improved. Because of their skills in the labour market, they can provide for the basic needs of their families. Therefore, empowered women can provide security and other needs. This strengthens the feeling of belonging. Other needs, namely safety, social and love, are also considered. In addition, their self-esteem can be strengthened. Self-actualization is possible when all other needs are met (Bland, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study followed a qualitative research method with an interpretive paradigm to understand the barriers that impede women from occupying senior management positions in municipal leadership in South Africa. Ethical guidelines were followed before the study was carried out. Permission to conduct that study was obtained from the municipality and participants signed a consent form. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from the selected participants in the municipality. Purposive sampling was used to select participants in the municipality. Purposive sampling enables the selection of participants who are most relevant to the research question. This targeted approach ensures that the data collected is comprehensive and directly relevant to the study's objectives, resulting in more meaningful and focused results. Data cleansing was done following Braun & Clark's (2006) steps, and themes were generated from the verbatims.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section of the paper presents the findings from the interviews with the selected participants. The table below shows the demographic details of the participants:

Table 1 Demographic details of participants

Pseudo-names	Gender of participants	Occupation
PA1	Female	Director-Skills development
PA2	Male	HR practitioner
PA3	Male	HR practitioner
PA4	Female	HR practitioner
PA5	Male	HR practitioner
PA6	Male	Union representative

***Source*:** author's own work (2024)

Data from participants were collected through interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Data were recorded and transcribed. The following themes emerged after data cleansing:

Theme 1: Gender equity and equality statements

Participants were asked to share their understanding of gender equity and inclusion in municipal operations. They defined gender equity as:

> *Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men according to their respective needs. Gender equality, on the other hand, means that men and women have equal rights, entitlements, duties, and opportunities in all spheres of life and have equal access to management positions as men. Equality means a condition where everyone has the same standing in their interactions with the government and society. Although we talk about inclusivity when defining gender equity and equality, the systems inside the organization do not tally with the above, considering a number of factors, such as lack of mentorship and lack of tailored training programmes that are meant for women.*

The above definitions from participants serve as an indicative of their understanding of equality at work. As explained in Sustainable Development Goal 5, Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Participants further shared their understanding of the importance of inclusion and having a diverse workforce within the municipality, highlighting the significance of the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) in HR processes.

Theme 2: Lack of mentorship

Participants were asked to share their sentiments on the factors that hinder them from occupying management positions, and they shared their understanding of the role of mentors in upskilling other employees. According to them, lack of mentorship affects their progression to senior roles. PA4 argued that:

> *Management roles require someone with extensive experience in the field, and some of the women within the municipality do not have such. There are no mentors who are ready to uplift women. This makes it difficult for such women to be appointed to management positions.*

Most participants agreed with the above sentiment, arguing that support from the HR office might assist in avoiding appointing men only. They further indicated that most applicants in senior management positions are men because of the experience and qualifications needed.

Theme 3: Lack of development programmes tailored for women

Having programmes tailored for women in workplaces provides essential support and training that empower them with the necessary skills and knowledge required. These programmes address women's unique challenges, providing them with the skills necessary for their career development. Participants shared their sentiments about the lack of support from the municipality. They indicated that fewer programmes are tailored to empower women. This creates challenges when they want to apply for senior management positions. PA1 and PA4 echoed their sentiments on the lack of development programmes that are tailored to empower women:

> *We have not had programmes designed to empower women in the last few years. Yes, we are in management posts, but we did not get training that prepared us to climb the ladder. Yes, I believe women need to be empowered with skills and knowledge to occupy management positions, but it is not easy for them as things stand. Another thing that hinders their development is education. Support is needed in this regard. We do not have a programme that is meant to support women.*

Theme 4: Organizational structures and practices

Organizations have hierarchical structures and policies that guide their operational processes. These current policies and procedures in the municipality favour male leadership styles. This, in turn, affects the women's progression to management positions. For example, participants indicated that the Employment Equity plan is outdated, dated in 2007,

with some amendments not aligned with empowering women in the workplace. The document is neutral about empowering women. PA3 and PA5 echoed their sentiments, indicating that:

> *Organizational structures are still favouring males in management positions. Policies are not aligned with the Affirmative Action and Employment Equity Act (No.55 of 1998). This means that women will still struggle to occupy such positions. There is a pressing need to revise policies and organizational structures to cater to women's needs. This will help curb this inequality.*

Theme 5: Work-life balance

The burden of domestic and professional responsibilities affects women in the workplace, particularly in working environments that are not flexible. Some municipal processes are not flexible, resulting in women being sabotaged because of the lack of flexible working arrangements.

> *We are at the centre of service delivery. Although the laws of the country are promoting gender equity and equality, sometimes we find it difficult to respond to community needs because women managers take maternity leave. This right is entailed in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (No.75 of 1997), but it affects our daily functioning as the municipality.*

This theme emphasizes the need for flexible working arrangements where women feel valued by the employer. Support is at the centre of this theme for women to balance between work and other key responsibilities that they face in their lives.

DISCUSSION

Quality of work life, women empowerment and improvement in organizational structures are bilateral cooperation, all resulting in inclusive and enhanced organizational productivity (Zmani, 2016). Empowerment enriches an individual's quality of work life at the workplace (Nayak et al., 2018; Gortani, 2011). This part of the paper discusses the above themes, providing a nuanced understanding of the significance of training and developing women holistically to occupy management positions.

Opportunities for growth-Reskilling and upskilling of women

Women should be trained and empowered to occupy senior management roles. Education is the most effective means to empower women. It increases their knowledge and gives them the ability to exercise control and become self-reliant. Empowerment has a positive effect on the professional growth of women (Gholipour et al., 2010). Many organizations focus on the challenges female employees face in the workplace. Once such barriers are identified, relevant officials work to improve the situation by reskilling and upskilling women. This process can be done On-The-Job (OJT) to capacitate women in municipalities. Women can distinguish themselves from men, and these opportunities work in favour of women only when officials understand the concept. (Alexander & Welzel, 2010).

Skills development is crucial for empowering women to occupy senior management roles. Women get equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge, ultimately enhancing their career development. As noted by Nwaeke & Onyebuchi (2017), skills development entails processes that are aimed at improving employee expertise and interpersonal skills, which are crucial for personal growth and organizational performance (Fitong & Dzansi, 2023). However, participants that were interviewed highlighted the fact that women in the municipality lack access to tailored development programmes, which is a significant barrier to their development.

Moreover, the reviewed literature emphasizes that women often find themselves not included in development programmes, which limits their experience in leadership roles (Lewis & Beuregard, 2018). Some participants echoed this concern, asserting that without mentorship and targeted training, women struggle to compete with their male counterparts who may have been groomed for leadership roles.

Gender equity and equality statements

Participants defined gender equity as fairness in addressing the specific needs of women and men, while gender equality refers to equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life. Participants have echoed their sentiments and frustration that, despite the existing laws and policies promoting inclusion of women in management roles, systems in these organizations do not align with these policies. This misalignment between policies and practice is evident when participants highlighted the lack of mentorship and tailored programmes for women. This also aligns with the SDG5, which stresses that gender equality is a fundamental human right and is essential for a sustainable future.

Organizational practices

Policy frameworks within the municipalities often favour male leadership styles, creating an environment where women are unable to advance to senior leadership roles. Such structural barriers not only hinder women's progression but also reflect a broader organizational structure that lacks inclusivity. This is evident in literature where Kumara (2018) advises organizations to revise their policies to create an equitable and accessible workplace that genuinely support growth of women to leadership roles.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that for municipalities to be inclusive and diverse in terms of workforce, there is a need for tailored programmes whose aim is to empower women. Skills development for women is one of the key issues Human Resources

Management practices that municipalities should consider in order for women to meet the requirements for senior management positions. To have a balanced leadership and an inclusive and diverse organization, municipalities should focus on implementing policies that are aligned with Employment Equity and the constitution of the Republic. To achieve SDG-5, there is a need for stakeholders to work together, providing a clear framework on creating an inclusive and accessible workplace where women feel valued and appreciated.

PRACTICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has proven the role of personal responsibility in women's skill development and professional advancement. Practically speaking, this means that women need to take ownership of their career development and make every effort to advance. This calls for assets, dedication, selflessness, optimism, and the audacity to voice their career goals. In any case, firms, HR specialists, and managers should prioritise women's participation in their initiatives.

Organizations can facilitate women's career advancement by offering opportunities for personal development that tackle key themes like optimism, accountability, and self-assurance. Organizations should assist mentoring programs and encourage women to hire life coaches or leaders who can help them hone and build natural leadership skills that will help them succeed in their careers in order to boost women's personal growth. Aspiring women can be inspired to pursue leadership roles by having access to mentors and experiences outside their current position. Companies also need to help women manage their careers, i.e. Help them plan their careers and make sure they are in line with programs and procedures that are important for their development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study recommends that the municipality ensure equal access to developmental work opportunities, particularly for women who were previously discriminated against. This can be achieved by introducing mentorship and coaching programmes that will help the municipality to be inclusive in its operations.

Creating an inclusive culture where women are encouraged to develop themselves in preparation for leadership positions.

Implement an Employment Equity plan for the municipality to improve representation within the municipality. This will translate to an inclusive organization that encourages women's empowerment.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study was limited to one selected municipality in the Eastern Cape. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other municipalities since municipalities have unique challenges. In the case of creating an inclusive workplace, different municipalities have different policies to address this inequality challenge at work. Therefore, it is important to note that municipalities have different challenges regarding including women in management roles.

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