WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: ACCESS, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

A. G. Dosunmu*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2779-2138

M. Dichaba*
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4128-0240

*Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Women in corporate sectors across South Africa are not adequately represented. Despite the influx of women in the workforce, they are still experiencing challenges in leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. Thus, the gender gap has caused most women to put extra effort into building their careers through personal efforts – mentorship, networking, and further training. This article analyzed quantitative data and discussed how access to higher education influences career choice and the advancement of women in the telecommunication industry in South Africa. One hundred and thirty-three (133) junior and middle women workers from a telecommunication company were chosen randomly to understand how they plan to build their careers and the challenges they have encountered. The finding indicates that the driving force among the respondents was the opportunities they had created for themselves to progress in their careers.

Keywords: higher education, women, career opportunity, access, workplace, equity

INTRODUCTION

From a global perspective, it is supposed that women are usually not well represented in terms of equal access to higher education and employment opportunities (Jauhar and Lau 2018). However, the report (Blakemore and Cooksey 2017) illustrates that circumstances for women have not been opportune to attain certain higher qualifications; thus, such attainment is still very minimal across the regions of Africa. It is pertinent that for African women to progress in their careers to the highest positions, they need to acquire higher educational credentials for them to successfully break through the invisible obstacles affecting them at the workplace (Dosunmu and Adeyemo 2018). The gross enrolments ratio reports indicated that the number of women accessing higher education is quite low, being about 5, 1 per cent compared to 8.7 per cent for men. This ratio explains the reason(s) why the vast majority of women in the

corporate workforce still find it difficult to attain higher positions (UNESCO UIS 2016). Regardless of the improvement and achievements in educational attainment in the 1960s and 1970s, there is still a level of disparity regarding the African educational systems across all regions in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity, and rural and urban residence (McKeever 2017). The most persistent out of all these factors is gender, which is profoundly common, while this demonstrates continual basic unfairness in prospects regarding access to higher education and schooling. In most African countries, the female population is still under-represented in their education systems (Okeke et al. 2017). However, this indicates that women might not have the opportunity to demonstrate their potential and utilize their skills in human capital development.

In Africa, cultural and economic factors have hindered women from benefiting from formal education, particularly higher education, which has created gender inequality, which still exists in the workplace (Durowaiye and Khan 2017). These problems are considered structural, with the problem manifesting itself in several ways in different countries. Globally in the ICT industry, formal reports on professions indicated that women hold about 56 per cent of professional jobs. Still, in a country such as South Africa, especially in the communication industry, women only represent 20 per cent of professional jobs (Pokpas et al. 2019). Therefore, in South Africa, for instance, the case is quite different from the global position because of the lower percentage of women representation in the ICT industry, but in a global context, the situation seems to be succeeding progressively. Female representation in leadership positions in some sectors of the South African economy appears very low (BWASA 2017). The South African corporate work environment is gender-biased, especially in the communication industry, where males dominate all sectors (Moss-Racusin et al. 2018).

Essentially, women's involvement in all spheres of the economy needs to be recognized for Africa to reach its full potential. However, women should be valued and seen as important key individuals who can potentially attain certain leadership positions in the economic terrain of society (Sandberg 2015). Hence, this article analyses the influence of access to and success in higher education on career choice and advancement of junior women workers in the telecommunication industry in South Africa. This study contributes to several debates on the world of work using gender as social construction lens to understand access to education better as an indicator of career choice and advancement for women in a corporate organization. This aspect is mostly ignored or has not been well articulated in most literature on this issue.

GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

This study is theoretically anchored on social construction theory. The theory explains the core

aspect of gender inequality and the reasons for exclusion in higher education opportunities (Posselt and Nuñez 2022). Many of the published in this field largely critique exclusion of women in education and work advancement. However, there is no depth in most of the analysis to explain how women and men are socially treated differently in higher education and at workplace (Mousa 2022). Social construction theory argued for equal participation in terms of gender (Cohen and Karim 2022). The figure 1 shows interrelation of gender as a social structure that informs at individual or macro levels in terms of access and cultural stereotypes in the publication of Risman, B.J. (2018).
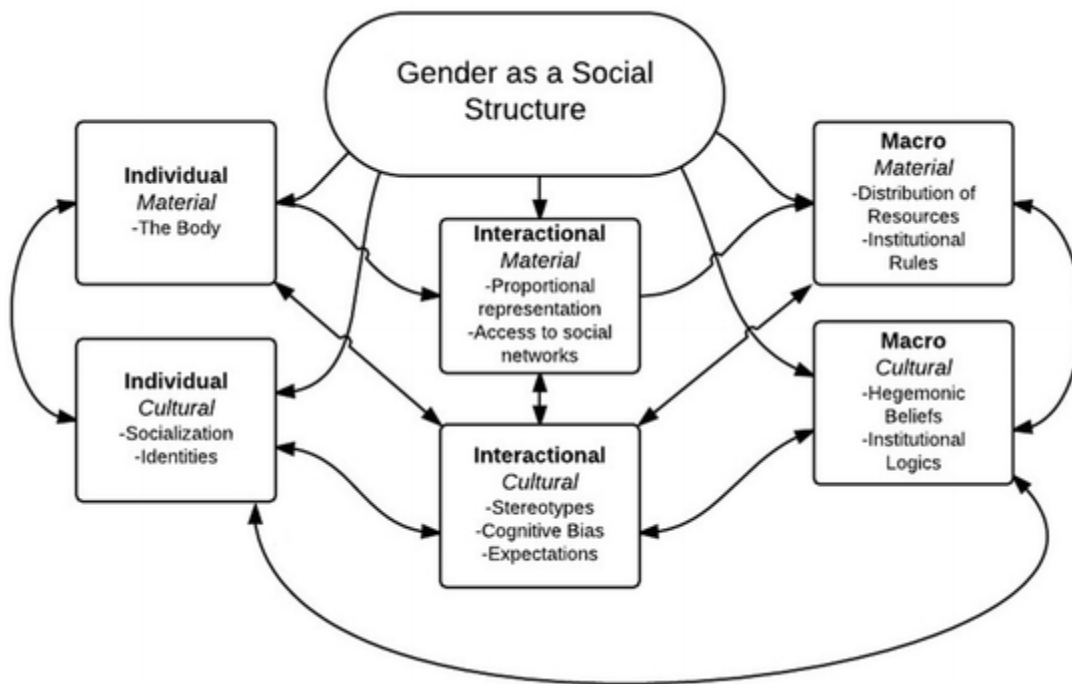

Figure 1: *Gender as a social structure* by B. J. Risman. 2018.
(Source: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_2)

What is interesting in this framework is how different social contexts give way to understanding women's gender and their access to opportunities. In Africa, social construction of women in higher education is viewed from pre-colonial understanding of the role of women in society (Frankema, Haas, and Van Waijenburg 2023). This idea continued to post-colonial universities and work environments where implementation of policies is unconsciously biased towards women. In other words, higher education qualifications are interpreted differently for women. Based on the framework, it is important to understand social inequality and exclusion of women beyond argument of lack of participation or opportunities. In a way, exclusion of women is socially constructed and embedded in African beliefs despite policies to redress it (Nyoni and Agbaje 2022). If argument in the framework is followed, equal access to higher education may be vague if not supported with reasons why they are excluded at workplace despite these

degrees. Literature and many of feminists have theorized exclusion of women mainly on scientific reasoning where human anatomy of gender is used to argue inequality (Slade, Duebel, and Ryab 2022). However, there is a need for more sociological lens to argue that women's exclusion in higher education for example is social, cultural, and has historical context (Nkrumah and Scott 2022). These views are rarely used to frame study of gender, women, and inequality in higher education.

On the other hand, the social constructionism approach further shows a process of differences in genders as a result of invisibility (Allen, Goldberg, and Jaramillo-Sierra 2022). This argument considered the aspect of gender to be natural instead of social. This suggests that women should not be denied opportunity to access and pursue their education because of their physiology and anatomy. However, the argument should have looked at how structural and social inequalities affect women in the workplace. It is unlikely that natural or physiological nature of gender will play more important factor in higher education and at workplace, particularly in South Africa. Nevertheless, many of the writers believe that gender is natural which thus continues to create hindrances for professional women's success in the workforce (Fox Tree and Vaid 2022). It is argued that in the past especially in developing countries of Africa women were denied access to higher education because of their anatomy or natural being rather than social (Mutie 2022). This argument is complex and may not necessarily be true in all cases. Perhaps, social and natural explanations of exclusion of women could provide more comprehensive understanding of inequalities in higher education and at workplace in developing countries. Therefore, social difference is historical and could limit more opportunities for women than argument of exclusion based on natural value of women because of history of Africa (Duguma et al. 2022).

Furthermore, inequality in gender in all aspects of life in terms of biases is deeply rooted in the historical antecedents of societal structures (Ridgeway and Markus 2022). Higher education accessibility is considered a tool for liberating women from biases and discrimination of gender menace (García-Peñalvo et al. 2022). It is argued that in education especially in higher education there is discrimination of gender that still persist in terms of inequality reflecting unequal treatment female gender (Zajda 2022). Arguing from a sociological perspective higher education and gender notions of women are denying opportunities for upward mobility due to their social locations (Rosa and Clavero 2022). This signifies that the higher education systems treated women unequally due to cultural beliefs that female gender are socially constructed (Ezebuilo 2023). This experience justifies the gender discrimination in higher education as it has been applied which thus affects women to be relegated and struggles to equate the men genders in many African societies. The African belief system of educating boys instead of girls

has resulted in having more learned males than females and thus have adverse effects on society in terms of creating inequality in genders (Psaki et al. 2022). However, the policy transformation in South Africa shifted and tried to redress these beliefs in 1996 through transformation agenda that aimed to facilitate access for women to higher education (Mkhize 2022). This policy targeted socially constructed beliefs about women and decided to change them. While there might be some element of a natural view of women in the policy, however, the overarching aim was repositioning women back to the society of South Africa that is equal (Mntambo, Adebayo, and Ndinda 2023).

In South Africa or before the policy on transformation, gender inequality on the basis of gender in terms of access to higher education and other opportunities was prevalent (Aruleba and Jere 2022). This policy shows the importance of higher education in reconstructing society and through gender participation in education and economic opportunities (Tawiah and Thusi-Sefatsa 2022). It is argued that women's attainment of higher education is important to achieve the goal of career advancement in workplace (Sudha and Reshi 2023). However, there is no causal relationship between women attaining higher education and career advancement because of other issues that could conflict with it (Larsen and Emmett 2023). Further to this argument, what needs to understand in this context is that discrimination, biases, and gender inequality are processes planned to suppress women from accomplishing what men have achieved (Mittner 2022). It is argued that institutions of higher learning or educational institutions are considered to be socially and culturally reproduced in terms of inequality reproduction, particularly gender inequality which thus is through informal and formal processes that are reproduced (Hattery 2022). Thus, this is reflected in the opportunities to access certain courses and programmes thus depicting gender inequality concepts. This indicates segregating women or females from courses that are believed to be meant for men. However, this discrimination affects females or women in the process of job searching as it usually determines their choice of employment. This portrays large gender gaps in the job markets for women especially when considering the types of programs, they completed their degrees and thus usually hinder their future career paths in the workplace. This argument addresses the practices, conditions, and factors that pose hindrances to the development of women's career opportunities in workplaces. Some of these issues are socially constructed and have culture undertone. However, there is poor understanding of demographic profile of underrepresentation of women in the literature.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE ARGUMENTS OF UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The literature and many of the findings continue to show underrepresentation of women in

higher education and in workplace (Pearson et al. 2022). In most cases, it appears overstated especially in countries such as South Africa where women's representation has improved through post-apartheid policies (Ndinda and Ndhlovu 2022). Yet, the improvement in terms of representation of women in education and at work does not show significant evidence of career advancement. This aspect is what literature perhaps failed to articulate well. Therefore, the theory of social construction could provide how representation is not equal to advancement (Bibri 2022). If argument in the theory is used based on seen women's exclusion from social factors rather than natural occurrence, it is possible to further understand how human factors play a role. So, societal factors delimiting women's opportunities to equally access leadership positions in the workforce are socially constructed (Tiron-Tudor and Faragalla 2022). If this argument is applied to the workplace, then, a slow rate of career advancement is likely to continue to impact professional working women in workplaces and higher education except policies are aligned to grassroots problem that is mainly human orientation of colonial era about women's role in society. This argument addresses the practices, conditions, and factors that pose hindrances to the development of women's careers in workplaces. Some of these issues are considered to be individual perspectives and less organizational.

Therefore, social construction theory is used to explain the unbalanced career opportunities for women beyond biological and physiological elements of gender (Akter, Rahman, and Radicic 2022). However, this framing allows a great understanding of issues related to women's career development and whether existing transformation policies in South Africa can address them without going to the practicality of human or cultural orientations of female gender first. Thus, human orientation can be a major reason why women struggle to achieve career advancement despite improved representation in education and at work (Hooker and Guy 2022). In other words, women's ability in terms of strength or other physical attributes may have slowly disappeared because policies may have curtained it. However, perceptions of female gender may be noticed in the relationship and interactions on campus and work environment (Allahverdi 2022). This is part of the finding of this study as it suggests that it contributes to ability to aspire and desire for advancement.

However, the unique qualities women possess are arguably derived from their actual life experiences, and sex role socialization is a determinant factor in which the world views women differently from men (Maseda et al. 2022). It is argued that the distinctive nature of the two genders put them in different positions of making decisions individually, for instance, women tend to make specific individual decisions on the basis of their gender identity within a situational context. In distinction, men are likely to morally make choices on the basis of rights and fairness (Jach et al. 2023). Therefore, women value relationships and interconnectedness

which thus makes them to be habituated and responsive and listen to people's concerns in around workplace environment (Hoff 2023). These skills placed women in a position to likely solve problems of groups and be democratic in managing issues in the workplace.

The perceived differences motivated by human orientation or culture may be associated with women and men being stereotyped and thus are invisible walls hindering women to ascend to positions of leadership in workplaces except for networks, mentoring, and higher education training as a basis to break through the organizational obstacles (Hing et al. 2023). The ascribed status identified to women is care for children and home and the greater working environment is identified to men. However, societal thought has unfairly and generally valued men over women in the world of work. Thus, women have been perceived and identified to work as lower and these conditions confined women to a space of stereotypes which thus in the public world placed them in a lesser status (Taparia and Lenka 2022). In other words, women tend to be valuable in terms of conciliation with organizations if given the opportunity.

Feminist theories argued that the experiences of women and perspectives thus eliminate artificial dichotomies of separation (Kwachou 2023). This perspective of distinct individuals also includes the styles of leadership associated with women and men. However, leadership in the workplace is usually favourable to men but unfavourable to women workers in terms of hierarchy in the organization even when performing the same task (Feldberg 2022). This has created a distinction in the past within the workplace where traditional leadership is promoted and decision-making authority is concentrated at the top been controlled by men (Zhang, Jia, and Yan 2022). This argument reveals the situational change in organizations that considered relationship-oriented leadership which thus results in innovation, workers' capability, motivation, enhanced commitment, and performance increase among workers but it is argued that individual gender characteristics continue to pose a challenge for women who aspire to reach top hierarchical positions.

Thus, the organizational and structural perspectives consider to regulates workplace policies rather not gender roles or individuals (Fernandes et al. 2023). However, it is argued that workers regardless of gender to a large degree are made to be who they are by the organization through structural practices (Jiang, DeHart-Davis, and Borry 2022). In other words, work behaviour in terms of sex differentiation emerges as a condition for workers placed in the organization for structural responses (Spadaro, Jin, and Balliet 2023). This explains workers' responsibilities for the behaviour they engage in at the workplace which thus is pre-determined by the work system structurally design to determine the fate of workers in terms of who actually progresses or attains a higher position, usually, this structural arraignment is included in the organizational policies to favour gender groups – *men* that occupied upper

executive placement in the organization, evidence indicated that men usually outweigh women on corporation boards and top hierarchy in the workplace (Holbrow 2022).

Research reveals that the dimensions and approaches to women's career advancement have recently taken different positions and impacted the organization's practices (Góral 2023). The process of bureaucratic authoritarianism which may be a human orientation of women in society has adversely destroyed prospective benefits for professional women in organizations to advance in their careers (Battilana et al. 2022). However, these practices are argued to be detrimental to women workers in terms of singular authority and span of controls which limit access to the process of decision-making. Equally, masculine traits are consciously hidden in the bureaucratic organization process and thus used to be successful for men in the organization (Bibilashvili, Kaladze, and Bandzeladze 2022). The argument around this discussion is that the bureaucratic organization process is unfair and unbiassed to the women's gender to continue to struggle in this movement of power tussle in the workplace. Importantly, the career advancement of women workers largely rests on the impact of the organizational structure on women's position in terms of the beliefs holds that the organization shapes the individual or the individual makes the organization in terms of bureaucratic organizational structures or gendered bureaucracy (Anderson-Gough et al. 2022). Thus, practices, policies, and structural organizational perspectives used mentoring in a way to create opportunities for women who are determined to aspire to leadership positions in the organization (Kalumba et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the delimitations of women's success in attaining positions of high level in the workplace, and corporation, are associated with the cultural perspectives context of an organization such as ideology, policies, and culture (Hoang, Suh, and Sabharwal 2022). Research demonstrated that organization is represented in management to mean gender neutrality but often involves traditional consistent characteristics and practices that valued men over women in the workplace (Kroese 2022). It is argued that patriarchal ideologies are confronted by women executives which thus are connected with unpaid work, family, and womanhood, which explains the limited and lower management opportunities women have access to in organizations (Muchabaiwa and Chauraya 2022). In addition, this is evidence that the situation which thus is characterized by most men peers relegates women managers to be often marginalized in the workplace.

Essentially, the fundamental cultural perspective of societal factors may consider influencing women's career development (Dewitt et al. 2022). This argument reveals that the culture of national egalitarianism may likely create the opportunity for women to relative success in advancing or having access to prestigious positions in the workplace (Courey et al. 2022). These frameworks of empowerment and egalitarianism are somewhat unstable but may

possibly enhance the potential advancement of women's careers. The instability in these societal factors is justified by the process and practices used in this context in the workplace, thus determining women's success or failure in the organization.

METHOD

Research design

This study used a survey research design to collect data, understand how higher education qualifications influence career choice, and determine women's progress in a selected communication organization in South Africa.

Population

The target population for this study comprised women workers. The categories of women selected for the study were junior women workers, which refers to women employees whose job descriptions fall on the lower rungs of the company structure.

Table 1: Number of women workers by position

Company	Women employees	Women in junior and middle management	Senior women executives
IT Company South Africa	2841	1876	965
Total	2841	1876	965

Source: Corporate Research Foundation (2011)

For this study, a simple random probability sampling technique was used to choose junior women employees from the total population of women who occupy junior position levels in the organization. Table 1 illustrates the number of women workers according to their position. This information was obtained from the company's records with authorization.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect data at the head office of the communication organization located in Gauteng province, South Africa. Seventy-eight questionnaires were administered at the Eastern Cape office, of which 33 were returned. Seventy-eight were also sent to the Gauteng office, of which 36 were returned. Finally, 78 questionnaires were administered at the Durban office, of which 47 were initially returned, and a further 17 questionnaires ten days later. In total, of the 234 questionnaires distributed, a total number of 133 questionnaires were returned. Therefore, the *n* value (total questionnaires distributed) is 234, but only 133 questionnaires were

returned.

Sampling and the sample size

A simple random probability was used for the study to select samples that represented women falling in the category of junior management in the company. Two hundred and thirty-four (234) junior women workers were sampled quantitatively. Therefore, from the total of 1 876 junior women workers, a sample size of 234 was generated, representing the total *n* value for the study. The study used a confidence interval of 6 and a confidence level of 95 per cent.

Table 2: Sample size by position, company location, and confidence level

	Population size	Sample size	Confidence level	Confidence interval
IT Company South Africa	1876	234	95%	6

Source: Corporate Research Foundation (2011)

The confidence level in the study is described as the percentage that represents the true percentage of the population chosen for the research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Career choice of women: A conceptual clarification

A determinant of careers can be classified into different categories such as structural and social factors, which include family, gender stereotypes, and personal and media culture (Ellemers 2018). However, considering these factors, indicates that both structural and social factors influenced the choice of careers; from an early age for children, social factors such as role models, peers, and parents are determinants that influenced them. In addition, in a professional situation, men and women are not exposed to structural factors the same as adolescents (Chandra-Mouli, Plesons, and Amin 2018). However, the possibility of bias in gender perceptions may result in social influence, which may be either internal or external. Therefore, parents, media culture, role models, and gender stereotyping are all examples of social influence. It is cited that family is a major factor through which socialization may influence childhood and adolescence; indirectly, family is used as a medium to motivate career choices (Xing and Rojewski 2018). For instance, parents may not have a professional background in some fields, such as IT. Still, they may encourage their children, especially girls, to vie for careers considered masculine. In other words, without being in a particular profession or professional job, parents act as role models for their children.

Furthermore, literature studies cited that some highly educated parents who have been successful in their careers, influence and motivate their female children who may build a career in male-dominated career paths such as science and technology (Sáinz and Muller 2018). In addition, mothers without qualifications are less likely to influence their daughters'/girls' career choices than mothers with a degree qualification (Sahinidis et al. 2019). For instance, the career aspirations of females/girls are significantly determined by the impact of their parents' educational levels and career occupational status (Pfingst 2015). Parental occupations are likely associated with children, especially females' career aspirations (Lloyd et al. 2018).

Furthermore, to have evidence of career goals and achievements attained so far along career paths, it is pertinent to understand that career progress plans assist in maintaining momentum toward the definitive goal (Coetzee 2019). However, a career goal is defined as a dream with a deadline, while flexibility is a key component in career development plans (Riley 2018). In other words, it is important to understand in this context that to achieve a career goal successfully, there is a need for appropriate career plans plus a process on which to embark. Studies have indicated that parents significantly influence their daughters/girls, particularly in commitment and professional work ethics (Cislaghi et al. 2020). For women to accomplish their occupational attainment toward their career paths, they must plan for their chosen careers. However, women can achieve success in their careers when they shadow a senior executive who can assist them in achieving their objectives through the occupational hierarchy.

However, some organizations suffer lost talent because of failure to concentrate more on leadership training development for employees, specifically women. This may result in utilizing employees with outdated skill sets (Oseghale, Mulyata, and Debrah 2018). In these modern times, for organizations to survive, their recruitment and employment selection process must be bias-free to hire suitable personnel that best fits available positions. The literature revealed that women need more encouragement and support than their male counterparts to attain leadership status. These differences in gender identity create an opportunity for a specific developmental leadership program for women to purposefully harness some of the challenges and thus find a means to equip women to progress to leadership positions (Sugiyama et al. 2016). Therefore, these programs are designed to create opportunities for women to be in leadership positions and to achieve career success, even when they tend to occupy senior executive positions in a work environment that is male-dominated. Programs of such a nature assist women in developing self-confidence and experiencing self-discovery for them to explore their management approaches (Hill and Wheat 2017).

Furthermore, for women to develop their interpersonal skills and self-awareness, there is a need for persistent leadership training programs through workshops and short courses that are

relevant to enable them to acquire the required skills for effective leadership in the workplace (Smirles et al. 2020). In other words, some of these leadership programs bring individuals together for collective learning and development experiences, especially for women, though the purposes vary accordingly in terms of content and targeted outcomes. There seems to be a dearth of information on leadership development education concerning women as future leaders in this context of women becoming emerging leaders (Eklund, Barry, and Grunberg 2017). However, individuals and organizations will benefit through leadership development education programs for women. This study was premised on the assumption that such leadership or higher education qualifications create opportunities for women to progress in their careers.

Women and employment equity in the workplace

South African employment equity is designed to structure some of the problems and challenges in an organization to strategically prevent any forms of bias against disadvantaged women in terms of practices and policies related to employment (Naidoo and Kongolo 2018). The idea of equity policy is to improve representation for women, especially those who have been deprived of opportunities in the past (Coe, Wiley, and Bekker 2019). The equity policy was enacted to establish equal opportunity through fairness and encourage supportive unbiased organizational cultures. The literature cited that employment equity legislation is usually unfavourable to certain groups in some African countries and other parts of the world, particularly those with disabilities, disadvantaged races, and gender (Jain, Sloane, and Horwitz 2015). Regardless of efforts to bridge the inequality gap in the workplace, women continue to experience unfairness. For instance, the workplace environment is still unfriendly to women because of their gender identity, and this often positions them below their male counterparts (Jones, Warnick, and Palmer 2016). In other words, Black South African women have been historically disadvantaged in the workplace because of their race and the lack of opportunity for them to quickly access formal education, which thus determines their socioeconomic status (Breetzke and Hedding 2016).

Furthermore, women need to be protected against all forms of discrimination in the workplace, such as sexism and racism. However, a policy of equal opportunities needs to be encouraged for women to eliminate unfairness in society. In South Africa, the equity legislation was purposefully enacted to redress precedent injustices of unequal employment access for certain groups of women, especially blacks, and to establish a non-racial and no sexist, and fair society for all (Oosthuizen, Tonelli, and Mayer 2019). The equity employment policy in South Africa addresses how to change and review the face of past policies and practices concerning women's representation in senior-level positions at workplaces across the country (Mabokela

and Mlambo 2017).

Research reports indicate that affirmative action had not been properly utilized to support disadvantaged groups, particularly women, because of unequal access to particular jobs, education, and promotion based on their gender identity. This shortcoming stigmatized the disadvantaged groups among other groups based on their status (Hideg and Ferris 2017). For instance, reinforcing stereotypes at the workplace affects women's capacity to vie for top positions, which has led to the neglect of designated qualified groups to favour the unqualified groups based on gender. In other words, if employment equity is to take precedence in terms of fairness, it may perhaps result in clashes in terms of seniority over such policies and principles. Moreover, employment equity implementation imperatively ameliorates the value system in the workforce and creates a well-supportive work environment that can provide opportunities for women to discover their potential to progress in an unbiased society (Holness 2016).

In South Africa, equity legislation implementation has been enforced on organizations to comply with the policy of equal access, especially for women from diverse cultural backgrounds. It thus creates opportunities for achieving equity objectives (Thaver 2017). Therefore, organizations ensure diversity in the hiring process to be bias-free, create a friendly work environment for employees and encourage women to partake in diverse training, mentoring, and coaching programs. As a result of affirmative action programs being adopted recently, organizations have included the ability in their management structure to give opportunities to historically disadvantaged groups who were denied access in the past (Lee and Mondi 2018). Despite the efforts made so far to achieve some progress in this area, the structures and management of the organization are still dominated by males (Hearn and Collinson 2017).

However, in Africa, some of the challenges facing the higher education systems are overloading employees being trained. This overload limits their opportunities for promotion and good research output, although this is related to assisting employees through retention policies aimed to attract skilled employees. To overcome these challenges, women employees in both administrative and academic situations need professional development. In addition, institutional gender policies related to sexual harassment, rape, promotion, etc., must be reviewed to accommodate women who have been secluded from non-traditional fields such as science and technology (Czerniawski, Guberman, and MacPhail 2017). In the South African higher education system, for instance, in the institutions of higher learning, major lingering issues are the imbalances of gender in terms of employees. Essentially, the role of women in academics is of vital importance because it assists them in developing the ideas surrounding their identity status; as a result, it makes them independent as a woman (Thobejane, Mogorosi,

and Okere 2017). However, this might be difficult in a situation whereby women's status is still considered to be token because most of them are found in the lower rungs of the employment position. Most of them are either temporary, low-paid, or part-time contract employees (Mallia and Windels 2018).

The discussion on women's position in higher education reinforces that the Human Capital Development Strategy (HCD) must be actively planned and should, ideally, be aimed at creating opportunities for people. HCD is often targeted at women who have potential but usually do not have the opportunity to develop their careers for historical and social reasons. In addition, it is also possible that, eventually, when women succeed in senior positions, there is a risk that they will find themselves in stereotyped career paths. Thus, one of the core purposes of HCD is to break down the boundaries to such career paths and open up opportunities for women to explore their fullest potential in all sectors. Therefore, this study explores the career experiences of women and how higher qualification influences their career choice and advancement.

Demographic

The findings of this study revealed that women might perhaps overcome challenges in their career development in the corporate world if they are given the opportunities to attend regular organizational training and access further education.
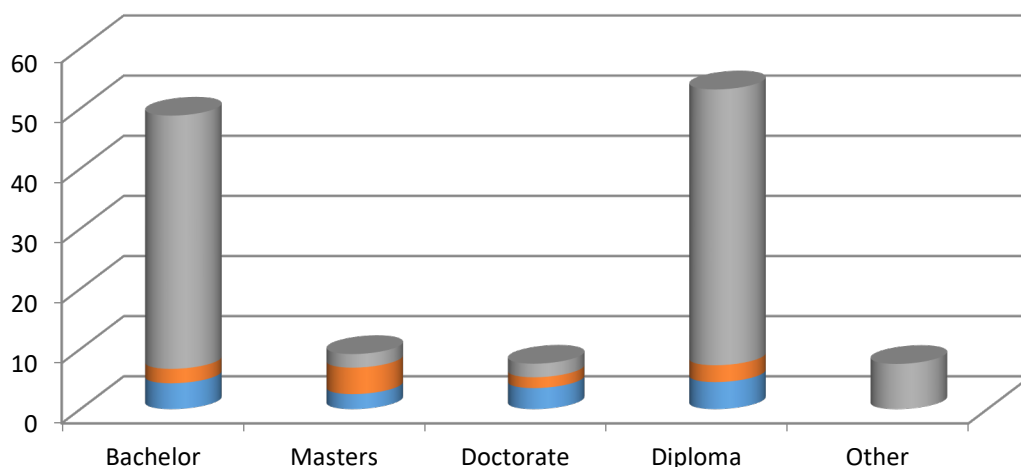

Figure 2: Educational qualifications of the respondents

Figure 2 shows respondents' qualification attainments. The majority possess a diploma qualification and a bachelor's degree, respectively 46 per cent and 43 per cent. These statistics indicated that the vast majority of the women junior workers had a diploma and bachelor's

qualifications which means that they might be enthusiastic and ambitious about their career development in the organization. However, since the majority possess these qualifications, bachelor's degrees, and diplomas, there is a possibility that they may be focused on their careers and willing to explore available opportunities to pursue their careers in the corporate world further. However, the figures show that those with master's and doctorate degrees are few among the women workers, only 3 per cent, while 8 per cent did not have any qualifications. These statistics imply that most junior women workers possess the required qualifications to pursue their career development. However, the findings show that women considered qualification attainment to be a significant factor for them to strive hard in their careers to enable them to vie for higher positions in the workplace.
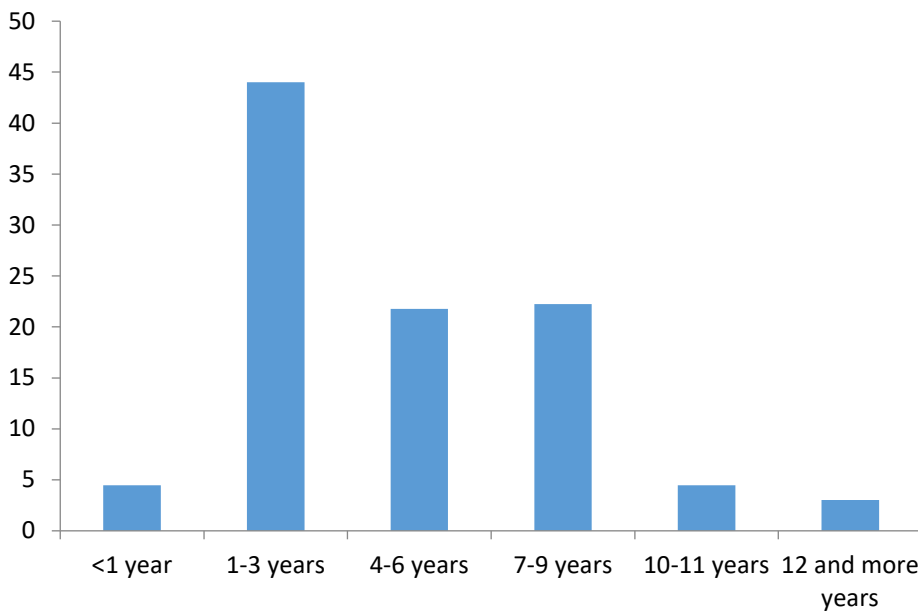

Figure 3: Length of service of the respondents

Figure 3 shows the number and length of years junior women workers have worked in the organization. A large cohort of women, 44 per cent, has worked between one to three years, while those groups of respondents who had worked between seven to nine years and four to six years in the organization both tallied 22 per cent of the total respondents. The figure shows that 5 per cent of the respondents started their careers less than one year ago. Those respondents who had worked the most years in the organization, from ten to eleven years and eleven to twelve years, respectively, numbered 5 per cent and 3 per cent of the total. The reports show that most women are still new in the organization because they joined the company less than four years ago, which means that they still have enough opportunities to build a career for themselves. At the same time, they might be anxious as well to develop their career paths.

However, the findings indicate that these sets of women are likely to have set a career goal for themselves by formulating career plans to achieve their ambition in the corporate environment.

Table 3: Factors influencing the career choices of the respondents

Factors influencing career choices	Frequency	Percentage
Self-generated	83	62.41
Parents	10	7.52
Male colleagues	3	2.26
Friends	8	2.26
Female colleague	9	6.77
Manager	10	7.52
No response	10	7.52
Total	133	100

Table 3 reflects the respondents' answers indicating which factors influenced their career choices. Most of the respondents, 62 per cent of the total, believe that their efforts and deliberations played the most significant role in their career choices. Thirty per cent of the respondents indicated that other people played the biggest role in their career decisions. Of these, 8 per cent indicated managers in the company as an important factor in their career choices, 7 per cent cited female colleagues, and 2 per cent cited male colleagues as major factors in their career choices. Only ten per cent mentioned people outside the current company as influencing their careers, with parents (eight %) being the biggest external factor, followed by friends, who were listed by two per cent of the respondents. Seven point five per cent of the respondents did not respond to the question. This implies that respondents had used their extra personal efforts to pursue a career of their choice, believing that they can only succeed in attaining their career goal if they continue to work hard. However, the respondents believed that some of the people who surrounded them, such as male and female colleagues, parents, and friends, have also assisted on this journey of their career paths.

Table 4: Factors influencing career paths of the respondents

Career path	Frequency	Percentage
Interest in the job	75	56.39
Training on the job	24	18.39
Organisational learning	13	9.77
Experience	17	12.78
Friends	1	0.75
Male colleagues	1	0.75
No response	2	1.50
Total	133	100

In response to the question of the factors that had determined their career paths in the organization, the majority (56% of the respondents) believe they had an interest in the job before joining the organization. Some of them (19% agreed) that training they had on the job was a factor in their career paths. A few (10%) mentioned organizational learning, and 13 per cent alluded to experience gained on the job as an important factor in determining their career paths. Only two per cent (2%) agreed that colleagues and friends contributed to their career paths in the organization. This indicates that internal factors also serve as motivation for the respondents' career paths and thus assisted them in their career development. These comments imply that a variety of wide range patterns such as social capital and human factors determine the career development of women in the corporate environment.

Table 5: Respondents' career satisfaction

Career satisfaction	Frequency	Percentage
Satisfied	103	77.44
Not satisfied	8	6.02
Indifferent	20	15.04
Other	1	0.75
No response	1	0.75
Total	133	100

Table 5 presents the range of career satisfaction respondents experienced in the organization. The respondents showed that they were mostly satisfied with their careers in the company. Seventy-seven per cent believed that they were satisfied with their job, while only a few respondents (6%) thought they were not satisfied with their job. Only one per cent (1%) out of the total respondents was indifferent about their satisfaction with their career. These responses suggest that the organization might have offered the respondents sufficient benefits to be satisfied with their careers because most respondents declared their career satisfaction on the job. Their responses might also indicate satisfaction with the on-job training opportunities.

Table 6: Factors determining respondents' career progress

Factors determining career progress	Frequency	Percentage
Organizational policy	28	21.05
Personal development	30	22.56
Nature of the job	20	15.04
Career plans	14	10.53
Friends	2	1.50
Colleagues	7	5.26
Opportunities to study	6	4.51
No response	26	19.55
Total	133	100

From Table 6, the respondents ascribed their career progress in the organization to their personal development, with 23 per cent of the respondents stating that they achieved their career progress and goals through self-efforts. Some of the respondents (21%) mentioned that the company policy contributed to their carer progress, while 15 per cent maintained that the nature of the job determined their career progress. Only 10 per cent mentioned career planning as a factor for their career development in the communication organization. Some respondents considered other factors such as friends (1%), opportunity to study (5%), and colleagues (4%) as supportive mechanisms for their career growth. Therefore, apart from qualification as an obvious determinant of career growth for women, this finding also reveals some systemic and other institutional problems that may hinder women's growth even if they have attained good qualifications.

Table 7: Relationship between higher qualifications and access to a senior position

Pearson Correlation	Qualification of women	Access to senior position	Interpretation
Qualification of women	1	-.181*	
Sig –(2 tailed)		0.39	Significant
Total	133	131	
Access to senior position	-.181*	1	
Sig-(2 tailed)	0.39		Significant

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed)

Table 7 reveals a relationship between higher qualifications and access to senior management positions. It is significant at R=.0339, showing that higher qualifications or training should aid progress in women's careers in the communication organization. Therefore, the organization must support and encourage women's career development since the majority of them indicate a need for career progress and satisfaction. Based on the literature and argument put forward in this article, higher education represents a critical factor in providing opportunities for women, particularly on the continent of Africa.

Table 8: Factors influencing the lack of career progress

Lack of career progress	Frequency	Percentage
Work environment	1	0.75
Gender (female)	1	0.75
Lack of opportunity for further study	7	5.26

The respondents believed that several factors were responsible for their lack of career progression in the organization, a part of which is the workplace environment. Only a few of

the respondents see these factors as a challenge for their career development, with some of the respondents (5%) still believing that they don't have the opportunity to study further, while one per cent (1%) believed their female gender impeded their career progress. This finding suggests that despite organizational support for career development, some of the respondents still find it difficult to progress in their careers because of the workplace culture and their gender identity. This finding means that even with their qualifications and efforts, the internal organizational structure still affects women's career progress in the corporate environment. Thus, a predictor of access to a senior position is an appropriate qualification or training, as indicated in Table 9.

Table 9: Predictor of Access to senior position

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.181[a]	.033	.025	.333

Predictors; (Constant), Qualification

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article analyzed higher education and its influence on the career development of junior women workers in the communication industry. Firstly, the presence of ambition among the respondents and their choice of career is usually influenced by both internal and external factors. Secondly, the respondents pointed to the importance of continuous learning and training on the job as critical for women to achieve their career goals. Thirdly, the importance of career satisfaction as a factor in women's advancement in their careers was highlighted. The study showed that pursuing career satisfaction might be a key way for women to realize their career ambitions. In addition, higher education was shown to be a tool that women can choose to use, but a supportive work environment was necessary for the corporate sector. Personal development is not about being developed but rather about choosing to create opportunities for advancement. The respondents in this study identified the importance of personal efforts, which assist in creating a road map for achieving success in the corporate world.

Implications for higher education in Africa

Higher education in Africa needs the participation of women for sustainable development purposes (Clark et al. 2022). This study highlights challenges related to women accessing opportunities despite improved participation in higher education systems. In South Africa, the dimensions of these issues are different. There are noticeable changes in terms of access for women to higher education and also at the workplace (De Castro and García-Peñalvo 2022). However, many other African countries are still struggling while some have made quite an

improvement based on their equity policies. However, this study has implications for development in Africa. Development in Africa requires tapping into the full potential that women can offer. Therefore, policies that are superficial and lack protection for women's careers in Africa can be addressed in the curriculum and institutional framework of higher education in Africa.

For instance, higher education training and career development may be necessary to drive career success for women workers, but this is considered limited in the recent study. Therefore, the study contributes to the body of knowledge about the connection between self-generated effort and career development. The findings reinforce the argument for the importance of higher education and formal training in workplaces in Africa to enhance and support workers' careers irrespective of gender and individuality to gain a competitive advantage to succeed in the workplace. Thus, the findings concur with the notion of investment in continuous higher education training opportunities for workers, especially women and thus adopting a strategic prioritized approach to support women who desire to advance to the pinnacle of their careers. In other words, the growing demand in workplaces and organizations today is diverse to promote individual development which thus aligns with the finding argument that women acquired specific skills and knowledge through higher education to help them to drive their career development in the workplace in the continent.

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