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## Present but absent: women in business leadership in South Africa

By Catherine Ndinda<sup>1</sup> and Ufo Okeke-Uzodike<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Women constitute forty six (46) percent of the economically active population in South Africa. Although both South African, African men and women are well represented in the economically active population, questions arise when it comes to their presence and effective representation at higher decision-making levels. Indeed, while African men and White women are present, White men dominate in top management. Through a gender analysis of current data on the labour force, this paper examines women's representation in top decision-making for all employers (government and business) in South Africa. In discussing the trends, the paper highlights gender disparities in the advancement of women into top decision-making positions. The analysis further explores and identifies areas that need redress in bridging the gender divide in top management not only because of employment equity requirements, but also for the good business sense it makes to include women in leadership. The contribution of this paper lies in its identification of the barriers to women's advancement in business leadership and the recommendations for policy and practice both at the micro- (firm) and macro- (national-) levels.

*Keywords:* Women, business leadership, South Africa

### Introduction

South Africa is among the countries that boast having achieved about 45% women representation in political leadership (Potter, 2009). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) that uses the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) to determine the scope and magnitude of gender inequalities South Africa is ranked 9th in the world in terms of political empowerment (WEF, 2010). The gender gap index measures gender-based inequalities in terms of key outcome variables relating to access to resources such as economic opportunities, education, health and political empowerment (WEF, 2010). While South Africa's overall GGGI ranking (12) is better than that of rich countries like USA (ranked 19) its performance in economic participation and opportunity is below average, and is worse than a country like Uganda (overall ranking is 33), which is ranked 42 in the gender gap index for economic participation and opportunity (WEF, 2010). The GGGI ranking of South Africa (at 55) on economic participation and opportunity is a reflection of gender inequality that exists in economic participation. In this paper the South African population is discussed in terms of the apartheid racial classifications of African, Coloured, Indian and White which have continued to be used by both government and business in the post-apartheid period in order to determine the rate of

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social and economic transformation. The term black is used in the employment equity sense to denote African, Coloured and and Indians.

The Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) data indicates that from 2000-2006 the deficit in terms of the professionally qualified women in SA was -6.9% (CEE, 2007). However, a disaggregation of the data in terms of race suggests that, this deficit was caused by the absence of African women at the professional management level; their overall deficit was -13.3% (2000-2006) (CEE, 2007). No deficits were reported among other groups of females and instead there were increases (1.2% Coloureds, 1% Indians, 3.8% White). Such data was not presented in the 2008 -2010 report so further comparative analysis is difficult. In 2007 there was an overall increase of 3.7% in women's representation in top management and this increase was shared by women across the racial divide (CEE, 2008). Reporting on gender in South Africa is complex because the question that always arises is which women, given the entrenched racial inequalities rooted in apartheid policies which discriminated against and segregated South Africans in terms of their race. Whites were the most privileged and Africans most disadvantaged and the effects of the institutionalised apartheid racism persist in the post-apartheid period and manifest not only in terms of incomes and positions held in the workforce but also the level of expertise amongst different groups.

Given the above context, this paper seeks to locate and situate women in corporate decision-making and to assess the implications that the current trends have for policy and practice in general. As such, this paper begins by setting the policy context for understanding women in management in general. It then proceeds to examine the current data on women in management, focusing on the national scenario. Before concluding we explore how different countries have addressed the barriers to women's advancement in management, drawing out the policy options and their implications for practice. This paper contributes to the debates on women in business leadership in Africa and South Africa in particular. While there is an abundance of scholarly and grey literature on women in political leadership in South Africa (Makoro, 2007; Phendla, 2008; Mogadime, Mentz, & Armstrong, 2010), there is a dearth of literature on women's participation in business leadership (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Although the existing literature on women in leadership and business leadership (Msomi, 2006; Moorosi, 2010; Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009) in particular takes a feminist perspective, this paper employs the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in locating women in business leadership in South Africa. The paper argues that to understand the position of women in leadership in South Africa it is important to explore gender and race concurrently because racism and sexism intersect in complex ways to reproduce either the subordination or the privileging of certain groups of women. Redressing women's absence in business leadership needs to be grounded in intersectionality, among other theoretical perspectives, for only then can we fully comprehend the multi-layered forms of domination and seek contextually relevant, dynamic and empowering solutions.

### **Affirmative Action and Gender Equity in South Africa**

Since the transition to democracy in 1994 South Africa has developed a bulwark of legislation all underpinned by the Constitution (1996) that is reputedly among the most progressive in the world (RSA, 1996). Gender equality is enshrined in the South African constitution which, in subsection 9 (1) stipulates that "Everyone is equal before the law

and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law". The Constitution not only enshrines equality but goes further to outlaw discrimination on any grounds imaginable in subsection 9 (3) : "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth". Discrimination by entities or individuals is specifically prohibited in the constitution. In these sub-sections of the Constitution lies the basis for the argument postulated in this paper regarding gender equality and access to opportunities in top management and leadership in South Africa.

The provision for equality in the Constitution is galvanised by a bulwark of sectoral policies which seek to ensure fairness and equality of opportunity for all. However, this paper focuses on labour policies in understanding the current trends in terms of women's representation in top management and leadership positions in the workplace. Policies and legislations such as Employment Equity Act (1997), Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (2003), Basic Conditions of Employment (1997), and the Labour relations Act (1995) have been implemented. Affirmative action is legal in South Africa and it seeks to redress the past injustices wrought by colonialism and apartheid that discriminated against black people (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) and kept them in low wage occupations because of the colour of their skin. Affirmative Action in the workplace is informed by the Employment Equity Act (EEA, 1998). In addition to these policies, the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) was created in the same period to monitor the implementation of affirmative action policies and transformation in the workplace in terms of race, gender and disability.

According to the CEE (2001:6), the EEA 'was introduced against a background of extreme disparities in the distribution of labour market opportunities particularly in terms of race, gender and disability. The CEE notes that 'Most of the disparities in the workplace are a direct legacy of past discriminatory laws, particularly those laws that deliberately excluded black people, women and people with disabilities from key jobs, skills development opportunities and ownership of property. The disparities in this country's labour market are rather extreme and systemic. One of the key indicators of the disparities is labour market segregation particularly in terms of race, gender and disability' (DOL, 2001:6).

Employment equity is not only about ethics but also social justice given the history of institutionalised racism and discrimination against blacks. Apartheid racism and discrimination resulted in many productive people, mainly blacks and women being under-utilised. The passing of the EEA (1998) was meant to curb discriminatory practices based on race and gender in the appointment, promotion and retention of workers.

Under apartheid, racial discrimination pervaded all spheres of life including the workplace. Beyond the apartheid legal framework, White privilege was further institutionalised through their superior education system and the freedom they were accorded in making career choices. Bantu education for Africans was meant to keep them in the lowest and most demeaning, menial jobs in the economy. In employment, Whites got first priority in terms of appointment and promotion to the exclusion of all others. Yet racial discrimination meant that Whites were most privileged and in areas such as the Cape, the Job Reservation Act (1926) meant that Coloureds got priority in employment over Africans. In KwaZulu-Natal Indians also got priority in appointment over Africans.

Although all women were discriminated against relative to men of the same race in the workplace, White women had the choice to either work or not work. Black women did not have the freedom of choice; often, they either worked or their families starved. At the end of apartheid, White women were included in the designated category for prioritisation in terms of affirmative action due to their underrepresentation in the formal work environment. In essence then, the purpose of Employment Equity Act (1998) is to ensure that equity in the workplace is achieved through a range of measures such as 'a) promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and b) implementing affirmative action measures to redress disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce'. Herein, lies the crux of the discussion on women's status in the South Africa workforce.

Section 15 of the EEA (1998) states that 'Affirmative Action measures are measures designed to ensure that suitably qualified people from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce of a designated employer'. The Employment Equity Act applies to all employers except the National Defence Force, National Intelligence Agency and the South Africa Secret Service. In implementing affirmative action, the EEA not only addresses the issue of equal opportunities but also stipulates that employers must be proactive in removing the barriers that stand in the way of designated groups accessing equal opportunities. Noting that it is not sufficient to simply appoint designated groups such as women, the policy goes further to note that employers must take measures to ensure the retention of those appointed from designated groups.

While the intentions of the EEA policy are indeed noble and in support of the advancement of previously disadvantaged groups particularly women, the provisions of the Act are watered down by the inclusion of a clause in section 15 (3) 'The measures referred to in sub-section (2) ( d) include preferential treatment and numerical goals but **exclude quotas**. Sub-section (2)(d) stipulates that subject to subsection (3), measures [ should be put in place] to (i) ensure the equitable representation of suitably qualified people from designated groups in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce; and (ii) retain and develop people from designated groups and to implement appropriate training measures, in terms of an Act of Parliament'. Generally the EEA is useful as a tool for monitoring the transformation of the workplace in terms of race, gender and disability. The clause regarding the non-admissibility of quotas to ensure greater representation of the designated groups defeats the purpose of the EEA.

Another piece of legislation useful in understanding the position of women in the workplace is the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA, 1997). The purpose of the BCEA is "to advance economic development and social justice by fulfilling the primary objects... a) to give effect to and regulate the right to fair labour practices....". The BCEA, like the LRA, applies to all employees and employers except members of the National Defence Force, the National Intelligence Agency and the South African Secret Service and volunteers working for charitable organisations. The BCEA covers important aspects of work such as the regulation of working time, leave, employment and remuneration, termination of employment and variation of basic conditions of employment. All these aspects are supportive in terms of ensuring a conducive working environment. Employees are protected against discrimination and their rights are also

protected. Yet the monitoring and enforcement of the conditions laid out in the BCEA are debatable as these depend on complaints lodged by workers against employers. Employers can contravene the conditions of employment for as long as no one lodges a case against them.

One of the most useful legislations in terms of monitoring gender transformation is the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE, 2003) legislation. Generally the BBBEE aims to achieve the constitutional rights to equality and increase the participation of Black people in the South African economy, promote growth, job creation and equitable distribution of income. The policy also aims to promote the economic unity, equal opportunity and access to government services. The BBBEE seeks to ensure the meaningful participation of black people in the South African economy. Section 1 of the BBBEE Act specifically states that its focus is not only on ownership of business enterprises but also on management by including among its objectives, "achieving a substantial change in the racial composition of ownership and management structures and in the skilled occupations of existing and new enterprises". Key among the objectives in section 1 of the BBBEE legislation is "increasing the extent to which black women own and manage existing and new enterprises, and increasing their access to economic activities, infrastructure, and skills training". Embedded in the BBBEE legislation is the concept of intersectionality that recognises that gender and race combine in complex ways to socially construct the marginalisation of Black women. In addition to the enabling legislating, a statutory body, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) was created in 1996 to monitor the rate of gender transformation in South Africa (RSA, 1996). While the performance of the CGE in meeting its mandate of monitoring the pace of gender transformation is subject to debate, the work of the department of labour in monitoring gender and employment seems to have generated much interest. The Department of Labour has consistently released annual data on the distribution of workers across different occupational categories in terms of race and gender.

The annual release of the labour statistics is often followed by a flurry of debates ranging from those who agree with the statistics to those who disagree with everything reported (SRI, 2011). As such, debate rages, the impact of almost 300 years of racial discrimination persists and pervades every aspect of South African life. In particular, racial dimension of gender discrimination in South Africa cannot be ignored for to do so would be to deny that White privilege was institutionalised in South Africa until 1994. This paper discusses the findings of the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) (CEE, 2010)<sup>3</sup> on the workforce profile for all employers (government and business) in terms of race and gender. The paper focuses on business leadership on three levels: top management, senior management and the level of professionally qualified, experienced specialists, mid-management. The CEE is a statutory organisation established in terms of the EEA to advise the minister of Labour on the implementation of the EEA with regard to the Codes of Good Practice issued in terms of section 54 of the EEA. The CEE is also mandated to advise the Minister of Labour on policy and any other matters concerning the EEA (DOL, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> This article was written before the release of the 2011 CEE Report. We however note that the under-representation of women noted in the 2010 report persists in the 2011 report.

### Women in Top-Management in South Africa for all employers

Transformation in the workplace, in terms of race and gender, has since the transition to democracy become an area of interest in determining the success in dismantling the apartheid structures of oppression. The demographic profile of the country suggests that Africans comprise the majority followed by Whites (see table 1).

**Table 1: Employment by Race and Gender**

	Black (percent) %		Coloured (percent) (%)		Indian/Asian (percent) %		White (percent) %	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Employed	41	28	55	43	65	40	73	59
Unemployed	20	24	15	16	9	9	3	4
Not economically active	34	45	24	38	23	48	19	33
Unspecified	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Institutions	2	1	3	1	1	1	3	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: ([http://www.statsonline.gov.za/news\\_archive/12March2008\\_1.asp](http://www.statsonline.gov.za/news_archive/12March2008_1.asp))

An underlying, yet often unstated, assumption held in most societies is that the national demographics should be reflected in the population of the economically active population but given the abnormal past that South Africa has emerged from, this assumption does not hold true. The scenario is different as shown in the Table on the economically active population (Table 2).

**Table 2: Percentage of the economically active population by Race and Gender**

Race	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
African	39.2	34.2	73.4
Coloured	6.1	5.2	11.3
Indian	1.9	1.1	3
White	6.7	5.5	12.2
Total	54	46	100

Source: CEE 2010. *The 10th Annual Report*. Pretoria: Department of Labour

A gender analysis of the South African workforce (Table 3) points to the dominance of White men in top management. The proportion of White men in top management is 3.8 times more than that of African men in the same position. African women are almost absent in top management as they comprise a mere 6.1% compared to White women (9.3%).

**Table 3: Top management by Race and Gender**

Race	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
African	6.1	0.1	6.2
Coloured	0.1	0.1	0.2
Indian	0.1	0.1	0.2
White	23.5	15.6	39.1
Total	30.8	16.0	46.8

African	14.2	6.1	20.3
Coloured	3.7	1.3	5
Indian	5.6	1.3	6.9
White	54.5	9.3	63.8
Foreign	3.5	0.4	4.0
Total	81.5	18.4	100

Source: CEE 2010. *The 10th Annual Report*. Pretoria: Department of Labour

White men and women dominate in senior management (Table 4). The proportion of White women in senior positions is double that of African women who comprise a mere 6.5% in senior management. The percentage of White men is three times higher than that of African men and seven times higher than that of African women.

**Table 4: Senior Management Category by Race & Gender for all Employers**

Race	Male(%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
African	13.5	6.5	20
Coloured	4.3	2.1	6.4
Indian	6.6	2.5	9.1
White	46.3	15.6	61.9
Foreign	2.1	0.5	3.6
Total	72.8	27.2	100

Source: CEE 2010. *The 10th Annual Report*. Pretoria: Department of Labour

At the professional level White men dominate but there is an almost equal distribution of African men, White women and African women. It is however notable that generally in each category of management from professional management to the top, the proportion of men is higher relative to that of women of the same race. Whites may dominate in top management, but there are more White men than women. Similarly, there might be few African men compared to White men in top management, but the percentage of African males is much higher than that of African females. Clearly then, strategies aimed at fast-tracking the advancement of women into senior and top management must bear in mind the diversity of women. The idea is to achieve proportional representation.

#### **Professionally Qualified, experienced specialists, mid-management**

In the category of professionally qualified, experienced specialists in middle management, the gap has not only narrowed between White males and African men but also between men and women generally across all the racial categories. Gender sensitive policies appear to be comparatively more relevant at this level as is evident in the minimal variance (0.5%) between African men and White women in middle management positions. The narrow gap between White women and African women is represented by the 0.3% variance in middle management. However, the variance between the proportion of African men in middle management and White women is minimal (0.8%). The gap between the representation of White women and African women is narrowing as shown by the 0.5% variance between the two social categories. African men, White women and

African women are almost at par in the professional category. Although present and growing quickly at the professional, specialist level, African women remain largely absent (albeit growing) in the senior and top management levels. This points clearly not only to the continued presence of a glass ceiling but also the relevance of race as a barrier to women's advancement in business leadership. The data points to the malleability of the glass ceiling; some change is occurring albeit slowly. The legal instruments put in place for gender transformation are beginning to have effect. How then do we begin to understand the how race and gender intersect to determine African women's position in business leadership? This question is addressed in the discussion section with the concept of the glass escalator to explicate how gender might explain where women are located within business leadership. Yet alluding to gender alone does not fully account for the apparent meteoric rise of White women and the continued slow rise and sometimes stagnancy of African women in business leadership. The notion of intersectionality becomes useful in explaining how gender and race interact to construct the location of Black women in general and African women in particular, in business leadership in South Africa.

**Table 5: Professionally qualified specialists (mid-management) category by Race & Gender**

Race	Male(%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
African	16.8	16	32.8
Coloured	6.3	7.2	13.5
Indian	5	3.1	8.1
White	27.4	16.3	43.7
Foreign	1.3	0.5	1.8
Total	56.8	43.1	100

*Source: CEE 2010. The 10th Annual Report. Pretoria: Department of Labour*

### Discussion

Although present at the professional, specialist level, African women remain largely absent in the senior and top management levels where White women have successfully found their place. This scenario then presents the presence of a glass ceiling for Black women in general and African women, in particular, and a glass escalator for White women (Williams, 1992). The presence of a glass ceiling needs to be broken for African women to advance to senior and top management in numbers proportional to their representation at the professional and skilled technical levels. The policy framework has largely contributed to the presence of African women in business leadership and indeed they are almost at par with White women at level of mid-management. Yet African women are stuck in mid-management hence the notion of the glass ceiling bearing hard on them. The data seems to suggest that race and gender interact in a complex way to determine African women's position in employment and it appears that beyond a certain level, invisible barriers exist which constrain their advancement. The concept of intersectionality, in feminist theory which, deconstructs how race and gender interact to determine Black women's employment outcomes, seems best to account for African women's concentration in the professional mid-management. Writing about race and rape Crenshaw postulates that race and gender interact in complex ways to make the

experiences of White women qualitatively different from those of women of colour (Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour*, 1991). Similarly, race and gender in South African interact in complex ways to make the experiences of White women qualitatively different from those of African women in the workplace. Such difference is reflected in the rate of advancement of both groups of women in business leadership. The large percentage of African women at the professional and specialist category provides a pool from which they can be trained, appointed and promoted to take up positions in senior management.

African women comprise 34.2 percent of the economically active population and that implies that the population of economically active African women is five times more than that of White men, 6.2 times more than Coloured women and 31 times more than Indian women. This numerical dominance of African women in the labour force has not translated into their representation in leadership.

The representation of White women in top management (15.6 percent) is higher than that of African women and at senior management the percentage of White women is more than double that of African women (6.5 percent) and more than all black women combined (11 percent). Yet the representation of white women at the professional/specialist level is only 0.3 percent higher than that of African women (16 percent), and in fact lower than all black women combined (26.3 percent). Given that all black women comprise 40.5 percent of all the economically active population, they are grossly under-represented in leadership.

The glaring absence of Black women in top and senior management positions and their abundant representation in the professional category points a a number of scenarios. First is that the critical mass of black women that occupy the professional category faces significant barriers in advancing to senior management and a harder glass ceiling in advancing to top management. Among black women as a group it the proportion of Indian women in top management (1.3 percent) women is high compared to their economically active population (1.1 percent). The percentage of coloured women in top management positions is the same as that of Indian women but lower than their proportion (5.2 percent) of the economically active population. The percentage of African women in top management positions (6.1 percent) is grossly below their economically active population (34.2 percent). How then do we begin to understand the glass ceiling that continues to bear hard on African women than other groups of women?

A number of explanations have been advanced for male dominance in top management and leadership positions. Ng & Wiesner (2007:179) posit that the 'social dominance perspective promotes inequality and legitimizes discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic prejudice, cultural elitism, meritocracy, and other social systems'. The authors (Ng & Wiesner, 2007) argue that men appear to enjoy a 'structural advantage' that ensures that they occupy top positions even when they enter into female-dominated occupations, such as nursing and teaching. This 'structural advantage' is often lost in when employment equity in terms of gender is enforced. In the South African context, we argue that men regardless of race continue to enjoy the structural advantage. With the introduction of employment equity which prioritises Blacks (Africans, Coloureds and Indians), White women and people with disabilities, White women appear to be having a "structural advantage" over black women in general; they dominate in top (9.3 percent) and senior management positions (15.6 percent).

The concept of the glass escalator was coined by Williams (1992). In a study examining men's underrepresentation in predominantly female occupations, Williams (1992) explored issues around discrimination in hiring, the working environment with regard to supervisors and colleagues and discrimination from outsiders among 76 men using in-depth interviews. Williams (1992) found that, contrary to the discrimination that women face in male dominated occupations, there was a preference for men who entered female dominated occupations such as nursing, teaching in junior high school, librarian work and psychotherapy. The author postulates that 'Many of the men perceived their token status as males in predominantly female occupations as an advantage in hiring and promotions' (Williams, 1992:256). The men in female dominated occupations found themselves being 'tracked' to take up areas of specialisation considered more legitimate for men such as administration and planning. 'This tracking may bar men from the most female-identified specialities within the professions. But men are effectively being "kicked upstairs" in the process. Those specialties considered more legitimate practice areas for men also tend to be the most prestigious, better paying ones' (Williams, 1992: 256). The analyst further posits that whereas women might face the 'glass ceiling' in male-dominated occupations in their attempt to advance to top positions, men in female-dominated occupations 'seem to encounter a "glass escalator". Often despite their intentions, they face invisible pressures to move up in their professions. As if on a moving escalator, they must work to stay in place' (Williams, 1992: 256).

The glass escalator concept is useful in understanding the position of women in top and senior management positions in South Africa. With the enactment of the EEA, employers appear to have tracked White women into top and senior management positions to meet their EEA targets. The underrepresentation of Black women, and more specifically African women, in top and senior management suggests that they face significant barriers compared to women of other groups. In 2001 the first CEE report noted that "unfair discriminatory practices in the workplace have led to a substantial proportion of the productive population being under-utilised...Amongst these majority are black females" (CEE, 2001:6). The comment of the CEE holds true even in 2011, a decade later. Obviously the failure of the South African organisations to tap meaningfully into the pool of qualified black women represents a lost opportunity for growth and development of the country. Now in 2011, the continued absence of black, specifically African women from top management suggests that significant barriers to their advancement into top management do exist.

In South Africa the barriers to women's advancement to top management are historical, structural and social (Ndinda & Uzodike, 2008; Msomi, 2006). During apartheid business leadership was predominantly White male-dominated and there was no representation of Black women in the whole apartheid system hence black women are considered to have joined the corporate world only recently (Msomi, 2006). Culture and tradition also explain the absence of black women from top leadership (Ndinda, 2009). In a lot of African cultures women are considered subordinate to men and this attitude extends to the corporate world. The idea of a leader is generally that of a man and not a woman. Prejudice and deep-rooted sexism in the society has meant that boards do not actively seek out women to become board members. There is also a lack of activism among the few women on boards in that they have not been pro-active in encouraging fellow women to join boards (Msomi, 2006). For a long time South African women were

discriminated against in the workplace. However racial discrimination under apartheid meant that women were trained in line with the education system designed for their race. African women studying through "Bantu education" could only hope to become either doctors, nurses or teachers in the public sector. Those who did not get into these positions ended up as domestic workers or informal sector traders (Ndinda & Uzodike, 2008).

Whereas the human capital theory might be used to explicate the advancement of White women into leadership positions, this does not sufficiently account for their overrepresentation as African women are almost at par with White women at the professional, specialist level where skill is required. This paper argues that although the human capital endowment of African women might place them at the professional category based on their specialisation, qualifications and experience, they remain stuck at this level. Beyond the professional level there is a glass ceiling that bears hard on African women and the invisible barriers to their advancement may be accounted for by a combination of sexism and racism. Ndinda & Uzodike (2008) have argued that the position of White and African women can be explained both in terms of the human capital endowment and social capital endowment perspectives. The human capital endowment of African women is able to take them only up to the professional category level where their skills are required just as White women. However, the connection of White Women to a historically hegemonic group (White men) has helped them overcome barriers to their career advancement (Ndinda & Uzodike, 2008; Msomi, 2006). The human and social capital endowment of White women has acted as a glass escalator and propelled them to top management faster than other groups of women. African women on the other hand have advanced by virtue of their human capital endowment but their connection to an historically repressed and marginalized group - African men - has meant that race has remained a barrier to their advancement. The lack of social capital endowment has meant that African women face the racist and sexist barriers in their advancement to top and senior management levels.

The 'old boys club' attitude may explain the advancement of black men into top business leadership (Msomi, 2006). The situation of African women is complex as their social networks consist of fellow black men and women who are also struggling to advance. When positions of leadership arise, the White men who control power and influence, are more likely (due to gender bias) to think about black men as deserving of leadership positions than black women. In this way African women disappear or are marginally factored into consideration for of top leadership positions (Ndinda & Uzodike, 2008).

In 2001, the first report of the CEE noted that 'unfair discriminatory practices in the workplace have led to a substantial proportion of the productive population being under-utilised' (DOL, 2001:6). Amongst these majority are black females and people with disabilities. Ndinda (2009) identifies cultural factors as barriers to women's advancement into top leadership of organisations involved in housing development. The author notes that 'while culture has a role to play in structuring social relations and institutions, the underlying gender ideology in the specific culture explains the subordination of women and men's dominance in community and regional governance' (Ndinda 2009:325). Writing about South Africa Msomi (2006) notes that the barriers to women's representation on company boards include racism, sexism, subversion and deliberate misinterpretation of the EEA to suit the employers' prejudices, the apartheid legacy that

meant corporate leadership comprised of White males, the limited pool of qualified and experienced black women; the fact that black women started entering the corporate world late (from 1994) and therefore have less experience, the low retention rate of women and the patriarchal mentality of men who view, dismiss and label brilliant, assertive women as arrogant among others.

The barriers to women's advancement in the UK include the inflexibility of senior management roles, women's self-selecting out of positions, the greater visibility of men and the role of informal networks in their appointment to leadership, the general perception about men as leaders and the accompanying perception about women in management and leadership as 'other' and 'high-risk' (ILM, 2011). 'The low proportion of women to men in leadership positions in UK business is testament to the fact that women in the UK face significant barriers to progressing to the very top of decision-making structures. Formal processes for [the appointment of] directors can teeter between casual to non-existent where "shoulder-tapping" and peer referral are endemic in stark contrast to the rigorous process laid down for the appointment of CEOs' (Lewis & Rake, 2008:3). Msomi's (2006) study on South Africa highlights the complexity with regard to board appointments. While advertising board positions is one way of ensuring greater inclusivity in terms of gender and also attracting the right skills, participants in the study expresses an aversion to advertising arguing that if White males had been invited to boards why should others' (black and female) be interviewed for the same positions? In other words, the standards used to appoint board members must be uniform across the racial and gender divide. Each society's history of race and gender discrimination come into view when explicating women's position in business leadership. Just as women's marginalisation in business leadership in the UK is rooted in its history as a patriarchal society, the entrenched marginalisation of women in business leadership in South Africa is rooted in its apartheid history of race and gender discrimination.

### **Addressing barriers to the advancement of Women to top leadership**

According to the first CEE report (2001:6), 'Employment equity is, therefore not only a moral or human rights imperative but also a precondition for this country's achievement and maintenance of global competitiveness', a view widely acknowledged by Gender and Development specialists as critical to any country's development (Visvanathan, Duggan, Nisonoff, & Wieggersma, 1998). Addressing barriers to the advancement of women to top leadership positions in South Africa raises a range of issues and debates due to the complexity of the South African Society. As already noted, the question of women's representation in top management must always be followed by another crucial query: which women? This is not just because of racial diversity of South African society; rather, it is primarily because of the historical context or legacy of severe race-based discriminatory policies of past White-dominated governments which systematically stripped citizenship rights and opportunities from Black communities while empowering Whites. Although post-apartheid government equity policies have sought to redress those race-based legacies and the gender divides, the effort has also revealed complexities associated with apartheid's patriarchal past, which (among other things) provided differential education opportunities to different race groups. Employment equity policies have benefited the designated groups but the outcome has been unequal. Black women appear least impacted by affirmative action enacted through

EEA. Existing literature (Msomi, 2006) suggests that Black women are often the last choice of equity candidates a fact supported by the data in this paper (Table 3). Just as White women progressed better than other people of colour as a result of affirmative action in the US, the same can be said about South Africa where 'white women have progressed better in executive management' (Msomi 2006:102). Research suggests that 'the BEE Act which was introduced almost five years after the Employment Act, was a mechanism to stem the imbalance that was being created with companies favouring the White female over the black female in leadership positions' (Msomi 2006:99). The rise of White women to top management is largely attributed to the EEA in South Africa; yet even the introduction of BBEE has not increased African women's representation in senior and top management in South Africa.

A question that arises is whether it is legal or constitutional to differentiate between members groups generally referred to as black given that they all experienced racial discrimination under apartheid. Msomi (2006:99) notes that 'in the past disadvantage-ness among women was tiered with African women being at the bottom of the rung' (Msomi 2006:99). Naff & Dupper (2009:179) observe that 'court judgments relating to affirmative action in South Africa have had to grapple with the issue of whether it is acceptable to classify members of the designated groups into categories vis - a-vis each other?'. The analysts (Naff & Dupper, 2009) postulate that, in the past, lower courts took decisions and acknowledged that Africans were more disadvantaged relative to Indians particularly with regard to education. When translated into the work place, such decisions, imply that in addition to the technical requirements for a position, gender and race must be taken into account when appointing and promoting women in South Africa. In feminist politics and theory the interaction of gender, race and class in influencing women's advancement and development outcomes has been conceptualised in terms of the notion of intersectionality, a term 'coined and substantiated' by Kimberlè Crenshaw (Lutz, Vivar, & Supik, 2011, p. 2). Intersectionality denotes 'the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences' (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244).

The concept of intersectionality 'addresses the most central theoretical normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely the acknowledgement of differences among women. This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions' (Davis, 2011, p. 45). Intersectionality theorists (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 2011; Ferree, 2011) argue that not to include intersections of gender, race and class neglects and further discriminates against groups seeking redress. Crenshaw in particular postulates that since women of colour experience racism differently from Black men and that women of colour also experience sexism differently from White women a focus on antiracism and feminism without exploring how these intersect in the lives of women is inadequate in addressing the challenges Black women face on society (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991, p1252) thus argues 'The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women'. Strategies that use an either or approach to addressing the subordination of Black women are in themselves defeatist and disempowering to the very women that they seek to empower. Crenshaw

(1991) like other theorists (Brah & Phoenix, 2004) seems to suggest that gender, race and class intersections have to be addressed concurrently if we are to arrive at a political discourse that empowers Black women in general.

To bring about greater equity and representativity both in terms of gender, South Africa has at least two options. First it can maintain the status quo by leaving it to businesses to implement their own transformation agenda. Obviously this strategy has potential pitfalls as it is likely to lead to social tensions as labour and political parties weigh into the issues. Alternatively, the South African government can take radical measures to ensure that top management levels in business reflect the gender diversity of the country. So far some of the measures that firms have used to get women into company boards include using executive search firms, advertising, using the institute of directors to source women, relying on reputation, word-of-mouth and referrals through shareholders and investors (Msomi, 2006). Adapting an exclusively antiracist or feminist agenda in addressing the issue of women in business leadership essentially precludes the ways in which race and gender play out in the lives of Black women, and African women in particular. Research suggests that when left to its own devices, business is often very slow to transform (Davies, 2011). The UK is a case in point. In the UK women comprise a paltry 12.5% of the members of company boards of the 100 FTSE listed companies and this is an increase from 9.4% in 2004 (Davies, 2011). At this rate, it is estimated that it will take another 70 years to achieve 40% women's representation in company boards in the UK. Reports in 2011 suggest that if left to business, to implement gender equity in corporate boards, it may take another 50 years to achieve 40% women's representation in the European Union (EU) (Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, 2011).

Many countries have adopted the quota system to increase women's representation in political leadership (Krook, 2008; WEF, 2008; Tripp & Kang, 2008) but few have done the same in business (Davies, 2011; Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, 2011). Norway was the first country to apply quotas in increase gender representativeness in business leadership (Sihvola, 2011; Huse, 2011) and countries such as France, Spain and the Netherlands have followed suit (Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, 2011).

When the decree on quotas was made in 2002, women's representation in Norwegian company boards was a mere 6% but this rose to 44.2% by 2008 (Lewis & Rake, 2008). The analysts note that 'Nothing short of taking a sledgehammer to the glass ceiling could have led to such a revolution in Norwegian leadership. Indeed shock tactics employed by conservative Minister, Ansgar Gabrielsen in 2002 were brusque but effective. Gabrielsen went public with the introduction of a 40% quota for women on publicly listed boards before consulting with cabinet' (Lewis & Rake, 2008:6). Without the requirement that boards comprise 40% women in Norway it is doubtful that women's representation in business leadership would be that visible. In the USA where quotas are not policy the picture is very clear; women comprise less than 3 percent of corporate officers and make up less than 16 percent of board members in the Fortune 500 companies in America (Sihvola, 2011).

Some analysts have argued that quotas do not necessarily translate into substantive representation and countries such as the United States and UK have left the matter of women's representation to business. The approach of the UK as postulated by Lord Davies (2011) is that "Government must reserve the right to introduce more prescriptive alternatives if the recommended business-led approach does not achieve

significant change" (Davies, 2011). The USA too has resisted the idea of imposing quotas to increase women's representation on boards (Sihvola, 2011). The argument advanced for such resistance is that quotas create an uneven playing field and that government should not interfere in the operation of business. Essentially a neo-liberal, *laissez faire* approach is preferred in the US and therefore the imposition of quotas is viewed as government interference with business and the markets. Other arguments postulate that the imposition of corporate quotas would unfairly advantage women just because of their gender, considering that there are more men than women in USA qualified in business management (Sihvola, 2011). The resistance to quotas overlooks the fact that the playing field for women in the labour market has always been uneven and unfair. It ignores the benefits of a more representative and diverse decision-making structure. Yet, the resistance to corporate quotas is often not accompanied by more viable alternatives for increasing women's representation in the corporate leadership hierarchy.

Feminists too have critiqued quotas but for different reasons; they argue that these have often been manipulated to meet political goals rather than the feminist goal of empowering women (Krook, 2008; Tripp & Kang, 2008). Krook (2008) argues that quotas are often used to appoint women who fail to challenge the status quo. While the use of quotas may appeal to feminists because of their concern in improving the lives of women, Krook (2008) argues that in politics, 'it is crucial to acknowledge that the adoption of quotas does not stem from principled concerns to empower women...Rather most quota policies are the result of combined normative and pragmatic motivations, pursued by varied but multiple groups of actors who support reform for various and often conflicting reasons' (Krook, 2008:355).

Groups from opposing ideological positions support gender quotas in business but for different reasons. While neo-liberals may advocate the use of quotas because it bolsters economic efficiency and contributes to social and economic development, conservatives promote the use of quotas because it helps them to appoint non-feminist women who do not challenge the dominant patriarchal paradigm in management. Feminists on the other hand advocate quotas as these contribute to the the critical mass of women necessary for bringing about transformation (Tripp & Kang, 2008). Although the resistance to corporate quotas remains strong, there is a general acknowledgement that the inclusion of women in the top decision-making makes business sense (Davies, 2011; Sihvola, 2011; Lewis & Rake, 2008; Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, 2011). Various analyses (Davies, 2011; Lewis & Rake, 2008; GEO, 2010; (McKinsey & Company, 2007) suggest that increasing women's representation in management helps organisations understand better their target market and is an asset for the corporate image when customers, shareholders and employees can identify with the top management. Greater representativity helps to tap into the existing pool of talent for the benefit of the organisation. Gender diversity enriches organisations when views are drawn from a range of backgrounds and experiences than when these reflect the dominant patriarchal worldview. A number of studies point to the positive correlation between gender diversity and improved performance by firms (Lewis & Rake, 2008; McKinsey & Company, 2007).

South Africa has since 1994 used the quota system to increase women's representation in political leadership but not in business. This paper argues that the quota system is required to increase women's representation in top and senior management. The

goal is not just to attain descriptive representation but also substantive representation through appointing a critical mass of women at executive management levels to ensure that they are appointable onto company boards. There are a few who are in boards and these few appear in various other boards and are considered to fulfil women's representation imperatives. The trend whereby the same women appear in numerous boards, is in this article referred to "spotlight recycling". The phenomenon of women board members being recycled over a number of firms reflects the reluctance of companies to move beyond a clique of known and connected women. The involvement of the same women in so many boards also raises questions about the level of descriptive and substantive representation of women in company boards. Given the absence of African women from the senior management level onwards, one may argue that women's representation at the board level is likely to be very low and absent in many cases.

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to assess women's representation in senior and top management in South African firms. Post-apartheid policies are very clear that gender representativeness is a necessary prerequisite in achieving equality, fairness and social justice, given the history of gender and racial discrimination and segregation from which SA emerged in 1994. As such the paper has examined the South African policy context which is supportive of gender representation in leadership. Affirmative action is acknowledged as a necessary step in bringing about transformation in all sectors of the South African economy and this principle was concretised in the EEA (1998) and later in the BBEE (2003). Women are represented in top leadership but that too has raised more complexities; women are present in business leadership but some remain either absent or grossly under represented. A theoretical understanding of the notion intersectionality is a starting point in correcting the anomalies observed in the data on women in business leadership; gender and race in South Africa have to constantly be interrogated until business leadership is reflective of the national demographics.

International experience suggests that women's representation in business leadership has been achieved through quotas. South Africa is among the countries that have successfully used quotas in to achieve gender equity in political representation yet the same instrument has not been applied in business and other domains. As in politics, the quota system can be applied to achieve gender equity in business. Intervention policies and strategies at the macro - and micro-level must ensure the proportional representation of women in business leadership. This would not only achieve descriptive representation but also lead to substantive representation of women in business. Increased representation of women would not only enrich the organizational culture but also enrich businesses with a broader spectrum of ideas for greater efficiency and performance and contribute to the feminist goal of women's empowerment. In practice the measures aimed at increasing women's representation must also ask the difficult and uncomfortable question: which women?

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