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Gendered narratives Relating to Women in The Information Technology Department of a South African Organisation

By Errolyn Long¹

Abstract

In South Africa, there is an underrepresentation of women in senior management positions and industries requiring “masculine”-typed duties. The study aimed to explore the gendered narratives relating to women in the Information Technology (IT) Department of a South African organisation using a feminist interpretivist framework. A qualitative design informed by feminist methodology and narrative inquiry outlined by Gilligan et al. (2003) was used for this study. Two females and four male participants participated in the study and data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews. The Gilligan et al. (2003) approach of data analysis was used (Listening Guide). The listening guide assisted in uncovering positive and negative voices as participants spoke about their work experiences. The different voices represented in the organisation ranged from frustration, blame, resentment, silence and optimism. All of these voices represent the types of gendered narratives in the workplace of the participants. The relationships that exist among the voices are work, family and career advancement. The paper highlights that there is an expectation to perform according to the gendered script of men performing masculine tasks and women performing feminine tasks. There is a tendency to view women in the organisation as the mothers of the organisation, which reinforces the gendered script. Women who do not conform to this script may encounter social sanctions in the workplace. Gender roles should not be seen as binary in the workplace but as different and welcome versions of it. Furthermore, the current policies in the workplace are meant to bring transformation (more women, specifically of colour), but instead, there is more frustration and resentment as these policies do not emphasise the skills and merit for employment and are used as window-dressing. The paper concludes that policies that promote diversity and inclusivity are not effective if the organisational culture does not change.

Keywords: Information technology, Male-dominated, Masculine, Narratives, South Africa, Women, Workplace policies

Introduction

In 2015, South Africa together with other countries and stakeholders joined the United Nations (UN) in adopting the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). The 2030 Agenda consists of 17 Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) that are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and

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prosperity. Goal five of the 17 SDGs is aimed at addressing gender inequalities that occur in all spheres of life (Dlamini, 2018). Thus, the representation of women in the workplace and in leadership positions has become a priority in South Africa. This priority in promoting gender equality is also reflected in Act 108 of the South African Constitution (1996). Despite this legislative commitment, male-dominated industries such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) remain at the forefront in the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Funk & Parker, 2018; McGee & Bentley, 2017; Moletsane & Reddy, 2011). This paper focuses on the Information Technology (hereafter IT) field. The continuous view of IT as a male-dominated industry socially shapes technology as inherently masculine (Brimacombe & Skuse, 2013; Pretorius et al., 2015). Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to explore the gendered narratives that exist in the IT Department of a South African organisation. This paper offers insight into how narratives regarding women in the organisation shape the women's identities and how this potentially influences their underrepresentation in the IT industry.

Organisational culture and gendered roles

Greenberg (2011) states that organisational culture is a cognitive framework consisting of a shared set of underlying assumptions that involve attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms, written and unwritten rules followed by employees. These shared underlying assumptions have been developed over time and normalised by the employees. Thus, an organisation that is male-dominated consists of senior leadership primarily made up of males, a situation which potentially influences the strategies and tools of Human Resources (HR) as well as the organisational culture (Bierema, 2009; Brimacombe & Skuse, 2013; Pretorius et al., 2015). Consequently, the organisational culture may gravitate towards male chauvinism which privileges behaviours and actions typically associated with the male gender. Although male-dominated organisations may vary in culture, there is a tendency to benchmark women's contributions in the workplace against a work ethic that is male-oriented (Billing, 2011).

Traditionally, women's roles have typically been associated with and confined to the domestic sphere which has often been seen as having a negative influence on the performance of an employee's job satisfaction and production (Moalusi & Jones, 2019; Sayce & Acker, 2012). The prevalent and layman, yet toxic beliefs about gender difference may shape the messages and information women are exposed to in the organisation (Sayce & Acker, 2012), which may lead to them experiencing the phenomenon called the 'glass ceiling'. According to Kiaye and Singh (2013), the 'glass ceiling' is a situation women encounter whereby there are barriers that hinder them from advancing into senior positions. For example, women have to balance between work and family, an everyday reality that prevents them from breaking through the glass ceiling (Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016; Latchanah & Singh 2016). Also, due to family responsibilities, women are excluded from networks – they can hardly socialise after hours in places like bars, golf courses or other places that allow for networking. The informal networking mainly consists of males and is referred to as the 'old boys club' (Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2012). Working fathers do not encounter uncertainty regarding career advancement because they are seldom negatively sanctioned if they spend little time with their children and are only expected to be active parents if their jobs allow it (Harris & Morgan, 1991). The same cannot be said about women who are traditionally and culturally expected to devote their quality time to the domestic sphere.

However, mothers are no longer seen as the primary caregivers to children; more fathers are increasingly undertaking that role (Gartzia, Sánchez-Vidal & Cegarra-Leiva, 2018).

The gendering of family-friendly HR policies

Family-friendly policies such as maternity and paternity leave are supposed to remedy the ills of allocation of roles along the lines of gender. This has not been the case. These policies prove to be instruments of perpetuating the division of labour on the basis of gender. The policies target seems to only recognise females as needing consideration for their caretaker role in the family while men retain the ‘breadwinner’ title, which excludes men from partaking from the provisions of these policies (Burnett et al., 2013; Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, 2013).

Organisations that continue to frame fathers as breadwinners and ignore their paternal role continue to feed into social attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate patriarchy (Burnett et al., 2013; Gartzia, Sánchez-Vidal & Cegarra-Leiva, 2018). These beliefs and attitudes constitute part of the male-dominated organisational culture. Thus, the organisational culture continues to operate as a site that accommodates women without changing the structures that lock men and women’s bodies into traditional roles of masculinity and femininity (Adewale & Anthonia, 2013).

The role of affirmative action policies in the South African workplace

Since the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, there has been a shift in some legislation in the promotion of race and gender in the workplace and leadership positions. Examples of legislative changes include but are not limited to: the Public Service Act of 1994, the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service, 1995; Employment Equity Act, 1998; the Promotion and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000; the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997; and the Broad-Black Based Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003 (The South African Department of Labour, n.d). As a result, there has been an increase in the number of women of all races who are entering various sectors of the job market. Research, however, shows that fewer women are entering senior management positions, and women do not remain in industries that are considered to be male-dominated or require masculine-typed duties (Bosch, 2011; Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2012; Moletsane & Reddy, 2011, Nkuna, 2010).

In South Africa, organisations that do not represent diversity come across as being resistant to transformation and equality of previously disadvantaged groups of people. These organisations are continually being policed by legislation and are under enormous pressure to comply with the provision of the Black Economic Empowerment Act (BEE) (Act 53 of 2003) and Employment Equity Act (EE) (Act 55 of 1998), otherwise they will face fines and penalties (Hills, 2015; Wylie, 2011). Subsequently, token appointments are made in the workplace, and policies that are meant to promote transformation are perceived as creating possible racial and gendered divides and a lack of trust as employees are appointed based on meeting the government quota and not necessarily merit (Ndzwayiba, Ukpere & Steyn, 2018; Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011). Additionally, the potential resentment, jealousy and anger may result in a backlash from employees who feel threatened and subsequently leads to rebellion against the token appointments and the organisation (Ndzwayiba, Ukpere & Steyn, 2018; Radke, Horsey & Barlow, 2016). In the STEM industry, senior managers warned that women might suffer burnout

if they are advanced too quickly because they would be taking on more than they can handle (Moletsane & Reddy, 2011).

Against this background, this study aimed to explore the gendered narratives relating to women in the IT Department of a South African organisation. The study argues that exploring gendered narratives in the workplace offers an opportunity for critical reflection into the dynamics of the male-dominated workplace. This study adds to this body of knowledge by offering an understanding of how male and female employees interpret the role of women in a male-dominated environment such as IT in the South African context. The study employs a feminist interpretivist framework to unravel patterns of the gendered and subjective understanding of a male-dominated workplace such as the IT department. The research questions for this study were:

What are the gendered narratives regarding the role of women in the IT department of a South African organisation in the Gauteng Province?

Sub-research questions:

1. How do male employees view the role of females in the IT department of the organisation?
2. How do female employees perceive and view their participation in the IT department of the organisation?
3. How do policies regarding equal opportunity in workplaces in South Africa shape the experiences of women in the IT department of the organisation?

Research Methods

This paper constitutes part of a larger study entitled: *Windows into workplace equality: Gendered experiences of career aspirational employees in the information technology field*. The larger study explored the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions in the IT field (Long, 2014). Permission to conduct the research was requested from and granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Ref: PERC-12016). Ethical considerations were adhered to in the study. In-depth semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data, and a listening guide was used for data analysis.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify potential participants for the study. Participants were recruited from an IT organisation in a large city in the Gauteng province. The selection criteria used for the recruitment process included employees who have been working for a minimum of one year in the field of IT and who were aged 18 years and above. A total of six participants met the criteria and were willing to partake in the study. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that they were under no obligation to participate in it. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. All of the participants provided written informed consent. The demographics² of the participants are displayed in table one and appear according to the order they were interviewed.

² The author considers black to refer to African, Coloured and Indian. The racial categories used in the table do not reflect the meanings of Apartheid government and serve as descriptors here. These racial categories were also provided by the participants. The author is cognisant of the potential influence of race as Apartheid has indeed had a different effect on individuals' experience in the past (Scantlebury & Martin, 2010).

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age group	Marital status
Jacob	Male	Coloured ³	Mid-thirties	Married
Katherine	Female	White	Mid-thirties	Married
Sharon	Female	Coloured	Mid-twenties	Single
Simon	Male	White	Late-thirties	Married
Paul	Male	Indian	Late-forties	Married
Gavin	Male	Coloured	Early thirties	Single

Data collection

The semi-structured interview schedule enabled probing the participants' experiences to obtain information that was relevant to this study. The author encouraged the participants to respond in ways that they considered relevant and significant to their experiences regarding the field of IT. The interview sessions were audio-recorded with the permission of participants, and notes regarding reflections on each interview were made after each session. Interview sessions were conducted during working hours at the participants' workplace and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a listening-guide approach, which is a voice-centred relational method. Gilligan et al. (2003) elaborate that the listening guide is a method of psychological analysis that facilitates a way of knowing the inner world of another person. This requires the author to draw systematically on the person's voice, resonance and relationship, which are considered to be ports into the human psyche. The listening guide is used to reveal complex expressions of human experience that are often multi-layered and in uncovering the interplay between the self and the relationship, psyche and culture that exists in the workplace (Gilligan et al., 2003).

The listening guide is composed of four steps. These are: Step One: Listening for the plot; Step Two: 'I' poem; Step Three: Listening for contrapuntal voices; and Step Four: Composing the analysis of the text. During Step One, the author listened to participants' stories and included a listener's response with the author's reflection on the stories. Step Two focused on the text that contained the use of the first-person pronoun ('I'). Initially, the author compiled a complete 'I' poem of the participants' entire transcript. Thereafter, only 'I' poems that were gender-related was selected.

³ The term Coloured is an apartheid racial category that was given to people who were of mixed ancestry and were loosely defined as people who were neither white nor black (Adhikari, 2006).

For example, the following is an 'I' poem crafted from Sharon's transcript:
I am also working a lot with like males and if you are female, you also like, they
tend to look, give you like the admin
I just see, 'type this'
'I am not your typist'
I mean, it is your knowledge base
I think the males in the unit sees (*sic*) all the females as this can be my secretary
person
I have never seen since I have been here like they give
I think it is just a man thing
I think they, that they think that
I don't know if there is a male secretary in this company even

Step Three involved listening for contrapuntal voices. Contrapuntal voices involve the author in identifying, specifying and determining the different strands in an interview that may speak to the research questions. Once again, this process entailed reading through the interview and taking time to tune into one of the voices used within the person's expression of her or his experience. The author's questions shaped this listening, which was based on the theoretical framework guiding the research as well as the questions raised by the previous listenings. Lastly, Step Four comprised the analysis of the text by bringing together what had been learnt about the participants' in relation to the research questions.

The findings of the study are analysed using the feminist interpretivist framework. The framework places women at the centre of the research process and aims at listening to the voices of underrepresented or marginalised groups (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Gergen, 2008). Thus, this paper is concerned with the gendered narratives relating to women. The feminist interpretivist framework acknowledges that there is a shared reality but that there are different experiences of this shared reality (Sarikakis, et al., 2009). This paper, therefore, considers that the participants in this study have different ways of knowing in response to the circumstances in their lives.

The plot identified in the study provides the collective positions of the participants within their work environment. The 'I' poems assisted in moving the participants' subjectivity to the foreground, and this offered a listening into how they spoke about themselves in relation to the topic in question. The contrapuntal voices elaborate on participant views regarding the workplace, network and policies (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). The composing of the analysis offers an overall understanding of the narratives relating to women in the IT department of the organisation. The steps of the listening guide have shaped the findings of the study and are presented as themes and not necessarily as steps of the analysis.

Findings of the study

The participant plots relating to experiences in the workplace

The plot presented in the participants' stories are the gendered and racial dynamics of the organisation. The gendered dynamics presented in the organisation are depicted by women who fulfil supportive roles and men who are placed in decision-making roles. The racial dynamics are depicted in terms of who is appointed for the job based only on skin colour.

Two female participants explicitly expressed that they felt that their role in the organisation was not valued because they were in supportive roles. For example, Sharon, a single, coloured female in her twenties, described her role in the field of IT as performing administrative tasks for her male colleagues.

“Hmm, it is an ever-changing field. And, there is [*sic*] always new challenges, very challenging field. I am also working a lot with like males and if you are female, you also like, they tend to look, give you like the admin stuff [smiles], always like shoving it your way. Ja [yes], so, but you have to like basically stand your ground.”

In her opinion, male employees were capitalising on female employees to do their administrative work or expecting female employees to be their secretaries. There seemed to be a sense of devaluation of administrative duties due to such duties being regarded as a female’s job.

There were dominant themes embedded within the male participants’ views of the IT environment that speaks to the inferiority of women and their association with the domestic sphere. Women were regarded as the ‘mother hen’ in management and due to their supportive role in the workplace. Simon, a white, married male in his late thirties, described the competencies and characteristics of management in the IT industry. He used his mother as an association with management, which informed that she managed the household:

“If I look at my mom. Do you know women have a different way of handling things ... more caring side than men. And for me as a manager, I do care about what’s happening with my employees ...”

Jacob, a married, coloured male in his mid-thirties, described how the organisation operates, especially in terms of who is appointed to a job and the support thereof. In his view, as a result of BEE pressure from the South African government, more people are appointed into positions through tokenism. The undertones of this policy speak to race and gender which are considered to be part of the issues that women experience in the workplace:

“I still feel that, that is being carried through, you know, whether we like it or not, there’s, there’s, there’s a term that they use, old boys’ club, you know, that still largely exists in organisations and corporate culture in South Africa. For you to break into that, it’s probably got to be, largely because the pressures of BEE are being, are being put on it. That’s my view. My fear around all of these things is that, you know, you can get, you can get given the opportunity in terms of senior management, when you’re not a white male, but do you get the support from your colleagues and your, your, your peers in terms of making a success of that role?”

During the interview conversation, Jacob used the term ‘old boys’ club’ to describe the nature of senior management. He refers to the ‘old boys’ club’ as consisting of mainly white males. The only way in which this ‘old boys’ club’ could be hindered is with the aid of the BEE policies because they would readdress gender and race discriminations.

The listener's response

On reflection, the historical model of heterosexual gendered behaviour can be limiting, especially if employees feel that they are not being valued. Challenging the model in which employees work would bring about conflict, yet it would allow for possible dialogue on alternative ways of creating a functional organisation. There is an expectation to perform according to the gendered script of men performing masculine tasks and women performing feminine tasks.

There is a tendency to view women in the organisation as the mothers of the organisation, which reinforces the gendered script. The potential implications of this are that women who do not conform to this script may encounter social sanctions in the workplace. Gender roles should not be seen as binary in the workplace but as different and welcome versions of how men and women perform their genders without fearing discrimination.

Contrapuntal voices on workplace, networks and policies

Each participant presented many different voices. The author chose voices that were prominently gender related. The transcripts of each participant were re-read, and themes that recurred were noted. The author revisited the research questions and explored how the themes either melodiously interacted or were in tension with one another (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). The following voices identified for this section are introduced below.

Frustration

A voice of frustration was reflected in the way in which Sharon emphasised how her male colleagues were inconsiderate by requesting female colleagues to carry out their administrative duties, especially when they were busy with their work.

“A job like or a task to do scanning or copying they'd like, even if you like crazy busy with also real things, they would rather take that from you and give you like it.”

The above quote suggests that there is a continual devaluing of the administrative tasks. Interrupting her current work through assigning her their administrative tasks also implies that her current work lacks value. Below, it is implied that tasks in the workplace are gendered.

“I think it is just a man thing. They just like assume that [slight pause] you are a female, you must because I think they, that they think that... Because I don't know if there is a male secretary in this company even.”

Sharon provides an awareness of her gendered body as she refers to all men thinking of women as their secretaries. It is clear from the interview that it is very rare for a man to be a secretary in the organisation and that women tend to occupy this type of position. This gives the impression that men do not request other men to fulfil tasks such as scanning or copying.

Blame and resentment

Regarding the number of women represented in the IT industry, Simon and Paul voiced a considerable amount of negative emotions on this aspect. In the conversation with Simon, he had viewed the stereotypical gendered role women perform as one of the aspects which prevents them from entering the IT industry.

“... women don’t go into the technical side of it because they need, they probably have more responsibilities at home, hmm. Because in the evenings, it’s usually kids must bath, food must be made and stuff like that, so *ja* [yes], that might be a social thing that prevents the women from actually ...”

Simon highlighted gender socialisation whereby women perform tasks that are located in the home and emphasised the issue of women’s safety. He blamed society for the lack of women representation in IT.

“I don’t think it’s the industry’s fault that it’s not happened. It is society’s fault that it’s not happened because you, first of all, it’s dangerous for women to work late hours, that’s, it’s just *maar* [but] how we’re set together. Okay, some women won’t mind, hmm, but they not real women. [Laughs]”

Simon’s statements appear contradictory. He argued that women should not be placed in danger and that women should not do certain jobs. At the same time, he tries to be supportive of women performing masculine tasks but considers them not to be real women. The author asked Simon during the interview session what he meant by women not being real women and he claimed that he was joking. He then proceeded with “*You get your butch women, but ja* [yes]. *That was just a joke.*” The phrase ‘real women’ suggest that he is arguing that one can only be considered to be real woman through traditionally feminine behaviours. There is an emphasis placed on the biological sex of women informing their gendered roles to be performed in the workplace. Also, the physical appearance of women is highlighted as a characteristic of their femininity. This means that women who are ‘butch’ do not resemble ‘real women’ and therefore would perform masculine tasks.

“But then again, there are certain things that you cannot expect a woman to do. You cannot expect a woman to climb up a ladder a hundred metres in the air, it’s just not safe. It’s not that you’re discriminate [*sic*] against you, that’s how we were ... Put together, the women aren’t supposed to be put in danger. That’s how it is.”

There appeared to be a fixation on the idea that women are not allowed to carry out physical duties. In doing this, he portrays the IT environment as only consisting of physical labour which is well-suited for men. Simon associated the behavioural, social and cultural attributes with the physical characteristics of the person. He expects women to be involved in the roles that resemble stereotypical feminine duties. As a result of society’s influence, it is possible that Simon believes that women are not biologically primed for the field of IT or any tasks that requires women to work late hours or perform masculine tasks.

Simon further indicated that he respected women and would not expect them to perform tasks such as moving tables. He mentioned how there is a lack of respect toward women carried out in countries in which women are not allowed to do simple acts such as sit next to men.

“I mean I’m not going to ask you please move the tables around for me. But if you want to move the tables, you’re more than welcome. But I’m not going to expect from you to do it hmm. Because it’s, *ja* [yes], again there I get back to, I respect the woman. In some cultures, and some countries, they don’t respect the women; they’re not even allowed to sit on a chair next to them, so its society, it’s cultural, but I think the industries in South Africa aren’t closed for anything.”

Simon implied that the organisation was open-minded towards hiring people, provided they have the skills to do the job, but subsequently stated that women should not be put in danger. Simon’s reference to other countries workplace contexts serves as a way to indicate the progress South African organisations are making when it comes to transformation. Furthermore, the aspect of BEE policies seemed to emerge as Paul spoke about his workplace and the representation of women in IT.

One of the dominating voices was of blame and resentment. Resentment is voiced towards the government and their policies that the organisations implement for tokenism. Paul spent time speaking about policies and the relationship between government and businesses. He underscored the implementation and following of policies such as BEE without questioning them or evaluating the possible repercussions. This shows that he does not see the benefit in having these policies in the workplace.

“They [government] don’t care. Again it’s, it’s, I don’t like using the term black and white, and I am South African, but they don’t care, the need to employ a woman, but wouldn’t say okay, we employ a woman, how is she going to add value to our system, hmm? The only reason they employ a woman, so they can get that contract, so they need the number.”

The preceding indicates that sometimes women get hired to appease government policies. Women are only selected for the corporate image and for making a profit (Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011; Wylie, 2011). Nonetheless, there is a concern from the employees that BEE policy involves merely recruiting people to satisfy the government quota but does not develop them for the positions. However, it is clear that the benefit of the BEE policy is meant to assist minority groups, women included, in successfully entering into senior management because merit alone is not enough (Moletsane & Reddy, 2011). This suggests that to fulfil top positions, the organisation uses strategies that involve recruitment based on gender and race and not on actual merit.

Silence

The author detected a voice of silence as a way for coping with the gender dynamics in the workplace. Silence involved being submissive and merely accepting an order to avoid confrontation. There is a sense of silent discontentment in Sharon and her female colleagues:

“... we have just now accepted it, that they are like that, hmm. Because it is sort of like a, like a little vicious cycle. All the females that join ... we get thrown into this, hmm, we have to do this, so you basically, you don't fight against it anymore, you just like, they are like that ... the males, and then you just take it up.”

The preceding narrative suggests that women are constructed as powerless and therefore assume the reality of being submissive in their workplace. In addition, Sharon conveyed that she and her female colleagues were resigned to doing their male colleagues' work.

Optimism

Katherine shared Sharon's frustration and silence but relayed a voice of optimism as she envisioned a more positive side of the industry. Katherine believed that in time, more women would enter the field of IT even though the industry is currently male dominated.

“Ag, I think it's, just because females only started getting into the workplace later, and, think with time, you can definitely see it's, it's picking up. You can definitely see its [*sic*]. I think as we go along, it will, one day, we will be equals.”

The above quote suggests that the increase in women entering the IT industry is possible with the assistance of policies. However, this does not necessarily mean that the cultural norms of the organisation will change. In order for men and women to be 'equals' in the workplace, there needs to be an organisational culture that is open to accommodating women and believing in the value they bring to the organisation.

Understanding the narratives relating to women in the IT Department.

The author reviewed all the text by consolidating what had been learnt about each participant in relation to the research questions. The author drew similarities and established the unique aspects of their narratives regarding their workplace. The recurring theme was that employees mimic historical gender roles. This requires female employees to fulfil supportive roles, and male employees assume decision making roles.

There were different voices represented in the organisation, which range from frustration, blame, resentment, silence and disgust but also optimism. The organisation represents images of masculinity which suggests that female employees should understand masculinity yet not be masculine so that they can remain 'real women'.

Discussion

The experiences of participants in the IT Department highlights that the culture in which they work is aligned towards a white male ethic, an ethic that may not be open to accommodate women and specifically, those of colour. This is often depicted in the voices of frustration whereby participants attempt to conform but eventually encounter systemic challenges. The term 'old boys' club' which was used by Jacob refers to the informal male social system that exists in the department which usually excludes women (Hofmeyr & Mzobe, 2012). The old boys' club is further strengthened by organisational and personal barriers such as pregnancy, lack of family-

friendly policies, family responsibilities, the balance between work and family life and unequal division of household chores and duties, which create the inability to rise above an entry-level position (Moalusi & Jones, 2019; Sayce & Acker, 2012). This, in turn, prevents women from overcoming the barrier to advancement which is commonly referred to as the 'glass ceiling' (Kalysh, Kulik & Perera, 2016; Latchanah & Singh, 2016). In South Africa, working mothers are placed in the position of relying on family members to look after their children during working hours. Although some organisations allow for flexible time, there is still the pressure to complete tasks. This is not to say that deadlines should be compromised for working mothers, but it calls for HR policies to intervene and allow women to attend to their children without feeling guilty or that their careers have been placed in jeopardy.

There is a need for organisations to interrogate institutional systems as a means of creating a gender-responsive work environment. It is problematic that working fathers are not constructed as being the primary caregivers for children (Clowes, Ratele & Shefer, 2013). Men who accept their roles of fatherhood without the fear of their career regressing would contribute towards the changing male-centric culture (Burnett et al., 2013). HR policies need to truly advocate for work-family life balance for both males and females. This will create an environment whereby women do not have to be perpetually apologetic for the roles they perform outside the workplace. Women roles can be projected both at a reproductive and productive level. Women take on childbearing and care of the future workforce. The productive role of women in the workplace assists in improving the welfare of many families, especially single working mothers and spurs economic growth. Priority should be given to the changing gender roles and gendered needs.

Voices of blame and resentment are a result of the policies of government being perceived solely for tokenism (Ndzwayiba, Ukpere & Steyn, 2018; Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011). Earlier findings behind burnout in the workplace suggest that when inexperienced people are recruited solely on the basis of fulfilling the South African BEE quota, they will experience burnout if they are promoted too quickly (Moletsane & Reddy, 2011). Similarly to other research findings, when the organisational culture is perceived as being white male-dominated, policies such as the EE, BEE and Affirmative Action (AA) can be seen as creating divides within the workplace in South Africa along racial and gendered lines (Ndzwayiba, Ukpere & Steyn, 2018; Nzukuma & Bussin, 2011; Radke, Horsey & Barlow, 2016). The implications of not addressing these negative voices are that there will be perpetual challenges linked to issues of transformation within the IT industry and as a result, the industry will continue to be dominated by males. Stringent processes need to be put in place for the BEE Act (No. 53 of 2003) and the EE Act (No. 55 of 1998) to be effective. This paper calls for an analysis of South African organisations by exploring which cultures still prevail in order to understand women's experiences in the workplace.

Limitations of the study

This paper provides further insight into the dynamics that exist within the IT Department of a South African organisation. The study presents proposals for making the workplace a healthier context to work. The narratives uncovered in this research are not representative of the entire IT Department of the organisation. However, the study serves as a portal, small albeit, of some of the challenges that employees encounter in a male-dominated organisation. Further

qualitative research needs to explore the experiences of employees, particularly those of women as a means of addressing gender-related challenges in the workplace.

Recruiting females to participate was a challenge. During the recruitment phase, the author had two African female participants, but they did not commit to the study. One of the female participants offered to assist the author in recruiting female participants. Unfortunately, the participant informed that her female colleagues were reluctant to participate in the study. Further insight into the female perspective could be gained through a shared experience. More women should be recruited into studies to explore additional perspectives regarding the IT industry. Also, research on women in IT management would provide an insightful narrative of the challenges women encounter in the sector.

Conclusion

This paper explored the gendered narratives relating to women in the Information Technology (IT) Department of a South African organisation using a feminist interpretivist framework. This study adds to the body of knowledge on the underrepresentation of women in male-dominated environments, in that it explored how male and female employees interpret the role of women within a South African workplace that is male-dominated. The paper described the challenges employees experience in the workplace that often result from exclusion from advancement due to gender and race. There was an acknowledgement that male and female employees' roles were not considered to be equal. This was evident in the tasks that employees performed. Female employees were tasked with administrative duties and male employees with decision-making tasks. As a result, the female employees saw their roles as being devalued as they had to perform administrative tasks that fell outside of their job descriptions. It was also evident that male employees tended to construct their female colleagues as not being fit for the IT industry and relied on gendered stereotypical representations to justify their way of thinking. There is also a tendency to view female employees as being mothers in the organisation. This could be linked to the supportive roles that women are expected to play in the workplace. Furthermore, the current policies in the workplace are meant to bring transformation, but instead, there is frustration because these policies do not emphasise the skills and merit for employment and are used as window-dressing. Thus, policies that promote diversity and inclusivity are not effective if the organisational culture does not change.

Current policies need to be challenged to emphasise skills and merit. Additionally, organisations need to change the organisational culture which is currently a male ethic as they only serve to accommodate women without changing the institutional structures. This involves taking into consideration the reproductive and productive roles performed by men and women. Workplace policies should bear in mind that there are different gender roles and gender needs and that men and women should not be placed in gendered binaries. This paper proposes that since the situation requires much effort for this positive change to occur, using the government policies correctly, providing employees with adequate training in order to carry out their tasks effectively and implementing diverse approaches in the workplace that do not result in gender or colour binaries can effect this change.

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