Invisible Barriers: Societal Norms Versus Female Workplace Progression

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Abstract: Cultural and societal norms constantly assign different family and religious expectations to women as compared to men. Therefore, this research paper seeks to provide insight into the effects of prevalent cultural and societal norms on the progression of lower-level female managers. It examines the impact of these norms on the fulfilment of work-related duties and the resultant implications for the success of a female within their professional role. The research integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches and was carried out within the culturally diverse province of KwaZulu-Natal, in South Africa. Primary data was gathered using a quantitative questionnaire distributed to thirty-five lower-level female managers, typically fulfilling an entry-level supervisory role, within two separate private organisations. The research was independent of race and age. The findings of the study indicate that respondents face societal and cultural norms that adversely affect progression. These include assumptions of weaker and more emotional management styles, lack of support in meeting family and work obligations, and gender biases impacting access to opportunities for progression. The findings also include women from many cultures by virtue of the diverse cultures within the KwaZulu-Natal region. This paper will therefore be of value to female managers from diverse backgrounds in developed and developing countries. Specifically, female managers encountering invisible barriers to breaking through the glass ceiling and progressing to higher levels of management due to their own cultural and societal norms will benefit from insights delivered. The findings will also be of value to mentors of aspiring female managers, male senior managers with female subordinates, and human resources departments. The research paper will commence with a literature review that examines the relevance of cultural and societal norms in the progression of female managers. The research methods and results of the study will then be described, and findings discussed. The paper will conclude with final insights and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: family obligations; gender equity; glass ceiling; invisible barriers; leadership; organisational culture

1. Introduction

The modern workplace has a more significant proportion of female managers than in previous years. However, as the levels of management have increased, the number of females holding top positions has decreased (Hearne, 2014).

From an aerial view, many perceive a false perspective of equality while, in reality, many female managers are not successfully moving up the hierarchy and reaching top management roles (ConsultnetAfrica, 2015).

One of the reasons for this is the sum of invisible barriers known as the 'glass ceiling'. The glass ceiling affects various industries worldwide and involves unspoken, 'invisible' societal norms that limit (mostly) female managers from progressing to higher levels of management (Genderlinks, 2012). The glass ceiling often includes social and cultural norms related to female roles and traits versus workplace roles and attributes.

An example of a societal norm that may impede female progression in the workplace is the perception that male managers more often display assertiveness and confidence than female managers. Indeed, when female managers assert themselves, society often considers them emotional and feisty (Consultnet.Africa, 2015).

Instances of female managers not being considered for top positions because they may want to start a family is another example of a societal norm forming an invisible barrier and reinforcing the glass ceiling. In such cases, employers believe that creating a family will interfere with the female manager's ability to perform her managerial duties (Matthew, 2015).

Norms such as these affect the confidence of female managers. This may lead to female managers not portraying the self-confidence required to reach top management, despite having the relevant qualifications and experience (Maseko, 2013). In this case, the glass ceiling becomes a self-perpetuating phenomenon.

Societal norms must be changed over time to support female career success rather than creating barriers to female workplace progression. Many imperatives are driving the importance of encouraging female managers

within organisations. These include political and legal imperatives for organisations. These also include strategic imperatives, with female managers often bringing skills and perspectives to a management team that can differ from and complement male managers, facilitating holistic planning and implementation (Ryder, 2015). Recent studies into management styles have concluded that female managers displayed a popular and influential trait in enhancing collaborative decision-making. This is achieved by ensuring that all members' ideas are considered, forming a diverse bank of knowledge that can be used to solve critical managerial issues (Llopis, 2014). An additional imperative for the encouragement of female managers is an economic one. Successful females in the workforce actively contribute to a country's gross domestic product (GDP).

Effectively understanding societal norms and supporting the progression of female managers requires society to take a deeper look at perceptions that contribute towards unconscious or conscious biases that negatively impact females in the workplace. Therefore, this research paper seeks to improve understanding of invisible barriers to female workplace progression by investigating social and cultural norms related to their managerial success. Findings contribute to the body of knowledge on gender inequality by determining the effect of these norms on the success of women within a South African context, focused within the geographical area of KwaZulu-Natal. This geographical area is culturally diverse. Findings will be of interest to managers from a vast array of backgrounds in developed and developing countries alike, particularly those impacted by these invisible barriers to breaking through the glass ceiling and progressing to higher levels of management.

2. Literature review

South Africa is a rainbow nation where democracy and stereotyping are shunned, and many cultures exist in harmony. However, buried deep in society, female gender inequality remains (Nobrega, 2014). A woman within the South African context is fondly referred to as a mother of a family, a nation, or any aspect she takes under her wing. Some believe that God bestowed the gift of bringing life into this world to a woman, which is her sole purpose. While some women were satisfied with fulfilling these roles, the evolution of both the business and social worlds has changed women's needs, goals, and aspirations. Many women are now striving for success and are driven to demonstrate their leadership qualities as equals to their male colleagues.

According to Consultnet (2015) South Africa ranks second in Africa in encouraging female equality, with a comparatively high representation of women leaders in parliament and politics. Women hold managerial positions at all levels in many government departments and within the private sector. However, comparatively high representation still means that women account for only 24% of leadership roles available, with the remaining 76% of leaderships positions being filled by males (Consultnet, 2015). According to a report released by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) (2016) the gap between unemployed females and males grew drastically, with females being the gender with greater unemployment. The report further states that the gap in earning power of males and females holding the same positions has increased significantly. In recent years the government has made many attempts to create opportunities for female managers to climb the professional ladder. These opportunities are, however, not yet utilised to their best potential (Ibarra, 2013).

The origins of gender inequality can be traced back to the invention of agriculture, where the need to have larger families to contribute to the upkeep of the farm became apparent. These aspects led to women conceiving more children, making it challenging to work on the farm as they needed to mind the children. This changed the dynamics as men became the sole provider of food resulting in them being seen as superior in society (Staff, 2015). Evidence suggests that, as the act of ploughing a field required immense strength possessed by males rather than females, women were further considered to be inferior (Philips, 2011).

For women today who secure management roles in modern society, their obstacles in career progression do not end once they have acquired this role. Instead, they often face ongoing struggles, encountering the glass ceiling and believing that women are inferior leaders and managers. This affects women of all races, ages, and social classes. Thousands of women graduate each year with management qualifications but still struggle to find opportunities within the corporate sector to demonstrate their talents (Van Vyk, 2014).

In understanding critical reasons for the perpetuation of this phenomenon, the role of social and cultural norms should be examined. Social norms represent the set of expectations that people within one's social group and broader sector of society use to judge themselves and others within that social group or social sector (Mcleod, 2008). Culture refers to how people live their lives (South Africa History Online, 2011). Cultural norms serve as

a rule book of correct and desirable behaviour patterns versus those that are prohibited and frowned upon within one's culture. Cultural norms can differ from the norms of one's social group/s and are expressed within the norms of the social group/s. Social and cultural norms are therefore described in combination to create a dynamic mix of societal norms. Norms create an expectation of how people should live their lives, with those who adhere to the norms experiencing a higher level of acceptance and perceptions of success by their community (Mcleod, 2008). In workplace progression, a problem arises when these societal expectations do not support the professional environment. Due to the rewards associated with behaviour that meets expectations, and the punishments for behaviours that do not, many people follow these societal rules regardless of personal preference.

In South Africa, diverse social and cultural views can create many challenges for females. The patriarchal system of beliefs still exists and, in most circumstances, leads to the subordination of females in society. Gender in the African culture is still often expressed according to the roles and responsibilities of a man and a woman. Females are generally responsible for keeping the family together, supporting the males whose job is to go out and provide for the family (Ngubane, 2010), caring for children, carrying out cultural traditions, and educating their children about their culture. The man (husband in a traditional household) is responsible for meeting the family's financial obligations. This places women in a dilemma. They are considered to be neglecting their family responsibilities when pursuing a career (Bosch, 2015) and their work commitments when supporting their family. Should a woman spend time away from her children, household and family duties may be left unfulfilled (Jaber, 2017).

According to Osman (2008), women often feel disempowered when choosing between their family, cultural responsibilities, and managerial positions. Female managers are often not considered culturally successful despite achieving managerial success. They are judged by the commitment with which they serve their culture. This judgement can result, not only in adverse emotional implications for women, but physical ones too. According to StatSA (2016) women who are seen breaking these norms are at a higher risk of domestic abuse. Society sees these women as neglecting their culturally accepted role in the household and attempting to take on a male role, therefore, neglecting their family.

Societal norms further govern how society treats gender and professional progression through a subset of norms applied within the workplace. For example, males and females are typically characterised by masculine or feminine qualities and are expected by society to acquire and perform jobs that align with these qualities (Heddleston, 2015). According to Akpinar-Sposito (2013) the social and cultural definition of what would generally be considered male and female jobs in South Africa are the cause for segregation in the current workforce. This segregation further manifests itself in other challenges which female managers and leaders face.

Societal norms impacting on female progression in the workplace also include employers who are of the notion that male employees offer more working hours and more economic earning power than females; employers who believe that males offer more employee loyalty because females are more likely to choose to take care of their children, while males remain with the company for an extended period to support their family (Bosch, 2015); young female managers not being considered for top positions since they might want to start a family and many employers believe that this will interfere with their ability to perform their work-related duties (Matthew, 2015).

As a result of societal norms, many women who progress in their careers still experience immense difficulty issuing out instructions to their male subordinates. Many males find it difficult to accept these instructions. This makes it extremely difficult for female managers to fulfil their roles and lead in the manner they should (Maseko,2013). According to Tomaszewsk (2018) females might not necessarily agree with the cultural norms and may understand that it is a limiting factor in their careers. However, they continue to follow these for fear of being rejected by society.

Social and cultural norms are invisible barriers that create the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is known as an unseen barrier that exists in corporate organisations. This barrier is not penetrable by gender due to prejudice (Barrios, 2006). This barrier results in significant gaps in salaries, benefits, and professional titles between males and females, with males generally being advantaged by the presence of the glass ceiling (Barrios, 2006). This practice is considered illegal in most countries, including South Africa. An important consideration is that the glass ceiling is not an act aimed solely at discriminating against women; it is sometimes a non-intentional practice

even while implementing organisational policies and procedures (Lewis, 2017). In cases where the glass ceiling is a limiting factor for both males and females, it seems to be of no benefit to anyone in modern society (Belanger, 2017).

Evidencing the impact of the glass ceiling on women, a South African study was conducted regarding the hierarchical managerial structure of many large organisations to understand the difference in earning power between males and females. It was established that male management employees earned a remarkable 35% more than their female colleagues (Bariet, 2020). There are many conflicting opinions about the reasons for this earnings gap. Some believe that males contribute more time and effort to an organisation than females; others think this results purely from discrimination (Bielby, 2002).

According to Ryder (2015) gender discrimination in the workplace is challenging to prove. One must go to great lengths to demonstrate unfair treatment, which may involve gaining access to salary information, individual treatment details, and workplace promotion decisions. For this reason, most cases of gender discrimination remain undocumented and unheard of. The South African government has provisions such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), to eradicate discrimination based on gender. However, some argue that the BCEA is not a magical tool to solve all injustices. Improved understanding of the invisible barriers to female progression is crucial in ascertaining the most impactful ways of delivering against the intentions of the Act.

3. Methodology

This study adopted the integration of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Secondary data was found to be the most suitable method to solidify a foundation for the research. Secondary data was gathered from many resources, including peer-reviewed and published journal articles, research papers and other credible internet sources.

A quantitative questionnaire was then used to conduct primary research into the topic and contribute to the existing body of research. Questionnaires were selected as the most reliable and confidential manner to obtain information relating to the research topic. This method also allowed for feedback to be gained promptly and for feedback to be precise and linear.

The questionnaire was developed to focus on five key themes:

- The impact of cultural norms on the success of female managers.
- The impact of societal norms on the success of female managers, including aspects such as choosing between family and professional responsibilities.
- A study of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act related to providing for a female manager's family commitments.
- The presence of a 'glass ceiling' within the organisation.
- The impact of cultural and societal norms on the confidence of female managers in their professional life.

Questionnaires were distributed to lower-level female managers of two private companies situated in KwaZulu-Natal. KwaZulu-Natal, formally known as Natal, is considered a focal point of South African history and has a rich diversity of cultures and languages (KwaZulu Natal, n.d.). There was therefore a high likelihood of obtaining representation across multiple cultures in the research results.

Participants from the two private companies surveyed had to fulfil the following criteria: 1) Participants had to be female, and within the age group of 18-60 years old; 2) Participants must have been in a lower-level managerial position for one year or longer

The sample population included 35 lower-level female managers, comprising of 15 from a private educational institution and 20 from a private insurance and underwriting company. In the case of this research, lower-level managers were categorised as those holding entry-level managerial positions within an organisation, typically at a supervisory level. Of the 35 administered surveys, 34 were completed, and one was spoiled. All participants possessed a level of managerial training. Therefore, they were familiar with crucial executive terms and concepts, ensuring that participants were informed and equipped to provide the relevant data required for the research.

Targeting two companies from two different industries was deliberate. Both companies were small, ensuring that access would be readily granted, and sessions would occur without senior management's presence to avoid intimidation.

A random sampling technique was utilised to select participants from the population for this study. To ensure all respondents' confidentiality and privacy, the name of the respondents and companies will not be used.

4. Findings

The age groups of the participants are reflected in Table 1. The most prevalent age group was for participants in the 18-28-year age group, with the least representation being between the ages of 39-48.

Table 1: Age group of participants

Age of participants	18-28	29-38	39-48	49-58	58+
Percentage of participants	32%	14%	12%	29%	13%

Societal norms stand as the unspoken rules by which humans live their lives (McLeod, 2008). As seen in Table 2, the majority of participants (82%) indicated that they could not leave societal norms behind once they entered their managerial role at their organisation. It is interesting to note that only 6% of the participants strongly disagreed with this statement. Many women also indicated that societal norms and associated expectations limited them from performing their managerial activities adequately and to the best of their ability.

Table 2: Inability to leave behind societal norms when in a managerial role

Participants are unable to leave behind societal norms when in a managerial role	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Percentage of participants	32%	50%	0%	12%	6%

In terms of leadership style and as seen in Table 3, responses showed that 71% of female managers consider themselves transformational leaders and utilise these methods in their day-to-day managerial activities. In terms of perceived gender capabilities, male counterparts have considered this management style weaker and more emotional even though it has produced better results (Pachetha, 2013).

Table 3: Leadership style

Leadership style	Transactional	Transformational	Other
Percentage of participants	29%	71%	0%

A large portion of the respondents (71%) felt that current norms do not encourage them to reach executive management. 20% of respondents strongly disagreed. Therefore, the research suggests that societal support for most women surveyed is not conducive to career progression. These findings are reflected in Table 4.

Table 4: Current norms and encouragement to reach executive management

Society and its norms encourage participants to reach executive management positions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Percentage of participants	4%	5%	0%	71%	20%

Female managers often have extensive family commitments. A high number of respondents (79%) indicated that they could not easily balance responsibilities associated with their role as managers with family commitments. All of the participants indicated that they have to take time off work to meet family duties and then struggle to work overtime to meet work commitments as cultural and societal norms expect them to be available to their families.

From the perspective of religious norms, the women surveyed were from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Women are often seen as the bearer of religious practices and have more spiritual and cultural duties to perform than their male counterparts (Jaber, 2017). To this end, a common trend existed across all respondents indicating that their faith does not encourage them to dedicate their focus to managerial duties and career progression ahead of family duties. All participants also indicated that managerial requirements are not scheduled to work around the cultural needs of female managers.
Since there are many different cultural beliefs in South Africa, it is not feasible for organisations to close for every religious holiday or event. This can, however, place strain on female managers as they must divide time to adequately meet religious and cultural duties and be seen as productive and committed to the organisation

and their managerial role. It is apparent in the responses received that all participants felt unable to take time off from work to fulfil their religious obligations without the fear of coming across as disinterested and not committed to the company. It is important to note that female managers did not perceive themselves as having been assigned a larger workload than their male counterparts. However, the additional responsibilities resulting from their cultural background and society, added an increase level of difficulty in completing tasks.

Jaber (2017) states that a successful woman, as per societal norms, can take care of the upkeep of her house and family with ease and dedicate herself unselfishly to her family. Despite the constant evolution of gender roles, the responses to the questionnaires reveal that society does not necessarily consider a woman successful by her title in the professional world; therefore, many women prefer not to mention their professional successes in public. It is, therefore, unsurprising that female managers may not feel confident when having to correct male subordinates professionally. As seen in Table 5, only 29% of the participants felt that they could comfortably correct a male subordinate professionally, while 71% felt uncomfortable doing so.

Table 5: Correcting a male subordinate

Participants feel comfortable to correct a male subordinate	Agree	Disagree
Percentage of participants	29%	71%

According to Chan (2013), women who have inner confidence are often afraid to display that confidence for fear of coming across as abrupt and being frowned upon by society. The responses to the questionnaire confirmed this, as seen in Table 6. Majority of the participants (92%) see themselves as successful managers and feel that they have a successful manager's appropriate skills and capabilities but are not comfortable making this explicitly known. All the respondents indicated that they would question their abilities when faced with gender inequality, eroding their confidence in themselves.

Table 6: Confidence amongst female mangers to fulfil all relevant roles and responsibilities

Participants feel that they can confidently manage their responsibilities as a daughter/wife/ mother as well as their managerial duties with ease.	Agree	Disagree
Percentage of participants	8%	92%

When asked about the glass ceiling as a concept, all of the participants were aware of the practice and believed it exists within their organisation. They felt that men and women were not treated equally concerning promotions.

It was essential to establish whether participants were aware of the laws of the country related to maternity leave as it would shape the results of the questions to follow. It also provided insight into how available this information is to respondents. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act of South Africa was developed to create fairness and equality in the workplace (Ryder, 2015). Despite this, many women still feel that the legislation does not provide adequately for their responsibilities. 85% of the respondents understood the details of the Act but all respondents still felt uncomfortable with the maternity leave policy. They did not think that the Act provided adequate time for them to spend with family while protecting them from penalties imposed due to their absence from the organisation. 85% of participants further indicated that they did not feel that the regulations catered to their nurturing needs for a new baby, disagreeing with the statement that the maternity benefits concerning leave provided by the government were sufficient.

In the final analysis, 97% of participants agreed that gender equality is not achieved in their organisation. The majority of participants felt uncomfortable in the process of balancing their personal and professional responsibilities, with 56% of participants admitting to having received some form of reprimand for putting family responsibilities ahead of professional responsibilities. As per the questionnaire, 91% of participants also felt that a male superior had treated them unfairly and that the lack of fairness stemmed from the participant being female.

The study aimed to establish whether women could meet their social and cultural responsibilities as compared to men. Results indicate that the organisations surveyed did not adequately support female managers to fulfil these responsibilities. 97% of participants indicated that their organisation did not cater to their personal cultural needs.

Finally, the study aimed to establish how comfortable a female manager would feel should she need to exit a board meeting to attend to a family emergency. It is important to note that this represented their opinions and feelings and did not directly reflect the rules of the organisation. A large majority of the female managers indicated that they would not feel comfortable doing so, showing that many female managers cannot comfortably blend their personal and professional lives.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study demonstrates that many embedded cultural and social norms do not support female lower-level managers striving for career excellence and executive management roles. Research findings suggest that, while the South African private sector has progressed in terms of equity and acknowledging females in leadership roles, female managers still face numerous challenges. Many of these challenges result from inequities in cultural and societal perceptions and expectations of males and females. Findings suggest that personal roles such as those of wife and mother cannot be set aside during working hours and women feel that they have added pressure to perform without the required organisational support. The impact of unsupportive norms must be considered when addressing women's professional lives and career progression in the workplace.

There is room for future research to observe a larger sample size, and to investigate whether there are generational differences in challenges to female progression. The introduction of Generation Z into the workforce, and a possible shift in gender roles, could also be explored. Further, it is recommended that research be undertaken to establish how female managers themselves may be influenced by societal and cultural norms when making managerial decisions, thus impacting on female workplace progression. Finally, future research could also investigate the balance between the organisation's role in creating equity in the workplace, and society's role in creating equity within its cultures and communities.

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