

Experiences of career-persistent women managers in the manufacturing export sector in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of career-persistent women in senior management roles in the male-dominated manufacturing export sector in South Africa. Particular attention was given to the different forms of discrimination that the women faced in the work environment and how it influenced their employment relations in these organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach was employed to explore the experiences of 18 women's employment relations from different industries, age groups and race groups making up the sample. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed, from which first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregated dimensions were derived to facilitate the analysis.

Findings – The key findings were that women managers experienced various employee relations challenges in the workplace, including unequal pay and the preferential selection of men for succession and mentoring opportunities, which hindered women's promotion prospects. Despite these challenges, the women managers persevered by concealing their stress and frustration and working hard to prove their worth to their organisations.

Originality/value – Limited prior research has been conducted on women managers in an exporting context, especially the White male-dominated manufacturing export sector where women, and particularly Black women, are faced with both local and international cultural norms and gender stereotypes. The study has important implications for employee relations, including Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, Human Resources Management succession strategies and management development interventions.

Keywords Gender, Diversity, Career development, Women executives

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Manufacturing employs less than 25% of women overall, with fewer than 20% in supply chains and transportation, and under 20% in top management roles within the industry (World Economic Forum, 2025). Unlike domestically focused businesses, exporting firms in the manufacturing sector engage with various entities across complex supply chains and operate in different time zones, thereby extending their operating hours and affecting employment relations within these companies (Bista and Tomasik, 2019). These daily challenges of exporting are further complicated by cultural norms that differentiate between men's and women's professional roles (Anggadwita and Indarti, 2023). According to Eden and Gupta (2017), cultural differences both within and between countries have contributed to persistent gender disparities in the corporate environment, particularly within manufacturing exporting firms that have traditionally been male-dominated (Pergelova et al., 2018).



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Some cultures disapprove of women taking on leadership roles because their traditional responsibilities are centred around caring for the family (Alok *et al.*, 2021; Eden and Gupta, 2017), even when they are well educated. As a result, female export executives face challenges in gaining acceptance in countries with patriarchal cultures (Hoch and Rudsinske, 2022). According to the *World Economic Forum* (2020), only 15% of exporting firms worldwide are led by women. Discrimination against women in exporting firms is often based on the belief that exporting is complex and travel-intensive, making it unsuitable for women with family obligations (see Bear and Glick, 2017; more recently, Van der Straaten *et al.*, 2023). The “Diversity and Inclusion (D&I): Global Strategic Business Report” (Research and Markets, 2023) emphasises that while many multinational corporations are prioritising D&I initiatives, challenges remain in successfully implementing these programmes. Confetto *et al.* (2023, p. 122) suggest that commitment to managing diversity allows companies to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda (2030), which include securing good health and well-being (SDG 3), supporting gender equality (SDG 5), fostering decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).

Despite efforts to increase the number of female export executives, progress has been slow (ILO, 2022). Professional women encounter numerous challenges, including both subtle and overt gender bias in the workplace, added responsibilities at home and unequal pay. Consequently, women remain underrepresented in managerial leadership positions (UNCTAD, 2021). Even when women are promoted to positions of power, they often have less authority than their male counterparts (Bishu and Alkady, 2017). Research and Market’s (2023) report highlighted that microaggressions, frequently overlooked, are a significant indicator of a non-inclusive work environment.

Policymakers have made efforts to empower women to take on more significant roles in the export sector (UNCTAD, 2021). However, there is a lack of studies exploring the lived experiences of women expected to benefit from D&I initiatives and how these perceptions affect their employment relationships. Akbari *et al.* (2024, p. 2077) emphasise the scarcity of research in this area that addresses the “multifaceted challenges of gender equality” in Operations and Supply Chain Management. Additionally, Garnett and Kinnear (2026) and Lala *et al.* (2025) confirm that similar trends are observed in South Africa, where manufacturing remains an entrenched muscular domain.

This study aims to address several important gaps in our understanding of women in management positions within the male-dominated manufacturing sector in South Africa. *First*, we investigate the first-hand lived experiences of a sample of women who have advanced to management roles despite facing significant challenges. These women, referred to as “career-persisters,” have maintained long-term careers in this sector and are committed to continuing their professional journeys (Alok *et al.*, 2021). Alok and Banerjee (2023), building on an earlier definition, define career-persistent women as those who have worked continuously for at least three years and intend to *remain in their field*, even if their roles or employers may change. Examining the experiences of these career-persistent women in hostile or structurally unequal environments addresses a *second* gap, as *career persistence itself is under-researched* (Alok *et al.*, 2023). Understanding the mechanisms that support the success of career-persistent women is essential for reducing gender inequalities. The study provides insights into the enablers and barriers these women have encountered, how these factors have shaped their perceptions of their employment relationships and the broader implications for the manufacturing export sector.

Third, we draw on Role Congruity Theory, originally developed by Eagly and Karau (2002), and apply an intersectional lens that accounts for race, a lens seldom utilised in Management and International Business research, especially regarding Role Congruity Theory. A systematic literature review by Triana *et al.* (2024) indicates that most studies on Role Congruity Theory primarily address gender, neglecting interactions between race and occupation. Additionally, research by Van der Straaten *et al.* (2023, p. 1632) highlights that race has been “a notable area of notable neglect” in International Business, particularly

concerning gender. Given South Africa's history of apartheid, the intersection of race and gender is particularly pronounced, making it a compelling context for research. [Anglin et al. \(2022, p. 1474\)](#) further illustrate the compounded biases that Black women face at the intersection of gender and race, describing this as "double jeopardy." By including a racially diverse group of South African women, this study directly addresses these critical gaps.

Fourth, South Africa presents a unique context as a country with an *export-oriented*, racially stratified labour market shaped by its apartheid history. This historical backdrop has exacerbated gender inequalities within global trade. Research by [Bezuidenhout et al. \(2019\)](#) indicates that international trading companies in South Africa exhibit significantly larger gender wage gaps than non-trading firms. By studying racially diverse women working in exporting firms or multinationals, we can investigate the *intersections of race, gender and trade* within a framework characterised by persistent structural and institutional inequalities.

Review of the literature

This literature review focuses on three theoretical constructs that underpin the study: role congruity theory, trade liberalisation and female labour-force participation, and cross-border cultural differences.

Role congruity theory

Role congruity theory, as proposed by [Eagly and Karau \(2002\)](#), defines gender stereotypes as widely held beliefs about the characteristics of different genders. Women are typically perceived as possessing feminine or communal traits, such as sensitivity to others' feelings and tactfulness, while men are often seen as embodying agentic or masculine traits, such as aggressiveness, dominance and independence ([Eagly et al., 2020](#)). These gender stereotypes are especially prevalent in the managerial and leadership contexts.

Research by [Koenig et al. \(2011\)](#) indicates that managerial stereotypes tend to emphasise masculine traits more than feminine traits. Furthermore, [Fritz and van Knippenberg \(2020\)](#), as well as [Powell and Butterfield \(2022\)](#), highlight that the convergence of stereotypes creates gender-based perceptions that align leadership more closely with male traits than with female traits. Consequently, in male-dominated environments, this gender bias is likely to be exacerbated ([Koburtay et al., 2018](#)).

[Hoobler et al. \(2014\)](#) note that supervisors often have biased views of women, perceiving them as less career-motivated than men. This bias has several implications, including a reduced likelihood that women will be afforded training and development opportunities, which in turn stifles their managerial or leadership aspirations. Additionally, [Hoobler et al. \(2014\)](#) emphasise that the stereotype that women are less agentic and less career-oriented than men leads to fewer opportunities for mentorship towards senior management positions. [Kossek et al. \(2017\)](#) raise the question of whether women are "opting out" of these roles or if they are being "pushed out" by gender biases that limit their advancement to top management.

Relatively little is known about factors that help women leaders persist in their roles and careers. The role congruity theory does not address the consequences of gender bias in male-dominated environments, which can create perceptions of inequity and injustice in the workplace. [Adams' \(1963\)](#) equity theory of motivation provides more insight. It suggests that an employee's motivation is influenced by their belief that the benefits and rewards of their job are at least equal to the effort they put into their work. Additionally, an employee's motivation is affected by whether they feel they are treated fairly, particularly compared to colleagues at the same level. If they perceive inequity or injustice (such as in remuneration), they may feel underappreciated and even worthless. Conversely, organisations that "create a climate where employees feel a sense of belonging increase the likelihood that they will become brand ambassadors and help attract other

talent to the organisation” (Confetto *et al.*, 2023, p. 125). According to Adams’ equity theory of motivation, the level of tension or distress caused by workplace inequity is proportional to the magnitude of the inequity. To alleviate this tension, an employee will seek to reduce the inequity, which may even lead them to terminate their employment.

Another area that the role congruity theory is relatively silent on is the lack of attention to the impact of race or gender-based inequity, which, for example, is often experienced by Black women. Anglin *et al.* (2022) review indicates that Black women may not align with traditional leadership roles typically associated with being male and White, resulting in a “double jeopardy” for them. They note that “virtually all management disciplines give considerably less attention to other important social roles, such as those tied to race, age, sexual orientation, and nonbinary gender roles. . . highlights the need to expand structural-functional role research beyond the purview of traditional gender roles” (Anglin *et al.*, 2022, p. 1471). Triana *et al.* (2024) and Boora (2025) also emphasise the importance of considering how role congruity theory can help explain stereotypes that arise from incongruity across various social roles in multiple emerging management contexts. In the South African context, Garnett and Kinnear (2026) found that, compared with the United Kingdom, where motherhood poses significant challenges for women, race emerges as a more critical intersectional social role factor in South Africa.

Trade liberalisation and female labour force participation

The extant literature indicates that trade liberalisation enhances women’s economic participation by creating more job opportunities (Li *et al.*, 2020). According to the World Bank and the WTO (2020), more women are employed by exporting firms than by non-exporting firms. However, women remain underrepresented in managerial positions (UNCTAD, 2021). Even within exporting firms, women face biases emanating from a patriarchal culture. Van der Straaten *et al.* (2023) confirm that many women of colour are in the lowest levels of multinational hierarchies.

Developing countries have an abundance of unskilled labour, most of whom are women (Altuzarra *et al.*, 2021). Research by Akhtar *et al.* (2023) suggests that higher female labour force participation enhances gender parity and increases trade openness, ultimately contributing to rapid economic growth. They recommend establishing specific seats for them in both public and private sectors to improve their access to employment opportunities. Additionally, they advocate for policy changes to attract more women to executive and senior decision-making roles in local and multinational companies, thereby enhancing overall economic efficiency.

A study by Ul-Haq *et al.* (2023) in the manufacturing sector also indicates that trade liberalisation and tariff reductions directly increase female employment in manufacturing, reinforcing the connection between trade policies and opportunities for women in the workforce. Furthermore, Lala *et al.* (2025) found in their research on the South African manufacturing industry that, while women’s participation in the labour force has risen, equal opportunities for advancement continue to be an issue.

In developing countries, exporting firms typically employ more women than men, though at lower organisational levels and this cost saving enhances their competitiveness (Altuzarra *et al.*, 2021). Stolzenburg *et al.* (2020) highlight a concerning trend: foreign-owned firms in South Africa exhibit more pronounced gender wage gaps compared to their South African-owned counterparts.

Cross-border cultural differences

Women managers working in exporting firms may encounter various cultural norms in foreign markets that impact their professional experiences. For instance, they may not receive the same treatment as their male counterparts (Hoch and Rudsinske, 2022). Akbari *et al.* (2024) confirm that gender inequalities vary across countries, cultures, industries and policy contexts,

alongside issues such as a lack of transparent Human Resources Management (HRM) processes and biased promotion systems.

Triana *et al.* (2024) highlight that women often face subtle forms of discrimination, particularly as mothers, and they are at higher risk of experiencing career derailment. Research by Alok and Banarjee (2023) indicates that being married and having a child can significantly hinder women's persistence in their careers. Additionally, other studies emphasise the expectation that women should handle a "second shift" of household responsibilities after returning home from work and that women experience penalties associated with motherhood (Boora, 2025). Van der Straaten *et al.* (2023) discuss how standardised HRM systems frequently fail to address local work-family conflicts. Ideally, companies should foster an inclusive culture where hiring and promotions are based on merit. However, this goal is often challenging to achieve, especially when exporting firms' foreign business partners are influenced by culturally entrenched gender stereotypes.

Research on women's leadership in export environments remains limited. Nonetheless, it is clear that the number of women in management and leadership positions is still low. Sui *et al.* (2022) argue that women-owned businesses are underrepresented in the export sector, despite being well-managed and often achieving excellent results. Exporting firms frequently prefer to hire men due to perceptions that women are less flexible regarding travel (Bøler *et al.*, 2018), and less capable of working across different time zones.

Anglin *et al.* (2022) contribute to this discourse by suggesting that the work-family interface, often seen as a source of conflict, can actually lead to role enrichment; skills gained from motherhood, such as multitasking, can enhance performance in leadership roles. However, Tanwir and Sidebottom (2019) emphasise that conducive working conditions are equally important, noting that flexible work arrangements could enable more women to enter exporting firms and occupy senior positions.

While investor pressure has sometimes improved the representation of women at the board level, Poole *et al.* (2020) report that the implementation of gender-equalising policies related to flexible work and service, such as childcare, remains weak. Furthermore, the gendering of professional roles in manufacturing exporting firms (Bezuidenhout *et al.*, 2019) contributes to persistent pay gaps (Brush *et al.*, 2018).

Research methodology

The ontology of this study is based on relativism, which posits that reality is relative. The research adhered to an interpretivist philosophy, where reality is socially constructed and it collected phenomenological data from participants (Creswell, 2013). A deeper understanding was sought regarding how situations naturally unfolded and how the women managers in the sample made sense of their experiences (Yin, 2016). Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of career-persistent women in South Africa's manufacturing export sector.

Study population and data collection

The study used purposive, criterion-based, homogeneous sampling to ensure that participants met specific criteria (Creswell, 2013; Lala *et al.*, 2025). The sampling criteria comprised women in senior management positions within the manufacturing export sector who interacted with individuals and organisations in other countries. In total, 18 in-depth, semi-structured (virtual) interviews were conducted. Of the 18 participants, 15 held senior management roles across various industries, while three were subject-matter experts involved in trade facilitation.

Although all participants were high-ranking within their organisations' hierarchies, two held Senior Manager titles and one was a divisional manager, indicating that they had managers reporting to them, who, in turn, had subordinates. The remaining participants were department heads or directors, responsible for managing subordinates.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university where one of the researchers was enrolled as a master’s student, and the other two were professors. Participants were informed of the research purpose, that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. They signed a consent form outlining these points, including assurances that data collected through the interviews would be stored without identifiers and that only aggregated information would be reported. The interviews and data were handled with confidentiality.

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants, excluding the subject matter experts. The study focused on the participants’ lived experience, with their own interpretations of age being significant. For instance, Participant 1 described herself as young, even though she is a senior manager in her 30s. Ultimately, eight participants were under 40, while those over 40 were categorised as older. Most of the participants held a postgraduate degree as their highest educational qualification, with two possessing a Master of Business Administration. The majority had been involved in the export sector for 10–20 years, while five participants had 5–10 years of experience.

Table 2 presents descriptive data on the participants and their companies. All participants have interacted with multiple countries, primarily engaging with other African countries,

Table 1. Profile of participants (industry, role and number of direct reports)

No	Industry	Role	Direct reports	Race	Age	Cross-border interactions
P01	Automotive manufacturing*	Senior Manager	420	African	30–40	China, Europe, Japan, Middle East
P02	Beverages manufacturing*	Marketing Manager	0	African	30–40	USA, India, Pakistan, other Muslim countries
P03	Marine manufacturing*	HR Director	10	African	30–40	Japan, Brazil, African countries
P04	FMCG manufacturing*	Commercial Executive	5	African	40–50	Sub-Saharan Africa, mainly Nigeria
P05	Alcohol manufacturing*	Marketing Manager	9	White	40–50	USA, Middle East, Europe, Far East
P06	Chemical manufacturing*	Senior Customs and Trade Compliance specialist	5	African	30–40	Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa
P07	Valve manufacturing*	Head of Department	1	Indian	30–40	South Korea, Mexico, Europe
P08	Mining manufacturing*	Manager (Sales)	2	African	30–40	Most African countries, Indonesia, Chile
P09	Automotive manufacturing*	Senior Manager export and logistics	16	White	40–50	China, Europe, Japan, Middle East
P10	Beauty products manufacturing	Marketing Manager	4	Indian	40–50	Did not specify
P11	Herbal product and cosmetics manufacturing	Owner of export company	<50	Coloured	40–50	China, Turkey, other Muslim countries
P12	Glass manufacturing*	Marketing Manager	51	White	40–50	Did not specify
P13	Beauty and home care industry	Product Developer	3	White	40–50	Did not specify
P14	Footwear and accessories*	Marketing Manager	4	African	30–40	Did not specify
P15	Automotive tyres and industrial rubber*	Divisional Head: Sales International Business	4	Indian	30–40	Europe, most African countries, Lebanon, other Muslim countries

Note(s): *Denotes multinational organisations

Table 2. Participants' demographics (race, age, qualifications, years in sector, company age and size of company)

Indicator		Number of respondents
Race	Black African	7
	White	4
	Coloured	1
	Indian	3
Age	30–40	8
	41–50	7
Qualification	National diploma	2
	Bachelor's degree	4
	Diploma/Honours degree	6
	MBA	2
Years in sector	Less than 5 years	1
	5–9 years	4
	10–19 years	6
	20 years+	4
Company age	11–20 years	2
	40 years+	13
	Less than 50	1
Size of the company (number of employees)	100–250	1
	250–500	2
	500–750	3
	1000+	8
Location (province in South Africa)	Gauteng	7
	KwaZulu-Natal	8

Europe, the Middle East and the Far East, while some have dealt with South America. For reporting participant demographics, race is presented using South African classifications. Under the Employment Equity Act (1998), Africans, Coloureds (mixed-race individuals) and Indians are collectively classified as “Black people” for employment equity purposes, reflecting the Act’s objective of redressing the effects of historical disadvantage. Accordingly, our sample consisted of 11 Black females and four White females from South Africa.

Data analysis

An inductive approach was employed to analyse the data, relying on participants’ experiences to guide the analysis with the expectation that the main themes would naturally emerge. A three-stage data analysis process, informed by Gioia *et al.* (2013), was utilised. The interview transcripts were analysed and individually coded to preserve the concepts participants used to convey their experiences, which were classified as first-order concepts. Subsequently, second-order themes were developed from similarities among the first-order concepts. From the second-order themes, aggregate dimensions were formulated.

In total, 352 codes were generated from the verbatim transcripts. From the first-order concepts, 61 second-order themes emerged, which were further aggregated into 4 overall aggregated dimensions. During the final aggregation stage, the analysis shifted from inductive to deductive, using a theoretical lens aligning with existing literature to derive the final themes. A final round of in-depth analysis of the primary interview transcript data confirmed the emergent themes.

In qualitative research, researchers’ reflexivity is a crucial consideration. A reflexive stance allows researchers to analyse observations, conversations and experiences, including their own positionality, throughout the research process (Ozcazanc-Pan, 2012). The researchers had to maintain self-awareness and ensure that their personal experiences did not cloud their judgement. The diversity within the research team was a strength, providing an opportunity to discuss the findings from various perspectives and evaluate whether they were unique to their

sample (see [Schepers, 2026](#), for a discussion on dynamics in research teams in South Africa on gender and race relations). The research team consisted of a Black woman and two White South African women.

To mitigate the risk of bias during data analysis, the team collaborated throughout the analytical process. One researcher conducted the interviews and performed the first- and second-order analyses. This researcher is a Black South African woman who grew up during apartheid and, as a member of a group disadvantaged by apartheid policies, brought valuable contextual insights to the research process. Shared experiences may have facilitated rapport with participants. The other two researchers are White South Africans whose experiences and social positioning differed under apartheid. Their perspectives enabled critical engagement with emerging interpretations and helped reduce the risk of unexamined assumptions. The research team debated the findings and considered their alignment with existing literature. They collaboratively developed the aggregate dimensions.

[Figure 1](#) illustrates the first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregated dimensions, following the process outlined by [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#).

[Figure 1](#) illustrates four aggregated dimensions related to women leaders in the manufacturing export sector: antecedents and contextual variables affecting these leaders; women’s coping mechanisms when facing discrimination; organisational obstacles encountered by women; and the enablers for women leaders and their impacts on employment relationships within the manufacturing export sector. The following section presents these findings, supplemented by interview quotes that support the analysis.

Findings

The findings are organised under subheadings for each aggregate dimension. Second-order themes are discussed beneath each dimension, with examples of the first-order concepts. *Bold text* has been added in certain areas to highlight connections to the second-order themes.

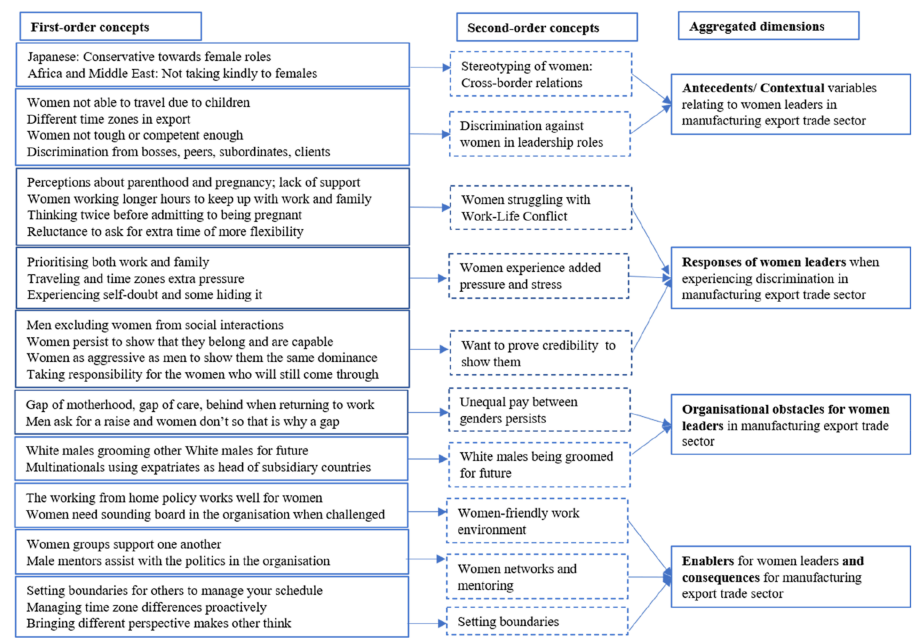


Figure 1. Illustration of data analysis using [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#) method. Source: Authors’ own compilation from transcript data

Aggregated dimension 1: antecedents and contextual variables relating to women leaders in the manufacturing export sector

The following second-order concepts have been identified: stereotyping of women engaged in cross-border relations and discrimination experienced by women from their managers, peers, subordinates and clients.

Stereotyping of women engaged in cross-border relations. The stereotyping of women's roles in society is influenced by the national culture of the country in question. Most participants indicated that their perceived roles did not align with the traditional expectations of a leader within an organisation. One participant noted:

I had to work with Africa and Middle East, and Africa and Middle East don't take too kindly to females. So, I had to often get up and present in forums where I was the only female, so they used to bring in one of the HR ladies just so I don't feel like the only female in a male environment. (P12, older White, Glass, Marketing)

Regarding the Japanese culture as well as approaches to leadership, Participant 9 observed:

So, you've got the combination of a Japanese culture, which is quite conservative, plus male-dominated. And as women, we tend to be a lot more empathetic and nurturing in our approach to leadership, whereas that's not necessarily the approach of a male-dominated leadership. (P09, older White, Automotive, Senior Manager)

It is important to note how this participant described her own feminine relational approach to leadership as, "we tend to be a lot more empathetic and nurturing in our approach to leadership". This finding must be handled with caution, since there might be a concern of essentialising female characteristics. In this case, the participant had a self-perception of approaching leadership in a specific manner, due to her gender and contrasted this with male-dominated leadership, aligned with how [Eagly and Karau \(2002\)](#) described agentic and communal leadership. She furthermore shared about her gender as an identity group ("we as women").

Participants observed that the Sub-Saharan African region mirrored South Africa's male-dominated environment. However, some shared positive experiences dealing with countries such as Mexico, Germany and South Korea. The participants noted that cross-border relations were particularly challenging in regions where Islam is the dominant religion. One participant remarked:

It is challenging knowing that women in certain religions like the Muslim religion, certain African cultures internationally are not necessarily recognised to have a say, especially the Chinese culture, women must keep quiet when a man is speaking. (P10, older Indian, Beauty, Marketing)

Discrimination experienced by women from their managers, peers, subordinates and clients. Many participants highlighted that their organisations were resistant to promoting women to leadership roles, primarily due to the assumption that women, given their family responsibilities, would not be able to travel. One participant stated:

In our organisation in export, my manager for him to employ export manager to service either East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, Middle East, whichever region, I can put my head on the block, he would never hire a woman in that role. (P10, older Indian, Beauty, Marketing)

Another participant pointed out the challenges posed by time zones and travel:

Working across different time zones, working in awkward hours and must be up and down must be travelling and all these things. So, for me, it's a big challenge. (P01, young African, Automotive, Senior Manager)

Furthermore, women in leadership positions often faced discrimination due to the stereotype that they are not "tough" or competent enough for their roles. One participant shared:

I got a sense that the big boss did not think that I was tough enough for the role because now there is a team of men and then there is me, only female in the team. (P02, young African, Beverage, Marketing Manager)

Participants expressed a strong desire to be taken seriously and included in decision-making processes. For example:

Like not being acknowledged, that you are also in a leadership role, you also want to be involved and taken seriously in the big decisions. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Manager)

Discrimination originated not only from higher levels of management but also from peers. One participant noted:

As a woman, if we don't get that respect from your next peer, it's actually hard for you to be heard. You'll say something and your male counterpart will raise his hand and say exactly the same thing, he will get the compliment. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Manager)

Resistance to the idea of women in leadership roles also came from subordinates. One participant shared:

So, there were white males who were like, she's going to be our boss, because they've never had a black female leading them. They normally had a white male leading them. (P04, older African, FMCG, Commercial Executive)

Aggregated dimension 2: women's coping mechanisms when experiencing discrimination

The following second-order concepts emerged: women experiencing but hiding work-life conflict, women overcoming self-doubt and women striving to prove themselves.

Women experiencing but hiding work-life conflict. Participants often faced work-life conflict, but attempted to conceal it. Several factors contributed to this conflict, including male leaders' perspectives on parenting. For example:

With pregnancies there is a lot of, I do not know what word to use, but almost punishing females for being absent. (P02, young African, Beverage, Marketing Manager)

I have two kids, when you are in a work environment although you have a lot of those things to manage, everyone is going to expect you to not give a 100% because you are dealing with your kids. It is about making that concerted effort to find that balance and manage things so that you do not drop the ball from the home point of view as well as work. (P04, older African, FMCG, Commercial Executive)

Participants sought to conceal the internal conflict they experienced while juggling their work and home lives. For example, one participant mentioned:

There were times where I would go to bed, and then would sit up working until two o'clock in the morning to finish your work, and then still get up, do the mom thing, and then go to work. (P09, older White, Automotive, Senior Manager)

Women trying to overcome self-doubt

Another source of stress for participants was their feelings of self-doubt, which they often did not acknowledge openly. One participant expressed:

I think it's because of our low representation that in itself makes you question. Why are they so few that look like me? You are bound to be scared, you are bound to question if what you're going to say is the right thing and sometimes you hold back. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Director)

I think you tend to hide your insecurities and any emotional distress you might be going through. (P13, older White, Beauty, Manager)

Women striving to prove themselves

Participants were also motivated to prove their capabilities to the men in their organisations. For some, this drive stemmed from a desire to show those who excluded them that they could succeed despite the odds. For example:

The ease that males are able to engage with each other is not there, it's not easy there when you come as a female. You come like ice cold, you're outside the circle. (P08, young African, Mining, Manager)

It was very important for me to work late, but still be there for my son. So, there was a lot of that to show them that you can actually find a middle way and still add to a business and be a mom. (P12, older White, Glass, Marketing)

Interestingly, there were times when a policy of aggression was actively supported. For example:

You have to go in with the aggression because it's almost as though that's the language that men understand. Only if you're confrontational, then they're willing to listen. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Director)

The participants' long tenures in the industry positively reflected on their character. For instance, one participant stated:

But I think the experience that you bring to the table and the never-give-up attitude is what will see you through and I think that's what saw me through in the five years that I spent in the industry. (P14, young African, Footwear, Marketing Manager)

Additionally, some participants felt a heightened responsibility to persevere for the sake of the women who would follow in their footsteps:

And now that I've been given a seat at the table, I owe it to them to see it through as far as I can. And, you know, being in an organisation of 80% African women on the shop floor, and you're the only one who's sitting at a top management decision-making table means that you've got this responsibility to speak up. And if I run away, then what happens to the women who are looking to me as their beacon of light. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Director)

Aggregated dimension 3: organisational obstacles faced by women leaders

The following second-order concepts were identified: unequal pay between genders and the grooming of White males for the future.

Unequal pay between genders. Participants expressed concerns about ongoing pay inequality, despite existing labour laws and policies. For example:

The drivers of gender pay gap that we see within the export is often driven by occupation and types of contracts. When they returned to the labour market, then women experience the gap of motherhood, the gap of care, it's much more challenging. (E01, subject matter expert)

I had to fight with HR, for grading me one grade lower than my male counterpart. I was a grade eight and he was on grade nine. But when I applied, both roles were a grade nine. I've seen where I've been underpaid by 40%, versus the peer and I saw it by mistake. (P04, older African, FMCG, Commercial Executive)

White males being groomed for the future. Participants noted that White males were actively grooming other White males as future leaders within their organisations. One participant stated:

Normally a young White male who is being groomed by the existing older male director and they do not even hide it. There is a concerted effort in ensuring that he is groomed into, he is pipeline fill. Obviously, the director here in South Africa is a White, older male. I am getting demotivated. I do not see a future right now. (P02, young African, Beverages, Marketing Manager)

Eleven of the participants worked in multinational organisations. While multinationals had to adhere to local culture and norms, they needed to reflect the culture of their country of origin, often employing White expatriates. One participant remarked:

[In terms of] culture in the observation of the corporates of Africa, which puts the White male in senior roles still perpetuate even across actually some other countries, because then they're willing to even hire expatriates, in terms of senior males. (P04, older African, FMCG, Commercial Executive)

Ten participants shared negative experiences relating to both their race and their gender. The African women in the sample expressed deep concerns about the phenomenon of "White male protégés." For instance, one participant said:

It's compounded and for me I am black. It is a triple whammy, I'm young, I am female and black. White females are deemed more competent than black females. (P01, young African, Automotive, Senior Manager)

Aggregated dimension 4: enablers for women leaders and the consequences for the manufacturing export sector's employee relationships

The following second-order concepts were identified: a woman-friendly work environment; women's networks and mentoring; and the importance of setting boundaries while embracing femininity in the workplace.

Women-friendly work environment. Participants favoured the work-from-home policy as a means to create a more women-friendly work environment. For example, one participant stated:

I think the work-from-home policy works well because we must start treating people as knowledge workers where you can work from home and be flexible, because I don't need to be here 24/7. (P01, young African, Automotive, Senior Manager)

Some participants shared how their organisations were developing support structures. For example, one participant mentioned:

In terms of the culture of the organisation that you can have sounding boards within the company when experiencing any difficulties. (P04, older African, FMCG, Senior Manager)

Women's networks and mentoring. Several participants spoke about the value of women's networks:

The more we are finding ourselves as women in these uncomfortable situations, we are rising to the occasion, and we are leaning on each other, fixing each other's crown. (P03, young African, Marine, HR Director)

You also need to be part of a woman's group or women's forum where we can actually encourage each other. (P05, older White, Beverage, Marketing Manager)

Male mentors also appeared to be significant, as one participant commented:

But from the business point of view, it can benefit you a whole lot having a male mentor. (P01, young African, Automotive, Senior Manager)

Setting boundaries in employment relationships Participants agreed on the importance of setting clearer boundaries in their employment relationships. For example:

So, I need to be the one managing how other people are going to influence my schedule. There's quite a lot that is within our control that we should be putting in place. (P04, older African, FMCG, Commercial Executive)

There'll be days where our America office only comes on three o'clock South African time. Now they schedule an evening meeting at six o'clock African time. So don't allow it to happen all the time. (P10, older Indian, Beauty, Marketing Manager)

The next section links these findings with existing literature and illustrates the development of the study's conceptual framework, based on the findings and further analysis.

Discussion

Contextual variables characterising the manufacturing export sector

Participants confirmed the dominance of a masculine leadership stereotype in the manufacturing export sector, which aligns with role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Compounding the issue, women leaders must navigate not only the cultural norms of their home countries but also those of the foreign markets they serve. Participants experienced a lack of acceptance when engaging with certain cross-border counterparts, despite holding formal leadership positions. The fact that female managers were not given the same treatment as their male counterparts (cf. Hoch and Rudsinske, 2022) emphasises the existing gender disparities both between and within countries (Eden and Gupta, 2017; Van der Straaten *et al.*, 2023).

Like their male colleagues, the women leaders were expected to work unusual hours and to travel abroad, often at short notice. However, they were perceived as being less flexible than men (Bøler *et al.*, 2018) and viewed as risky prospects for promotion. This perception of women's lack of flexibility was contradicted by the study's findings, which indicated that participants went the extra mile to meet performance expectations despite the challenges they faced.

Moreover, participants were also often judged as not being "tough enough" to perform their roles, aligning with the masculine stereotype of a strong leader, as proposed by role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Additionally, they encountered insubordination and other negative attitudes from their subordinates. This finding is consistent with Vial *et al.* (2018), who discovered that men tend to prefer working with male supervisors or managers. Participants expressed a desire to be taken seriously and have equal participation in decision-making; however, their male counterparts were typically entrusted with more authority.

Responses of women leaders when experiencing discrimination

Participants clearly faced challenges with work-life conflict, often attempting to conceal their struggles. Women, in particular, experienced heightened stress due to negative perceptions surrounding parenthood. Many felt uncomfortable telling their managers about their pregnancies. This tendency to hide internal conflicts may increase stress, potentially leading some women to leave their leadership roles or limit their career ambitions, a finding supported by Triana *et al.* (2024). Recent literature, including work by Alok and Banarjee (2023), suggests that having children can deter women from persisting in their careers, while Boora (2025) highlights the penalties motherhood can impose on women's professional advancements.

Participants often suppressed their feelings of conflict and stress because male managers typically expected them to struggle to balance family and career responsibilities. This aligns with Anglin *et al.*'s (2022), which discusses work-family conflict. To cope, many women put in extra hours, but this is not a sustainable solution and could ultimately harm the organisation's operations.

The findings from this study suggest that women are more flexible than commonly perceived, challenging Bøler *et al.*'s (2018) argument that women are viewed as inflexible. However, it was evident that participants imposed additional pressure on themselves to succeed in a male-dominated environment.

According to Adams' original equity theory of motivation (Confetto *et al.*, 2023), one would expect women to reduce their productivity or output when faced with inequity. Interestingly, this study revealed that discrimination instead motivated participants to persist in advancing their careers. They increased their productivity and performance to demonstrate their capability, competence and commitment to their male counterparts. This unexpected drive among women exposed to inequity has received limited attention in the literature and deserves further research. Additionally, the study found that participants could adopt assertive, dominant male traits when necessary to be heard or taken seriously, highlighting the complexities of gender dynamics in organisations.

The current study identified that ten participants faced negative experiences related to both race and gender. This highlights the importance of applying an intersectional lens that considers race, thereby extending Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory to incorporate additional dimensions of diversity and to avoid examining gender in isolation. Some participants referred to their experiences as a "triple whammy" (for example, Participant 1), reflecting the compounded challenges of being African and female, and in some cases, younger. Researchers, including Anglin *et al.* (2022), have similarly acknowledged the notion of "double jeopardy" at the intersection of gender and race. The legacy of apartheid continues to affect the representation of Black women in managerial roles in South African organisations (with "Black" used in accordance with the Employment Equity Act (1998) as a collective classification for African, Coloured and Indian people who were disadvantaged under apartheid).

Most participants indicated that they needed to consistently display confidence and restrict their feminine traits while also concealing their emotions to avoid being perceived as weak. Although there is limited literature on women's lived experiences in male-dominated work environments, the findings of this study align with those of Martin and Barnard (2013) regarding women's experiences in male-dominated sectors focused on domestic roles. A particularly notable finding from this study (not reported in previous studies) was that some participants felt an added responsibility to persevere for the sake of other women who would advance in their careers.

Organisational obstacles faced by women leaders

Unequal pay between genders is a persistent issue in organisations across South Africa. The findings of this study align with existing literature, confirming that women continue to earn less than their male counterparts (Bezuidenhout *et al.*, 2019; Bishu and Alkadry, 2017; Van der Straaten *et al.*, 2023). Recent South African studies, including those by Garnett and Kinnear (2026) and Lala *et al.* (2025), indicate that women face gender-related barriers in the manufacturing sector. Garnett and Kinnear (2026) highlight that systemic organisational support remains lacking in this sector.

Adams' classic equity motivation theory (1963) suggests perceptions of inequity can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction or worthlessness, prompting individuals to leave their jobs in search of better opportunities. Vial *et al.* (2018) discuss that the prevalence of an in-group social identity causes male leaders to surround themselves with other men, thereby perpetuating the gender gap at higher levels within organisations. In this study, participants observed that White males often mentor other White males as future leaders within their organisations. Hoobler *et al.* (2014) describe the detrimental effect this has on women's career aspirations and professional development. Similarly, several participants in this study expressed feelings of demotivation due to the lack of a visible career path for themselves within their organisations.

Theoretical and practical implications. The bias towards White males was particularly evident in multinational companies, which often promoted White men from their home countries (expatriates) to senior leadership positions within local operations. These findings support the study by van der Straaten *et al.* (2023) and shed light on why our South African participants feel displaced by White male expatriates. Additionally, van der Straaten *et al.* (2023) highlighted the significant number of women of colour occupying the lowest tiers of multinational hierarchies.

This finding reinforces an earlier point made in this article: that role congruity theory should be broadened to account for the intersection of race and gender, particularly regarding its impact on Black women. This represents the theoretical contribution of the current study. The existing role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) appears inadequate to explain the challenges experienced by the women in the study, as it focuses solely on gender and neglects the intersectionality of race and gender.

In terms of enablers for women leaders, especially Black women leaders, and the implications for employment relationships in the manufacturing export sector, participants indicated that the working-from-home policy had helped create a more women-friendly work environment. Tanwir and Sidebottom (2019), along with Poole *et al.* (2020), argue that the focus in the export sector should extend beyond merely creating jobs for women to also include fostering supportive working conditions. This study also revealed that participants significantly benefited from women's networks and forums.

This study presents a conceptual framework (shown in Figure 2) that captures our findings on career-persistent White and Black women committed to advancing in their careers despite the challenges posed by a predominantly White male industry. These challenges are reinforced by societal, organisational and personal stereotypes regarding the roles and status of men and women in business. According to our findings, greater trade liberalisation, in theory, serves as a societal enabler, helping women broaden their horizons and advance in their careers.

The Employment Equity Act of 1998, which was enacted following South Africa's transition to democracy, aims to promote equitable representation in the workplace by addressing the effects of past discrimination. The Act designates Black individuals (Africans, Coloureds and Indians), women and persons with disabilities as designated groups for employment purposes. However, the export and trade sector remains predominantly male, in part due to the nature of the work and an entrenched (especially among White individuals) male bias that continues to be perpetuated. It seems, therefore, that organisational support for women, especially Black women aspiring to leadership positions, is often inadequate. The study revealed that women managers and leaders receive little support when confronted with the gender and racial discrimination they frequently experience. As a result, they are often left to address these challenges independently, which means they must manage their responsibilities while minimising the expression of their emotions (stress, frustration,

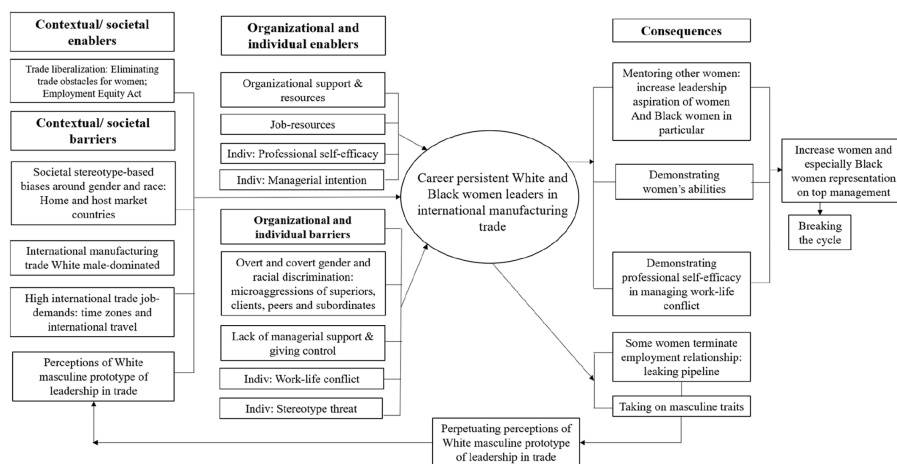


Figure 2. Conceptual framework based on the study's findings. Source: Authors' own compilation

anger) in the face of discrimination, inequity, unreasonable expectations and condescending attitudes. Consequently, these women often feel compelled to work harder than their male counterparts to prove their worth. In some instances, they have chosen to leave their organisations.

The ongoing struggle for these women leads to work-life conflicts and additional stress, with few alternatives available to them. Some women managers have occasionally adopted a more aggressive, traditionally masculine persona to be taken seriously or to achieve results. However, this is generally viewed as a last resort and may reinforce the stereotypes surrounding masculine leadership. More commonly, their response is to persist, maintaining high-performance levels while battling self-doubt.

The conceptual framework illustrates that some participants felt an obligation to continue as career persisters, aiming to serve as role models for other women advancing in their careers.

Organisations in South Africa could demonstrate their commitment to the transformation objectives of the Employment Equity Act (1998) and invest in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives that raise awareness of the benefits of promoting women, especially Black women, into managerial positions. Such initiatives may contribute to more inclusive workplaces and support broader transformation efforts.

Study limitations and future research

This study focused exclusively on women leaders in organisations within the manufacturing export sector. As a result, the findings may not be applicable to other contexts, such as small, young entrepreneurial firms within the same sector or to different sectors altogether. Future research could benefit from including entrepreneurial firms in the manufacturing sector and from exploring male-dominated sectors such as mining and construction.

Additionally, the study was limited to women leaders in South Africa, meaning their experiences may not reflect those of women working in multinational companies in other countries. Future studies could incorporate a larger, more diverse sample of women leaders, including those who remained in their organisations and those who left. Furthermore, exploring women managers' coping mechanisms in greater depth could provide valuable insights into the causal relationships between inequity and the various responses they exhibit.

Conclusion and recommendations

There is a clear need to promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, with a particular focus on gender and racial inclusion, within the manufacturing export sector. Exporting firms, including multinationals, should implement flexible working arrangements when appropriate. Additionally, they must address pay inequity, as it can be demoralising for both junior and senior staff members.

Moreover, the trend of grooming predominantly White men for executive positions within the host country needs serious attention, as this practice can suppress women's leadership ambitions and impede their professional development. Supervisors and mentors should recognise that women leaders may conceal their work-life conflicts and feelings of self-doubt.

Interventions are necessary to mitigate the risk of stress and burnout among women leaders. In this context, male leaders must be trained to provide psychosocial support to the women on their teams when needed. There is much that can and should be done to break the cycle of discrimination, preventing women from realising their professional potential. With proper support, women can lead their firms to greater success.

Human resource managers should take note of these findings and initiate DEI programs to raise awareness about the gender and race discrimination faced by women leaders in this sector. They must specifically address biased succession planning and unequal pay, as well as their impact on women's employment relationships.

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