



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 19

Issue 3 *Selected Papers of the Third World Conference  
on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 2017*

Article 13

Apr-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Osituyo, Oladapo O. (2018). Deliberate Ceiling for Career Progress of Female Public Service Employees: A Contemporary Transformation Trend in South Africa. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(3), 172-186.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss3/13>

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## **Deliberate Ceiling for Career Progress of Female Public Service Employees: A Contemporary Transformation Trend in South Africa**

By Oladapo O. Osituyo <sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Female employees are rarely found in senior level decision-making roles in the public service sector. Rather they are concentrated in larger number at the lower management levels in the workplace. This study evaluates barriers to female employees' career progress within the South African public service sector. Prior studies relating to progress of female employees into the senior and top managerial levels within the South African public service sector have revealed an exclusion and inability to climb the decision-making ladder. Employing a questionnaire that included evaluative tools from previous scholarly studies (e.g., the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) and the Career Barrier Inventory (CBI) scale), a sample of 286 employees working in selected South African public service organisations within the Gauteng province formed the foundation for the current assessment. The raw data was evaluated with standard statistical software (e.g. Microsoft Excel) and the results pointed to an insignificant positive correlation between gender role perceptions and women's career progress; a slightly insignificant positive relationship between women managerial capability and women's career progress; and a slightly insignificant negative relationship between gender stereotype and women's career progress. The overall outcome of the study reveals that the pace of women's career progress within Gauteng province is affected by workplace barriers.

*Keywords:* transformation, managerial level, gender stereotypes, women's career progress, Gauteng, capability

### **Introduction**

Female representation in managerial levels has increased on a global level in recent decades. In spite of this increase, research indicates limitations to progress due to barriers to entry specific to senior level leadership.

Women are employed in increasing numbers in developed countries. However, progress as defined by representation in leadership positions consistent with the proportionate representation in the population remains relatively sluggish and irregular in diverse countries and cultures (Davidson, 2012). Arguably, the increased female representation in the workplace in transforming global labor markets such that gender roles continue to shift rapidly. Despite this rapid swing, it is apparent that important human resource management procedures and decisions (i.e. work assignments, compensation, and promotion) continue to be biased in opposition of proportionate female gains in representation across all leadership levels (Kim, Trimi & Chung, 2014). The first set of female managers was noticed within the workplace in late 1960s and early 1970s (Whiteley, 2013), today they remain in limited number in both in politics and within the

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topmost managerial level in public service (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2014). Some studies have indicated that it is the nature of the public service sector itself has limited the entry of women. (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1992).

Overall, the female employment rate continues to rise, resulting in apparent global revolution as the representation of female participation in the workforce has increased from 38.0% in 1970 to 47.3% by the end of the twentieth century (Lazreg, 2000). Caligiuri and Tung (1999), revealed that both women and gender issues globally have become an area of focus specific to gender equity. However, the same growth and oversight has not been true with respect to trends related to women in the public sector (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2014). Werner and DeSimone (2011) in their study explained career progress as a set of activities through which appropriate personal and professional goals are determined to obtain the required skills and experiences needed. However, the concentration of women and maintenance of women in low level occupational positions without evidence of an upward mobility precludes the perception of career progress. The significance of this is that women tend to be underutilized in the labour market (Mathur-Helm, 2005).

A number of studies reveal the presence of obvious obstacles being experienced by female employees in advancing into top managerial posts (Enid & Singh, 2013). However, organisational researchers have continued to focus on managerial women and the issues they face. This research as revealed that there is evidence of career progress. This has undoubtedly created consciousness around women's intellectual and skilled contributions (Mathur-Helm, 2005). According to Ellinas and Suleiman (2012), women constitute 13.7% of board positions, representing 3.4% of presidents and chairladies within the European Union. This limited representation of women continues to be tied to traditional gender roles (i.e. house chores performing household tasks) that have isolated women from opportunities for progress due to both employer perception and personal responsibility (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Even though, women are progressing in the public service sector, they are continually confronted with challenges on their way up the ladder (Ricucci, 2009). However, there has been limited evaluation specific to public service sector career progress (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005).

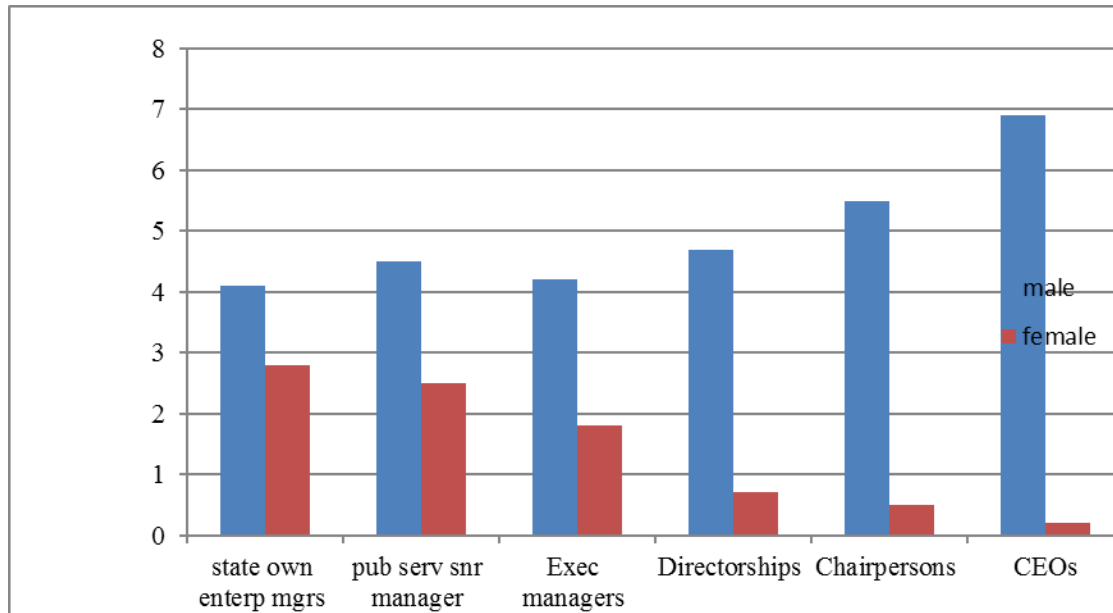
In South African society, legislative and social discourse on gender equality issues has not been able to achieve total equality in terms of adequate female representation in organisational management structures. Even though gender equality has been undergoing transformation in recent times (i.e., placing women empowerment and emancipation issues at the forefront to enhance administrative role) the sociological evaluation of women's performances and advancement has had limited assessment (Schein, 2007). Given the visibility and the role of the South African public sector there appears to be value and corresponding limitation in research focused on investigating the reason why women are employed in large numbers but are never allowed to get to the top-most management positions. This study therefore examines the factors preventing women from holding top managerial posts within the South African public service.

### **Problem statement**

This study examines the factors preventing female employees from holding top managerial positions within the South African public service sector. According to Tlaiss and Kauser (2011), the paucity of literature on the topic makes it imperative to examine the degree western views are applicable in emerging countries. There has been a great measure of studies surrounding gender issues in the workplace (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat, Chang, Hewapathirana, Horimoto & Hamzah,

2015). Many organisations have failed to employ, promote, or sustain female employees relative to their male colleagues (Cho, McLean, Amornpipat, Chang, Hewapathirana, Horimoto & Hamzah, 2015). Scholars around the world (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Heydenrych & Van Wyk, 2014; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005; Allen, French & Poteet, 2016; Surajlall, 2013; Shrestha, 2016, and Eagly & Carli 2007) and most especially in South Africa have articulated a number of hindrances to female employees' career progress which result in their slow progression. Many scholars have been focusing their studies around glass ceiling in workplaces as a main obstacle to female employee's progress to leadership positions at workplaces. Studies (Mathur-Helm, 2005; Garavan, O'Brien & O'Hanlon, 2006) have also incorporated discussion on gender from workplace perceptions, women career progress, affirmative action and gender and equity relative the South African workplace. It is apparent that most noticeable barriers identified in the literature includes women's social existence derived from some fact of their physiology (Thusi, 2014), and gender and leadership stereotyping. Investigation into gender stereotyping reveals a mutuality in the belief of women as naturally subordinate to their male counterparts, which includes the perception that female employees do not have the capacity of facing challenges of managerial roles. As a result. the career progress of women remains significantly limited in South Africa (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010; Thusi, 2014; Gyekye, 2013).

The chart below, produced by the Business Women's Association of South Africa, reflects female employees appointment into non-executive directorship positions. The proportions provided reflect exclusion from the most important key decision-making positions within organisations. The data from the Business Women's Association of South Africa also reveal how workplaces (i.e., the state owned enterprise) management positions have been dominated by men (59.9%) relative to women (40.5%). For public service senior managers the distribution between genders: men (61.8%) and women (38.2%) is more pronounced. Continuing upward on the leadership hierarchy, males hold 70.7% of executive position relative to females at 29.3%. This trend continues at the Director level, 78.2% men and 21.8% women, to the Chairperson with 90.8% of positions being held by men compared to only 9.2% represented by females. The highest managerial level position, the CEOs has male representation of 97.6%, resulting in a significantly low representation of females in the top position at 2.4%. The career progress of female employees to top management positions continues to be influenced by several career barriers they face. The South African government seems to be more committed to implementing policies to promote female representation in workplace. Despite this commitment the representation of women in higher managerial positions within the public service has yet to reach its target of 50% female representation. Men are appointed to significant proportion of executive positions in public service, while women are still minority in higher positions (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2010; Kahn & Motsoeneng, 2014; Meyer, 2014; Kahn & Louw, 2011).



**Chart 1. Business Women’s Association of South Africa**

Presently, there is dire need for more rigorous studies on the advancement of women within the South African public service sector. This research takes a bold step further to review literature on issues affecting public service women in top management posts within the South African public service sector, drawing from extant research and developing more on strict observance of the feminist theory to support an appreciable increase in female employee’s representation at the top management positions within the South African public service. The findings of this study will further public service sector organisations in re-formulating effective policies to encourage female employee’s career growth at national, local and municipal level. It is also hoped that the present study by highlighting the need for greater research related to the career progress of women, will also stimulate more future research in the general field of gender studies.

### **Significance of the study**

The South African Employment Equity Report (2014) reveals that the number of females employed within the South African public service is mostly employed into lower managerial posts. For example, only four hundred and three thousand, three hundred and fifty six are females while one million, fifteen thousand; three hundred and twenty five are overall, also having twenty thousand, three hundred and sixty two of eighty two thousand, two hundred and twenty eight of senior management positions are held by women (Farmer, 2013). According to the employment equity report of 2014, there are men and women occupying top managerial posts within the Gauteng province, 7.8% and 3.3% respectively. Women occupy a percentage of 3.6% of chief executive posts (Farmer, 2013).

### **Research question**

- Is there any relationship between women’s managerial capability and women’s career progress?

- Is there any relationship between gender-role perceptions and women's career progress?
- Is there a relationship between gender stereotype and women's career progress?

### **Research objectives**

- Assess the relationship between women's managerial capability and women's career progress.
- Establish the relationship between gender-role perceptions and women's career progress.
- Investigate the relationship between gender stereotype and women's career progress.
- Develop a conceptual framework depicting the relationship between variables of the study and women under representation in the public service.

### **Previous studies and scholarly views**

In South Africa, feminism is tied with gender equity in the workplace (Gouws, 2017). Given the attribution, feminism appears to be requisite in the workplace (Gouws, 2017), most especially within the Public Service sector. However, the persistent manifestation of gender disparity within the public service employment can be analysed from diverse viewpoints, with evidence of that supports the increasing interest in women in senior and managerial posts. A small number of studies on gender in psychology have surfaced the relationship between femininity and masculinity as predictors of temperaments, abilities, characters, and roles embedded in an individual (Connell, 2014).

The 1994 transition to democracy in South Africa offered a critical phase for ensuring the priorities of the post-apartheid state included gender equality and equitable representation of women. Although, this was largely achieved in formal institutional and legal terms, feminism and revolutionary policies have been weak; current debates center on the role of "state feminism" in relation to civil society (Franceschet, 2003). Few studies on feminism try to find responses to queries leading to an increase in gender awareness; yet, feminism continues to receive its share of criticism (Brannon, 2016). This has led to a critic of feminism as being a mechanism to eliminate men's right (Brannon, 2016).

### **Women in South African Public Service and feminist theory**

The persistent exit of women along with increased representation of men in organisational leadership in the late 1990s furthered gender equity and increased research and interest in gender research (Fitzgerald, 2013). Lay and Daley (2007) revealed the struggle for equal rights for women concerned has been linked and attributed to a rise in feminism in both public and private employment. The feminist theory is founded on the belief that men and women should be equally taken into consideration in social, political-economic contexts and that the two should participate on equal terms. Doubell and Struwig (2014) along with Barrett (2014) noted that feminist's theorists believe "women" or "gender" are social constructions rather than a natural fact. The oppression of women, however, is perceived by men as historical natural system of existence

(Fitzgerald, 2013). Therefore, for feminists, one can only assume that there is no a man or woman but only human beings that exists within the society.

Harding (2011) described feminism as a drive; principles on opinions about gender equality as a problem. Feminists believe women are being restrained through their male counterpart's assertions of superiority via patriarchy. Heywood (2017) is of the view that movements and ideologies share mutual objectives; to be able to achieve common political, financial, personal and social rights among women i.e. the quest for the establishment of same prospects, just as liberation of women is perceived an impossible task in a societal direction designed by men and established on patriarchy (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2018). The concept tries to find liberation of women by the existing structure of conveying transformations, especially within the South African public service. Furthermore, Bierema (2003) was able to establish that there are astounding ways through which women deal with marginalization, "one might assume that working in a patriarchal system would galvanize a woman's feminist perspective and desire to change organizational culture, often the opposite is true". Reinharz & Davidman, (1992) also argue that "Feminist researchers deal with dilemmas that have no absolute solutions". However, more investigation is essential in order to understand "who has the power and how it is utilized to either change or maintain the status quo; but also, what forces exist that prevent women from fully expressing themselves and their values".

An underlying motive of approaching this study from feminist viewpoint is to call attention to the level of intimidation through appropriate investigation of several methods these women are oppressed. More particularly the progress in the career of women are specifically mentioned and considered within the realms of women's liberation. Female employees in public service should be given a fair and equal hearing while engaging in work life activities with their male counterparts (David, 2017). Public management in recent time is driven with little or no feminist perspective bringing about topics and questions neglected due to this (Fitch, James & Motion, 2016).

### **Career barriers**

According to Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein & Hein (2015), there has been limited work conducted on the topic of career limitations related to female progress and advancement. However, both internal and external career barriers exist; external barriers are found in the environment and internal barriers are of a more psychological nature (Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein & Hein (2015). These barriers are believed to create a lack of confidence and self-esteem with respect to the self-perception of an individual to personal abilities resulting in frequent loss of opportunities and advancement in career. Albert Banduras social cognitive theory is well known for its ideas about people learning by examples, this provides a basis for understanding, forecasting and altering human behavior i.e. attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The theory likened the self-efficacy concept to choice of career and application. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the underlying system of cognitive belief within workplace leading to effective progress in career readiness to regulate direction (Arokiasamy, Mansouri, Balaraman & Kassim, 2017).

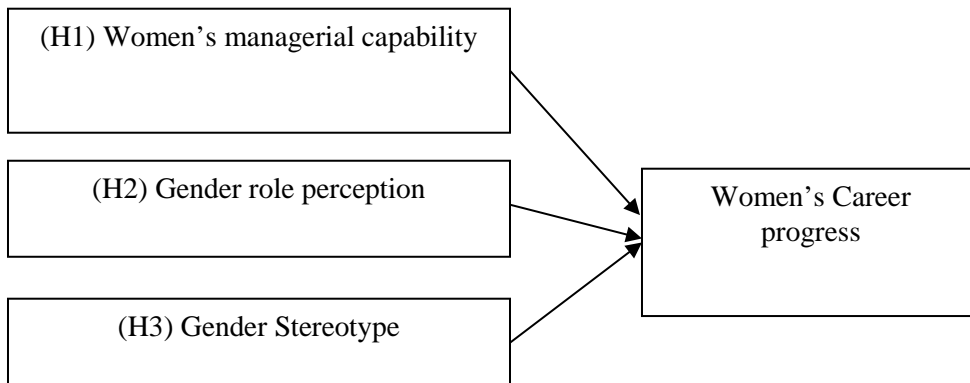
### **Reproduction of Labour Theory**

Reproductive labour according to Anderson (2002) describes how employees are maintained. This idea of reproductive labour was developed by feminists. Women have been noticed to be at the centre of capitalist production due to their unpaid household labour, while

producing labour control. The rearing of children and maintenance of employees is credited largely to the women’s unpaid labour (Anderson, 2002). Kamau (2012) further described reproduction of labour theory as support to women who embrace old-style roles within the home, and forestall irregular labour involvement. Only a little incentive will be available to invest in their work, causing underrepresentation at the topmost managerial level. Females have been attributed with having lower career ambitions than their male colleagues. Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein & Hein (2015) termed it “glass cliff” to express similar idea, while Farmer (2013) perceived it to be “glass escalator”. Ryan and Haslem (2007) further described to be “glass cliff. However, the terminology is equally reflective of a barrier for women and the balanced contention that elimination will necessitate structural and perceptual changes with strong commitment from the managerial post holders (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**The conceptual framework of this study**

Various hypotheses have been formulated to illustrate the direction and strength of these relationships. These hypotheses are tested in subsequent section of this study, to confirm or reject the validity of the relationships shown in the framework. As shown in different sections of this paper, all these relationships have been well established through theoretical and empirical literature reviews. The structural testing and validation of this framework is however shown in the empirical part of this study. In developing a conceptual framework for this study, the researcher examines the career barriers effect on women in relation to their career progress. The framework examines the factors (independent variables) hypothesized to influence women’s career progress. Career progress, the dependent variable demonstrates a direct relationship between the variables (gender-role perceptions, women’s managerial capability, gender stereotype), and women’s career progress.



**Methodology**

*Sampling design*

Most times, the best way to find out people’s opinion about an idea is through cross-examination. An appropriate research design is required to test the merit of the conceptual relations, as hypothesised by the structural framework. Research design similarly allows researcher to test for hypothesis and reaching valid conclusions about relationships between independent and



dependent variables to identify the conditions underlying the occurrence of a given phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013).

#### *Target population*

The targeted population that this study focused on was the middle and senior employees within the South African public service. This was appropriate for the research because the South African public service employees post designations reflected an acute shortage in number of female employees in senior management positions. Specific to methodology the study conforms to standard methods. Practically all surveys aim at describing the opinion or depiction of a population using a representative sample.

#### *Sampling frame*

The sampling frame was generated from selected South African public service organisations. Employees in middle and senior management positions represented the managerial and supervisory levels in the organisations.

#### *Sampling size*

The sample size was made up of 286 respondents. In order to ensure that all employees had an equal opportunity, the questionnaire was randomly distributed among the middle and senior employees from the selected organisations.

#### *Sampling method*

This research therefore adopts the convenience sampling method which is a non-probability sampling technique applicable to quantitative or qualitative studies, although not frequently used in quantitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In convenience samples, subjects that are more readily accessible to the researcher are more likely to be included (Denscombe, 2014; Suen, Huang & Lee, 2014).

#### *Questionnaire design*

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire had four sections A, B, C, and D. Section A is a demographic section for gathering background and personal information. Sections B, C, and D had questions on gender role perceptions, gender managerial capability and gender stereotype.

#### *Measuring Instruments*

The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire which was divided into 6 sections. The questionnaires comprised several scales based on earlier scholarly studies including management and organisational related scales (e.g. the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), Women as Managers Scale (WAMS), and the Career Barrier Inventory). These instruments had been used in previous studies with their validity and reliability tested along with nominal and interval scales to provide adequate response variance which made it easier for participant's completion.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Relationship between women's managerial capability and women's career progress*

Chong (2013) defines managerial capability as superior job performance related features. An individual's performance is measured in relation to precise behavioural indicators. This reveals

the expectations on performances in organisations, while managers are evaluated on set tasks with defined organisational standards called “competences” which are differentiated from the individual's capability. Varieties of issues are envisaged to arise in restraining women's potential aspiration to climb the managerial ladder. Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein and Hein (2015) upheld that women's restriction might be because of patriarchal system where decision-making powers are in the hands of their male counterparts. In this situation, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the status and women's role within society are still common and many women who are part of this system find it difficult to diverge from this culture and tradition they do not accept. The man is observed as the head of the family and bread winner, and has the right to public life. However, limiting women's identity to the domestic sphere is a major barrier to women's entry into the top management level that affects public life.

According to Grant Thornton's report in 2013, female representation in senior management positions varies significantly by country and culture. A few countries i.e. China, Poland and Latvia still have female managers at the senior level at 51%, 48% and 43% respectively, while Japan has been confirmed to have the least number of women as senior managers with only 7%. The United Arab Emirates and Netherlands both have 11% (IBR, 2013). Sealy and Vinnicombe (2012) revealed in 2012 women held only 15% of board seats and 6.6% of executive positions of the FTSE 100 companies, while globally the average of companies with a female CEO was 9% in 2012, and it increased to 14% in 2013. Dezso and Ross (2008) in their research argued that female representation in senior management below the CEO level had a strong positive relationship with better company performance. The attributions included bringing important and social diversity benefits to the top management team, enriching the behaviours exhibited by managers in the workplaces, and motivating middle management women. In public sector, it is evident that although there has been a steady increase of women in top executive positions, women are still lagging behind their male counterparts within the South African public service. Considering the relationship between women's managerial capability and career progress of female employees in the above literature review, along with the empirical evidence presented therein, it is therefore proposed that:

**Proposition 1: Women's managerial capability has a positive effect on women's career progress**

*Relationship between Gender-role perceptions and women's Career progress*

Studies (Streiner, Norman and Cairney, 2015; Johnson, 2017) reveal discriminatory behavior may appear justified if it is consistent with a workplace culture. Higher executive positions in workplaces continue to be dominated by men despite a significant increase of women in managerial positions (Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; Wentling, 2003). However, gender equality is not only about the number of women and men in leadership roles, but also about the types of leadership roles they attain, the expectation surrounding their appointments and their experiences in those roles. Thus, gender equality cannot just be about increasing the number of women in certain positions, but also about the quality of those positions and their experiences within those roles (Belknap, 2014; Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink & Haslam, 2014). The apparent fitness of men and women leaders during crisis depends on the social support (Rink, Ryan and Stoker, 2012; Ellemers, Rink, Derks and Ryan, 2012). Women's labour force participation is seen to conflict with career roles in some countries, regardless of their level of education women may have to prioritize their family responsibilities over employment and/or career choices (Bingham, Adolpho, Jackson & Alexitch, 2014). Despite the increasing population of employed women, women are still found

wanting in holding commanding and influential posts in government or the private sector (Posholi, 2012). Many organisations today still see top management activities as a prerogative of men (Carnall, 2007). Considering the relationship between gender-role perception and career progress of women in the above literature review, together with the empirical evidence presented therein, it is therefore proposed that:

**Proposition 2: Gender-role perceptions have a negative effect on women's career progress**

*Relationship between Gender stereotype and women's career progress*

Eagly, (2013) define gender stereotypes as a socially created 'masculinity' and 'femininity' which are established through diverse behaviour. This clarifies gender stereotypes as social constructions of masculinity and femininity constructs which influence external perceptions and individual's internal identity and sense of belonging (O'Hara, 2016). O'Hara (2016) explained that attribution of gender stereotypes qualities according to masculinity and femininity tends to categorise individuals. Characteristics such as 'active-creative' are generally attributed to masculinity, with qualities such as activity, dominance, self-confidence, aggressiveness, logical thinking, and leadership ability associated to it. There are indications that stereotypically across the world female qualities do not quickly come to mind when considering successful leaders (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink & Haslam, 2014). Even though there have been changes to the way the society views women but women who are seen violating prescribed feminine traits and behaviours are viewed unfavourably while gender role expectations remain strong (Balachandra, Briggs, Eddleston & Brush, 2013).

Heilman (2001) contended that this ascription of qualities to gender becomes problematic when it starts to bring out gender bias from evaluators; "they produce the perceived lack of fit responsible for many types of biased judgments about women in work settings". Those not fitting to this recommendation are judged harshly by society. Heilman (2001) was supported by O'Hara, 2016 revealing that socially constructed and gender-stereotyped prospects around motherhood do not include additional accountability of qualified leader. Heilman proposed further that the primary cause of women's scarcity at the top management positions of organisations is gender bias in evaluation. This is due to gender biasness and its influences on work place, being competent offer no assurance of advancement of a female employee to compete equally with her male colleagues (Heilman, 2001). Women in top management positions regardless of government policies and higher level of qualification can be credited to gender stereotypic opinions that women are less suitable for decision making posts and more to compassionate roles (Woods, 2008). Having considered the relationship between gender Stereotyping and Women's career advancement in the literature above, together with the empirical evidence presented therein, the following is hereby proposed for the present study.

**Proposition 3: Gender stereotypes have a significantly negative effect on Women's career progress.**

*Conclusion*

Several works have been done on career advancement and women's under representation within the South African context mostly leaving out the public service sector. The various themes identified, discussed and interpreted demonstrate that women's career advancement is being impaired by some barriers at the top management level within the South African public service. In this paper, women's career advancement and under representation within the South African public service has been looked into with a purpose to finding the reasons for women's prevention from

climbing the ladder. The research design and methodology followed by data collation, the instruments used and the statistical analysis were extensively explained.

However, from the data analyses it was discovered that there was:

- slightly insignificant positive relation between women managerial capability and women's career progress
- an insignificant positive correlation between gender role perceptions and women's career progress
- slightly insignificant negative correlation between gender stereotype and women's career progress

In summary, while the results of the study have mostly confirmed findings of previous studies, it also built on some new directions in the relationship between the concepts (Women's managerial capability, Gender-role perceptions, Gender stereotype and Career progress of women). This study will therefore form the basis for future research in a similar or different organisational environment, especially as it is one of the very few studies conducted in the Gauteng province of the South African public service.

### **Recommendations**

It is only over the last few decades that women's role in the history of South Africa has, belatedly, been given some recognition. Many South African women continue to experience marginalization and discrimination in the workplace, in their homes and within the communities. Perhaps the two most noteworthy findings of this study relate to the effect of these career barriers on the advancement and under representation of women in workplace. However, some previous studies were consistent while others were not. This indicates that developments amongst women in the workplace may be continuously changing and evolving. In addition, it is important to understand that the focus of this study was to not only to confirm or refute previous findings, but it is also aimed at illuminating vague reasons, and to unearth and understand the programs behind woman's career advancement initiatives within South African public service. This study has made the following theoretical and empirical contributions to women career advancement and under representation in top management positions, just as it contributes to career advancement concept and women's under representation within the South African public service and human resources management research globally.

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