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Sandwiched between groups: Upward career experiences of South African Indian women

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the challenges Indian women managers face in their career ascendancy.

Design/methodology/approach: Using a qualitative approach, to gain an in-depth understanding of the intersectional issues and challenges younger and older Indian women managers face in their career progress towards senior- and top-managerial positions.

Findings/results: The results indicate that the intersection of the socio-historical-political contexts, together with racial, gender, cultural and workplace impediments, produces both different and converging outcomes for older and younger Indian women managers in their upward career mobility. Compared with their older counterparts, the career ascendancy of younger participants is more challenging, as they have to compete against a bigger pool of qualified black candidates. A research limitation is that the study did not compare the experiences of Indian women with Indian men regarding their career ascendancy.

Practical implications: Practical implications include managers needing to implement targeted succession planning, eradicate sexism and patriarchy and introduce formal mentorship, coaching and networking programmes.

Originality/value: The article compares the experiences of younger and older Indian women managers in a changing political landscape. The findings of the study indicate that the experiences of women across generations differ, as their career ascendancy is dissimilar.

Keywords: Indian women managers; younger women; older women; critical race theory; intersectionality; interpretivism.

Introduction

The post-apartheid era has brought about many advantages for South African women, one such transformation being the greater advancement of women into managerial positions (Carrim, 2012). However, little is known about the experiences of women based on the intersection of different social, personal and organisational elements and their career advancement in corporate South Africa. Intersectionality, which is the intersection of social identities such as race, gender, culture and age, can be used to understand the challenges that women from diverse backgrounds, Indian women in the case of the present study, face in their upward career mobility.

Most studies on Indian women's career advancement were conducted in Western countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia (Chhatrapati, Bhardwaj, & Singh, 2011; Rastogi & Bansal, 2012; Riza & Gatrell, 2013). Many challenges within these contexts were found to relate to Indian women's upward mobility, ranging from social impediments to organisational factors (Kaushik, Sharma, & Kaushik, 2014; Radhakrishnan, 2008; Riza & Gatrell, 2013). In South Africa, colonialism and, thereafter, apartheid, together with cultural impediments, thwarted the upward mobility of Indian women.

The tri-cameral parliament of 1984, which excluded black people and gave Indian and coloured poeple minimal political and economic power (Soni, 2020), created limited job opportunities for Indian women within the corporate environment (Nyar, 2012). South African Indian women's career advancement opportunities only started taking root recently (from 1994 onwards). Therefore, their experiences do not resonate with those of other minority women in Western contexts. Since the first democratic elections in 1994 in South Africa and the introduction of labour legislation favouring the upward mobility of previously disadvantaged individuals (Indian people, coloured people, black people, women and disabled persons) more women are entering the corporate environment and climbing the career ladder (Chinyamurindi, 2016).

Most of the research on women's career advancement in the South African context has focussed on white and black women's upward mobility (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010), with limited research on how Indian women navigate their career advancement (Carrim, 2018; Chinyamurindi, 2016; Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Moreover, this line of research on women's career experiences has mainly focussed on structural elements within organisations that have negatively impacted women's upward mobility in corporate South Africa (Chinyamurindi, 2016). Whilst race plays an important role in the South African context, structural organisational elements, gendered factors such as taking care of the home and the family and lack of confidence in one's abilities intersect in influencing Indian women's upward career mobility (Carrim, 2018). As there is a lack of understanding of the racial, cultural and gender-based barriers that professional Indian women face, the objective of this study was to explore these challenges in their upward mobility.

This article, therefore, fills this gap in the literature by focussing on the experiences of younger and older Indian women and their career advancement in corporate South Africa using a critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality lens. In this article, I demonstrate how the quest to become a manager is complicated and not an easy journey. The participating women's stories suggest how their perceptions of their struggle for upward mobility may intersect with other factors beside their racial identities.

This article extends the understanding of minority women's career experiences in South African organisations. Drawing from their narratives, the complexities arising in organisations are revealed because of the legacy of apartheid and other factors that influenced their career advancement. The following question is answered: *What are the career experiences of younger and older Indian women managers in South African organisations?*

The next section focusses on the theoretical frameworks applied in the study, namely CRT and intersectionality. This is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion sections.

Theoretical framework: Critical race theory and intersectionality

Literature on CRT and intersectionality were used to frame the research.

Critical race theory began in the late 1980s as a combination of critical legal studies and feminism. Most of the scholarship in CRT is still embedded in the legal environment, with fewer studies conducted in Sociology, History, Education, Ethnic studies and Women's studies (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Puttick, 2012). Critical race theory is founded on the basis that race and racism are enduring and pervasive and a key element in the experiences of individuals in the workplace (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, scholars criticise this perspective for being too simplistic (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Women and people of colour felt that their ethnicity, gender, class, immigrant status, language, sexual experiences and histories were supressed and therefore opposed the black or white binary in CRT research (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). They emphasised that oppression in society could not be fully understood by focussing only on black and white racial groups (Puttick, 2012). By offering a two-dimensional discourse, the black or white binary limits understanding of the multiple ways in which diverse minorities continue to experience, respond to and resist racism and other forms of oppression (Treviño et al., 2008).

Some research related to CRT has been conducted within the South African context. This research was conducted in the Academic environment, (Jawitz, 2012), Legal studies (Modiri, 2012) and Theology (Conradie, 2016). Modiri (2012) argued that there is a lack of studies related to CRT in the South African legal system and calls for more attention to race. However, these studies have not considered the upward career mobility of previously disadvantaged individuals.

Research based on CRT has mostly focussed on the black or white binary, without taking other factors into account. Critical race theory theorists posit that race is embedded in a historical and social context; therefore, the meanings of race and racism differ across contexts and fluctuate over time (Gordon, 2000).

For most of South Africa's history, white superiority was central in the economic, political and social landscape, from which non-whites were excluded (Carrim, 2018). This racial hierarchy was characterised by subordination and segregation and was supported through state legislation. Indian, coloured and black people were considered inferior to white people. This view was used to justify inequitable allocation of legal, political and economic rights to individuals (Carrim, 2019; Puttick, 2012). The covert nature of discrimination, together with the denial that racism remains a major problem, is aggravated by the avoidance of dialogue around these issues (Conradie, 2016).

Although overt racial hierarchies have been eradicated through legislation in the South African context and there is an increase in contact amongst the different race groups, CRT holds that labour legislation and such contact alone cannot erase racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Conradie, 2016). Critical race theory rather aims to question how structural disparities such as inequality in access to education and distribution of wealth, together with interpersonal prejudice, informs racialised thinking (Cloete, 2014; Conradie, 2016).

Although black people have gained political power in South Africa, economic power still belongs to white people (Booysen, 2007). A race and gender hierarchy that has its roots in historical structures continues to exist in the workplace, where white men still dominate top- and senior-managerial positions, especially in the private sector (Department of Labour, 2020). Interpersonal prejudice, which

consists of a range of harmful assumptions, remains, despite an increased number of people of colour entering the workplace (Conradie, 2016).

Extant literature on the South African context points out that covert racism is still prevalent in the workplace (Conradie, 2016; Puttick, 2012; Steyn & McEwan, 2013). Attempts to reveal racism lead to victims being accused of reverse racism, political oversensitivity, evasion and hostility (Soudien, 2010). Critical race theory is therefore required to examine whether the workplace context changes, interrogates or reproduces existing assumptions and inequalities for Indian women employees (Conradie, 2016).

An intersectionality perspective

Critical race theory scholars have pointed out that racism is accompanied by other intersecting forms of oppression. Neglecting these in research results in a narrow perspective on minority employees' challenges (Crenshaw, 1993). Critical race theory provides an insight into intersectionality, as it leads to dissecting how minority groups may be subordinated (Gordon, 2000). Intersectionality scholars maintain that being oppressed is always intertwined with other social aspects, such as disability, geography, immigration status, to name a few (Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, the role of race and ethnicity cannot be ignored, as it is still present across the globe, evident in racism against immigrants in Europe and xenophobia in South Africa (Carrim, 2019; Gordon, 2000). Thus, one needs to understand where power and privilege come together in comprehending conflicting aspects of inequality (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Holvino (2010) and Ray (2019) pointed out that organisational scholars tend to ignore the importance of race in their research, whilst race- and ethnic-scholars ignore how organisations produce race. Omi and Winant (2016) pointed out that race is a multifaceted, socio-political and hierarchical construction, and that organisational formation is nested in the institutionalised field of race. Thus, race should not be seen as a demographic variable, but as a mechanism that reproduces inequality (Jung, 2015).

Race, according to organisational scholars, shapes career attainment (Ferguson & Koning, 2018; Golash-Boza, 2016). Not only is race important, but Acker (2012) pointed out that organisational scholars have been criticised for not taking into account gender in their research. She coined the term *gendered substructures*, which she regards as invisible elements within organisations where gendered conventions about masculinity and femininity, men and women, are embedded and gender inequalities are reproduced. She further questions why gender inequalities exist despite equality laws, feminist movements and women increasingly attaining academic qualifications.

According to Acker (2012), most studies based on race- and gender-inequalities focus on one or two groupings, without investigating them as jointly contrasting or reinforcing elements. Acker (2012) further pointed out that, besides gender, race and class also produce inclusions and exclusions in organisations. Hence, performance decisions could be based on race and gender and other factors. Few studies have focussed on how multiple categories intersect.

One exception is Adib and Guerrier's (2003) study in which gender was examined in relation to race, class, ethnicity and nationality. The results of their study reveal that at various junctures in employees' workplace duties, different identities become salient. Thus, gender identity is not always significant in their study. However, many researchers criticise the use of multiple identities in intersectionality research. These researchers argue that examining too many intersecting identities results in individual rather than group identities becoming pivotal. The critics therefore call for the use of specific locations and sites as the focus of such research (Holvino, 2010). I therefore focus on how race, culture and gender intersect in the experiences of Indian women managers in their upward career mobility.

Indian women's history in South Africa

In 1860, the first group of Indian indentured labourers, consisting of Hindus (86%), Christians (2%) and Muslims (12%), arrived in Natal to work on the sugarcane plantations. They were socially regarded of a lower class and most were semi-skilled or unskilled workers (Hughes, 2007). The second group, known as *passenger Indians*, arrived 10 years later, and were financially better off, as they were Muslim and Hindu business people and professionals (Govender, 2006).

As a result of patriarchal attitudes and financial affluence, women from passenger families did not complete their school education, whilst those from indentured backgrounds worked and could thus not attend school (Carrim, 2012). In 1960, the total number of illiterate Indian women was 61.5%, dropping to 10.4% by 1985 (Martineau, 1997). Disparities in the education system negatively impacted Indian women's level of schooling, even after the demise of apartheid. By 2001, 7% of Indian women still had no education at all (Perry & Arends, 2003). Contemporary data reveal that the number of Indian girls completing schooling have equalled, and in some cases surpassed, that of boys (Statistics SA, 2020).

Colonialism, apartheid, the caste system and the indenture labour system were pivotal in creating and reproducing economic, social and political disparities between people from different genders, castes and race groups (Carrim, 2018). The British colonialists implemented a rigid caste system in India, where women were subjugated to men. Whilst the British colonialists succeeded in abolishing the institutions of gender oppression in the form of female infanticide, widow remarriages, dowry, child marriages and the practice of *sati* (widow immolation), they failed to raise women out of the caste system (Buckley, 2015).

Colonialism relegated Indian women to subordinate positions and their minority status was exacerbated during

apartheid, when they faced double discrimination as non-white women (Carrim, 2018). However, it can be argued that cultural practices superseded colonialism and apartheid policies with regard to women's secondary position. As indentured labourers did not come with their families and limited opportunities for occupational stratification and specialisation existed, caste differentiation disappeared, but they maintained their Indian identity through their language and religious practices (Carrim, 2012).

The passenger Hindus and Muslims followed the caste system to a greater extent (Diesel, 2003), resulting in their women not engaging in employment, in contrast to women from indentured backgrounds. Moreover, women were expected to be submissive and passive and to abide by their prescribed gender roles in order to uphold their family honour, which depended on the extent to which men could control their wives and daughters (Carrim, 2018).

However, in many poorer Hindu and Muslim families, there was a rearrangement of their labour during the 20th century to benefit the new setting of the family. In 1978, 80% of families were nuclear families with some extended members and most accommodated grandparents. With greater expenses and higher mortgages, the father was forced to send his wife and daughters to work. This resulted in nuclear families, individualism and the emancipation of Indian women in South Africa (Maharaj, 1995).

The latest Commission for Employment Equity Statistics Report (Department of Labour, 2020), which is compiled from reports received from designated employers (Department of Labour, 2020), indicates that Indian women constitute 1% of the economically active population (EAP) from all the race groups and occupy 3.2% of top management positions and 4.3% of senior management positions in the private sector. They occupy 1.8% of top management positions and 2.5% of senior management positions in the private sector (Department of Labour, 2020). The white and Indian population groups generally remained over-represented against their EAP in senior- and top-management positions, as well as in professional and technical positions, from the period 2001 to 2019 (Department of Labour, 2020). Indian women's ascendancy to senior positions has therefore been successful even though it remains fraught with tensions which are expanded on in this article.

Methodology
Study design and research participants

This study adopted a qualitative approach to gain an understanding of the intersectional issues and challenges younger and older Indian women managers face in their career progress towards senior- and top-managerial positions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand and explore the meaning that individuals attribute to a phenomenon (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were used and focussed on

women in middle-, senior- and top-management positions in various South African organisations. I shared my past experiences as an older Indian female manager with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges. Compared with younger participants, the older women were able to relate to a greater extent to my story, as we experienced similar challenges.

A total of 13 older women were interviewed, aged 36–56, and 11 younger women, aged 25–35 years[1]. Five were in top management, eight were in senior management and 11 were in middle management. Additional participant recruiting were stopped when the data analysis revealed that it reached data saturation. All the women had completed first (3-year Bachelor's degrees) and 18 women had been awarded postgraduate degrees. Participants younger than 40 (ages ranging from 28 to 34 years) had been raised during the post-apartheid era and nine had been schooled in multiracial public schools. Three had attended private cultural and/or religious schools.

Participants over 40 were born and raised during the apartheid era and grew up in demarcated Indian townships, where they were educated in designated Indian schools. Nine older participants were educated at designated Indian universities, which were located in KwaZulu-Natal. Eleven participants attended historically white universities, whilst four studied through a correspondence university. The majority of participants came from KwaZulu-Natal and had relocated to Gauteng for better career prospects.

Three older participants were from indentured labourer backgrounds and the rest were of passenger Indian heritage. Five of the younger participants were from indentured labourer backgrounds and the rest were of passenger Indian heritage. All the older women's mothers were housewives and they either ran a business from home or assisted their husbands in family businesses. The older participants' fathers owned businesses in Indian townships. Four of the younger participants' mothers were professionals working in the corporate environment, whilst the rest were housewives. Five of the younger participants' fathers were professionals and worked in the corporate environment, whilst the fathers of the rest of the participants had run businesses in historically Indian, white and coloured townships.

Table 1 presents the sample and shows that all the participants had a tertiary education and were operating in different careers in the corporate environment. This is important information, as it indicates that they had similar experiences, although not all were pursuing the same career. Older women who had pursued a tertiary education did so during apartheid, when fewer Indian females were allowed to study further because of strict adherence to cultural norms. The sample is described in detail, and want to stress the point that there may be differences in their experiences in reaching management positions in the corporate environment.

1.The age categories were used as prescribed by South Africa's National Youth Policy, which defines younger people as 14–35 years of age (Republic of South Africa, 1997).

TABLE 1: Biographical data of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Educational level	Position
Older participants			
Shamila Rumi	46	Postgraduate	Business application manager
Saira Rehman	43	Postgraduate	Chief financial officer
Waheeda Banu	42	Postgraduate	Senior public prosecutor
Shabana Mahal	46	Postgraduate	Chief financial officer
Firdous Azmi	53	Postgraduate	Executive director operations
Zeenat Khan	47	Postgraduate	Chief communications officer
Bipasha Chaudry	38	Postgraduate	Operations manager
Mahima Basu	41	Postgraduate	Legal manager
Preity Sen	44	Undergraduate	Project manager
Sushmita Zinta	47	Postgraduate	Human resource director
Rani Kapoor	45	Postgraduate	Human resource director
Karina Mukerjee	46	Undergraduate	Senior marketing manager
Shilpa Chopra	45	Postgraduate	Human resource director
Younger participants			
Deepika Sharma	29	Undergraduate	IT manager
Anushka Sinha	34	Postgraduate	Finance manager
Alia Kapoor	29	Undergraduate	IT manager
Sonam Bhatt	33	Postgraduate	Engineering manager
Kangana Dixit	34	Postgraduate	Human resource manager
Karishma Balan	32	Postgraduate	Manager (Industrial psychologist)
Madhuri Kolhapuri	30	Postgraduate	Marketing supervisor
Vidya Dutt	31	Undergraduate	Project manager
Malaika Fakhri	28	Undergraduate	IT manager
Sonakshi Chawla	33	Postgraduate	Finance manager
Nargis Tagore	31	Postgraduate	Finance manager

IT, Information technology.

Interviews were conducted at participants' homes and offices. The interviews probed the childhood and workplace experiences of the participants. The questions invited the women to reflect on their experiences during their childhood and the early stages of their careers. Examples of questions included: 'Tell me about your childhood', 'Why did you pursue a tertiary education?' and 'Tell me about your journey to management'.

Probing questions were asked to obtain clarity regarding, and gain a deeper understanding of, important aspects relating to the participants' upward mobility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The one-on-one interviews lasted between 90 min and 120 min each. The interviews were audiotaped, with the interviewees' permission and transcribed these verbatim. A copy of the transcripts was provided to participants for member-checking and participants indicated that their stories had been captured accurately.

Ethical clearance was obtained from my institution before commencement of the study. All participants signed a consent form to take part in the study.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used and an inductive approach to analyse the data (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the early stages of the analysis, an external qualitative researcher was also asked to analyse the themes. The external researcher and I identified similar themes.

After listing the themes and sub-themes, the interview transcripts were re-read, to ensure that nothing important or significant had been missed. Redundant themes were removed and a refined list of themes and sub-themes was collated. The intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1993) was used to gain an understanding of how culture, race, gender and workplace experiences intersected and influenced the upward career mobility of younger and older participants during the apartheid and post-apartheid eras.

After finalising themes manually, the analysis was further refined and validated using Atlas.ti, a computer software program for sorting, classifying and arranging qualitative data. This process was conducted for purposes of quality assurance, to ensure that themes and subthemes had not been missed. An iterative process was used (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to analyse patterns across the sample and within the subcategories. The analysis then moved from a descriptive to an interpretive analysis, where I focussed on patterns and their implications and meanings in relation to existing literature.

Each participant's early life was analysed (her youth and upbringing), and thereafter her work experiences, before comparing the themes that emerged with those that emerged for others in the same age group. This was followed by comparing the themes that emerged from younger and older participants' stories.

Findings

The study revealed how gender, age, race and cultural identities intersect and result in similar and different challenges, influenced by the socio-historical-political context of both younger and older Indian women managers. The themes that emerged from the data were grouped into three categories. The first category, *childhood experiences*, provides background on their experiences when they were growing up, according to two themes: *gender roles* and *female emancipation*. The second category, *corporate career journeys*, deals with their early work experiences and their initial career ascendency, under the themes *Entering corporate South Africa* and *Role models*. The third category, *further career mobility*, focusses on their current work status and their upward career mobility to reach top management posts; the themes are *increased competition*, *networking*, *being undermined* and *spousal support*.

Category: Childhood experiences

This category focusses on how race, culture, age and gender identities intersect and produce certain commonalities and differences amongst older and younger participants. Their experiences whilst they were growing up are captured in the themes *gender roles* and *female emancipation*.

Gender roles

Older participants grew up in an era when Indians were confined to separate residential and trading areas, schools, hospitals, sport and recreational facilities, Indian colleges

and an Indian university, namely the University of Durban Westville (Bhana, 2008). The participants indicated that living in confined Indian suburbs left them little choice but to adhere to cultural norms that prescribed that women were responsible for household chores whilst men work outside the home. Participants pointed out that only women from poor households worked and a small number of women from middle-class families pursued careers in female-dominated occupations such as social work and teaching. Others assisted their husbands in family businesses. Shabana, an older chief financial officer, related:

> 'My mom and aunts were housewives. We had to follow Indian traditions, and women were not allowed to follow careers, as men were expected to financially support a woman. Living in Indian suburbs, women had no choice but to follow tradition.' (Shabana, 46, Postgraduate)

With the demise of apartheid, Indian families were no longer confined to living in demarcated Indian suburbs. Younger participants indicated that they follow traditional norms to a limited extent, and that, in some families, traditional gender roles have collapsed. They pointed out that, these days, even in Indian suburbs, many Indian women are pursuing careers and are working, as it is no longer economically viable for a family to rely on a single income. Alia, an information and technology manager, stated:

> 'My mother is a finance manager at a company. My mom has been working even before I was born. My parents have an egalitarian relationship where they both cook and do household chores. They never followed Indian gender roles in their relationship.' (Alia, 29, Undergraduate)

Female emancipation

Older participants indicated that, since the early 1980s, there was a slow but steady increase in the number of Indian women enrolling at tertiary institutions. The older women indicated that this had resulted from an increase in the job opportunities for Indians in the corporate environment because of cracks in the apartheid system. However, they did indicate that not all jobs (e.g. human resource management) were available for Indians to pursue. In some families, because of cultural beliefs related to women's modesty, as well as pressure from extended family and the community, fathers would marry daughters immediately after they had completed their schooling, but would allow sons to pursue a tertiary education. Waheeda, a senior public prosecutor, said:

> 'Some of my friends enrolled at universities for various degrees. We were advised by our teachers which careers to pursue, as some careers were reserved for whites only. The majority of girls in my matric class got married after completing their schooling. About two friends married at the age of sixteen, before they finished their schooling. Their fathers did not want them to study further. Their uncles and aunties instigated their fathers not to send them to study and complete their schooling. They would say things like, "What will an education help your daughter?" and "Girls who go to university have boyfriends". Many of my classmates ended up never studying, whilst their brothers were free to study further.' (Waheeda, 42, Postgraduate)

Younger participants indicated that, by the time they completed their schooling, there were many Indian women working in the corporate environment. The participants were encouraged by their parents to pursue a career of their choice, as there were no longer career restrictions based on race. They also indicated that cultural strictures placed on women's movements outside the homes became less stringent. Deepika echoed the sentiments of the other participants:

> 'I have two brothers and a sister. We are all in the careers we wanted to pursue. All my friends went to university. These days, Indian parents are encouraging their daughters to study after school and to delay marriage.' (Deepika, 29, Undergraduate)

Category: Corporate career journeys

The participants' career journeys comprised the following themes: *Entering corporate South Africa* and *Role models*.

Entering corporate South Africa

The majority of older participants indicated that they entered the workplace during the apartheid era; some entered just after the first democratic elections in 1994. Most indicated that, when they first entered the corporate environment, they were the only Indian women in their organisations, as cultural impediments prevented Indian women from working in the corporate environment. The majority of participants indicated that managerial positions were dominated by white males. In addition, because more Indian men than women studied at tertiary institutions, there were more Indian men than women in the workplace. They point out that the public sector that was controlled by white men and women in the 1990s, has transformed since the late 2000s and is nowadays dominated by black male and female managers. Karina, a senior marketing manager, commented as follows:

> 'In my organisation, there were no other women of colour, except the cleaners and tea ladies. I was the only Indian female working in that organisation. There were about three Indian males working there – one engineer and two accountants. They hired more Indian males, as they found it difficult to source qualified Indian women. Compared with Indian women, white women were promoted much quicker when the Employment Equity Act came into effect, but I did not question the process. I worked as an administrator for about 8 years before I was promoted to a supervisory position.' (Karina, 46, Undergraduate)

Younger participants indicated that, when they entered the corporate environment, there were employees from diverse racial backgrounds and Indian women had already entered management posts. They, however, found that the majority of managers in their respective organisations were either of black or white ethnicity. Anushka, a younger finance manager, remarked as follows:

> 'I was hired by an Indian woman chief financial officer. I worked with all types of people. Our CFO [*Chief Financial Officer*] and I were the only Indians in the organisation. We had two black males and three black female managers. The rest were white males and females in management.' (Anushka, 34, Postgraduate)

Role models

Older participants indicated that they had been submissive in the workplace and would not voice their opinions, as this type of behaviour from Indian women was discouraged in their homes and communities. Participants also indicated that their parents had socialised them not to stand up against their white counterparts, as they would be dismissed from their jobs. Their parents feared confronting whites, as such behaviour was not tolerated during the apartheid era. However, participants also realised that a demure attitude would not result in their upward mobility. As they had no Indian women role models, some participants decided to emulate the behaviour of white women and started becoming assertive. However, they limited their assertive behaviour, as they realised that they did not wield any power compared with their white female counterparts. In some cases, white male managers started mentoring some of the participants to become assertive and outspoken. Shamila reflected on her corporate journey as follows:

'If it was not for my Scottish and Irish white male managers, I would never have become assertive in the workplace. They encouraged me to become outspoken if I was to succeed in a higher post in the workplace. They would place me in situations that required me to stand up for myself. I developed courage over time. I realised early in my career that my cultural norms and my father indoctrinating me not to stand up against white colleagues, as it was still the apartheid era, were holding me back in succeeding in the workplace, and I had to learn to undo some behaviours in the workplace.' (Shamila, 46, Postgraduate)

Bipasha, an older operations manager explained how she shadowed her white woman supervisor:

'My white female supervisor was a junior manager. She was the only female in management at that time. I started learning from her how to conduct myself. It was not easy, as white women had networks with white males, and they could be assertive and get away with being bold. It was much harder for me to be as assertive as her, as I was brushed aside by my white male colleagues.' (Bipasha, 38, Postgraduate)

Younger participants who had attended multicultural schools pointed out that they had confidence in voicing their opinions in front of different race groups. However, some of the participants indicated that being raised in a predominantly Indian environment and school where traditional cultural norms are adhered to keep them passive and subdued. Nargis, a young finance manager, observed:

'I was raised in a traditional Indian family, in a predominantly Indian suburb and attended school in the same area. My extended family members still have a lot of influence on women's behaviour in the family. We are still not encouraged to be bold and outspoken. This has a negative impact on my career, as I am still passive in many instances in the workplace. I am, however, being mentored by an Indian female, and she gives me lots of tips on how to succeed in our workplace environment.' (Nargis, 31, Postgraduate)

Category: Further career mobility

When asked about additional challenges to their upward mobility, older and younger respondents held somewhat common and different views.

Increased competition

Older participants pointed out that Indian women faced less competition in reaching senior- and top-management levels for the first few years of democracy, as there were fewer qualified black candidates vying for these positions. Both older and younger participants indicated that with more qualified black candidates, the competition for promotion became more intense. Rani, an older Human Resource (HR) director, stated:

'There are too many black HR graduates entering the corporate environment. The chances of being promoted in this field today are fewer than 10 to 15 years ago.' (Rani, 45, Postgraduate)

Kangana, a younger HR manager, shared the view:

'My older Indian counterparts who are in senior- and top-management posts were lucky to have less competition. These days, getting ahead in certain careers is harder, as the pool of graduates is much bigger to choose from.' (Karina, 46, Postgraduate)

Networking

Some of the younger and older participants indicated that networking plays an important role in getting ahead in organisations, but that it is their weakness. However, older and younger participants pointed out that networking has its drawbacks, as they are not equipped to discuss certain social topics, such as hunting, rugby and soccer. They also indicated that they do not drink alcohol and find it difficult to socialise with a predominantly male team, as this goes against their cultural beliefs. They, however, indicated that they found that their Indian male counterparts and their white and black colleagues, were much better at networking and could relate better to diverse topics. Vidya, a younger project manager, echoed the sentiments of the other participants:

'It's still difficult to get ahead in the workplace, as you need to network. Networking is a challenge, especially when senior managers are male and you don't want to go to a rugby match or go for extreme sport. It's difficult to be part of a male network team, as, within some of our homes, we still are segregated in terms of gender during social functions. In my organisation, Indian men are part of the inner circle of management. They find it much easier to get in there than me.' (Vidya, 31, Undergraduate)

Bipasha, an operations manager, said:

'I usually mingle for an hour with my colleagues. I try not to stay too long, as I cannot talk about the things that male managers talk about, such as hunting and soccer. My white and black colleagues know so much more about these topics and converse much easier with the men.' (Bipasha, 38, Postgraduate)

Being undermined

Older participants complained, that during meetings, their inputs would be ignored by their white male managers. In some instances, their white male colleagues would bombard the women with questions during the meetings. They found that their white female counterparts were never undermined

during meetings. Older participants also indicated that, in some cases, black men would not take instructions from them, although these same men would not behave in the same manner with white female colleagues. Rani, an older human resource director, related being undermined by her male colleagues:

'I was like a dartboard for my white male colleagues. They would constantly question me during meetings. They tried to undermine me. In a meeting with staff from other departments, my white male colleagues would ignore my inputs, but was quick to listen to my white female colleague. I even had a problem with a black employee who refused to take instructions from me. I had to eventually dismiss him.' (Rani, 45, Postgraduate)

Younger participants indicated that their white male managers undermined their authority by siding with white employees whom the participants were supervising. Sonakshi, a younger finance manager, commented:

'My manager would constantly side with a white female employee who I was supervising. No matter what she did wrong in my department, he would cover up for her and brush my concerns aside.' (Sonakshi, 33, Postgraduate)

Spousal support

Some older participants had decided not to pursue top-management posts, as their traditional roles in their homes had negatively impacted their career advancement. Not having the assistance of their husbands and having to bear the burden of running the home left them with limited time to pursue their careers. For example, aside from the challenges in the workplace that had hindered Waheeda's upward career mobility, her career growth had been stunted because of her family responsibilities. She outlined her gender-role challenges as follows:

'I'm in my comfort zone at work. I don't want to be promoted and take on more responsibilities. I have to go home and cook and see to my four children's homework every day. I have to see to my in-laws and take my mother-in-law shopping during the weekends. I have to assist my husband in his business during the weekends. So, it's a lot for me to handle. I don't get help from any side.' (Waheeda, 42, Postgraduate)

Some older participants who had reached senior- and top-management posts, as well as the majority of younger participants, indicated that they were in egalitarian relationships. They shared their household and childcare responsibilities with their husbands. They were encouraged by their husbands to advance in their careers. Madhuri, a younger marketing supervisor, commented the following on her husband's role in supporting her career:

'My husband and I take turns cooking and taking care of the children. His parents don't like it when he assists me in changing the baby's napkins. They're always complaining about how lazy Indian girls are these days. But my husband ignores them. My husband wants me to succeed in my career, and cooks and takes care of our two sons whilst I work "till late in the evenings and over weekends."' (Madhuri, 30, Postgraduate)

Discussion and recommendations

The aim of the study was to understand the experiences of older and younger Indian women regarding their upward career mobility. Using an intersectionality lens, the findings of the study indicate that the experiences of older and younger participants differ in some aspects and converge in other facets. An important challenge that participants encountered was not having the ability to network. This finding is somewhat different from that of Tariq and Syed (2017), who found that Indian women in United Kingdom organisations did not have access to senior- and top-management networks.

This study also highlights the permeating influence of intersectionality as the socio-historical-political context intersected with race, ethnicity, culture, gender and organisational elements to produce different and certain similar experiences for older and younger participants. Consistent with intersectionality theory, this study highlights how oppressive institutions such as race inferiority, sexism and patriarchy cannot be examined separately (Veenstra, 2013). This is evident in older participants' experiences of career choice restrictions, the submissive behaviour demanded by their culture, their fear of white managers and their own insecurities that stunted their growth in preparing them for management roles.

This study also found that not all women face the same level of oppressive systems within organisations (Acker, 2012). Younger participants in the study reported having more career choices. They have fewer family and community cultural norms imposed on them and are able to deal with employees of all race groups on an equal footing. The study also found that their white female colleagues experienced less discrimination than the participants. This finding resonates with that of Kumra and Manfredi's (2012) study on black Caribbean women and their white counterparts.

The findings of this study further indicate that, with the passage of time, it is becoming increasingly difficult for younger participants to navigate to senior- and top-management positions, as there are more black candidates vying for these positions, compared with when their older counterparts were applying for these positions. The inability to network and, in some cases, being undermined by white and black male colleagues are clear signs of organisations not supporting them in their roles. Some participants were unable to advance in their careers because of family responsibilities and not having adequate spousal support. Kiaye and Singh (2013), in their study related to Indian women managers in Durban, also found that personal barriers impeded their participants' career progress.

This study focussed on the experiences of both younger and older Indian women. The voices of Indian men may yield different findings. Future research could compare the career experiences of Indian men and women in corporate South Africa. Indian women's experiences could also be compared with those of black, coloured and white women.

Future studies could also focus on the career experiences of Indian women managers in other African countries such as Sierra Leone, Kenya, Uganda and Mauritius with similar histories as South Africa of Indian Diaspora because of colonialism. These studies could focus on how Indian women managers' experiences are similar and different based on ethnocentrism and the influences of ethnicity.

Conclusion

The study revealed that older and younger women managers face challenges to their upward mobility. Workplace legislation is inadequate in resolving issues of intersecting institutions of oppression that may hinder women's upward career mobility. There are various factors within and outside the organisation that may negatively impact women's career ascendancy. Studies related to Indian women managers across various African countries can compare how government and workplaces are trying to remove barriers to their career progress and the extent to which husbands, fathers and brothers play a role in supporting their wives, daughters and sisters, within the different country's contextual realities.

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