

# Persisting challenges of women in accessing senior leadership positions in South African higher education: A comprehensive systematic review

<sup>1</sup>Zelalem Zekarias Oliso & <sup>2</sup>Sibongile Simelane-Mnisi

## Abstract

The status of women's participation in senior leadership positions remains an unachieved global agenda in all sectors, including higher education. The extant literature consistently underscores the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions at South African public universities. The main purpose of this review was to identify the major persisting challenges that limit women's advancement into senior leadership positions and to propose strategies to reduce the existing barriers. Using systematic literature review, this study synthesizes findings from 24 journal articles published between May 2015 and February 2026, sourced from well-known databases, namely Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and the Taylor and Francis Group. The findings from the review identified that several intermingled, persistent challenges obstruct women's access to top leadership positions in South African academia. Lack of support, mentoring programmes and networking, recruitment and selection biases, role conflicts, discrimination, gender stereotypes, gender inequity, gendered organizational culture, and gaps in gender policy formulation and practice are qualified as persisting challenges over the past ten consecutive years. The findings further indicated that refusal to racial discrimination, effective training and development programmes, provision of support and networking platforms, mentoring programmes and research, promoting institutional change and policy reforms, conducting continuous monitoring and evaluation systems, and ongoing advocacy and policy interventions are regarded as systematic strategies to mitigate the existing barriers. Institutional and government commitment play a pivotal role in achieving real gender parity in senior leadership positions and aligning with international, continental, and regional development goals.

**Keywords:** *gender policy, women leadership, higher education, educational leadership, strategies*

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## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding Author. PhD. Postdoctoral Fellow at Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa. Email: [Olisozz@tut.ac.za](mailto:Olisozz@tut.ac.za)

<sup>2</sup>PhD. Professor, Lecturer & Instructional Designer at Tshwane University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, School of Education, and Department of Educational Foundation.



## 1. Introduction

Gender and leadership are critical global issues. The proportions of males and females are relatively equal globally, but gender disparity in senior leadership positions is a common challenge across sectors (Burkinshaw et al., 2018). The government of South Africa has ratified various international, continental, and regional instruments to ensure gender equity in public and private sectors. Among international and continental conventions, the United Nations (UN) member states' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-2030) and the African Union (AU) 2063 Agenda are the major ones. Under SDG-5, Target 5.5, the member states agreed to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making positions (UN, 2015). Similarly, the AU-2063 Agenda was formulated with seven aspirations, and the sixth aspiration is to empower women and ensure that women occupy at least 50% of managerial positions in the public and private sectors (AU, 2015). Although progress towards gender equity is evident in South African higher education institutions (HEIs), the disaggregated data reveal that women are clustered mainly within the lower ranks of HEIs (Herbst, 2020).

Despite some advancements following the introduction of gender policies and women's leadership development programmes and initiatives (Pillay, 2025), a significant gender imbalance persists in senior leadership positions within South African public universities (Kuagbedzi et al., 2023). In South Africa, population estimates data show that there are more women than men, a trend that extends to university students and staff. According to the most recent mid-year South African population estimates of 2024, approximately 51% (32,129,704) are females, and the remaining 49% (30,886,200) are males (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2024). In South African public universities, currently over half of all students are women; however, they are not advancing to leadership positions (Moodly & Founten, 2026). Furthermore, women constitute 54% of university staff, but the same trend is not observed at senior levels of university leadership (Pillay, 2025).

In 2022, South Africa's public universities had only 6 women vice-chancellors out of 26 positions, highlighting that women are not advancing to senior academic leadership at the same rate as their male counterparts, who occupy the remaining 20 positions (Kuagbedzi et al., 2023; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022). Scholars like Moodly and Toni (2017) suggest that a persistent gender disparity, deeply embedded structural and cultural barriers in South African universities, require systematic investigation. In the context of women's leadership, numerous

studies have been conducted at South African public universities. Some previous studies identified challenges that limit women's ability to reach senior leadership positions in South African higher education (e.g., Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022; Jali et al., 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). These studies, however, failed to identify which barriers to women's leadership are persistent challenges and to suggest comprehensive strategies to mitigate them.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the major persistent challenges that prevent women from accessing senior leadership positions in South African public universities and to suggest comprehensive strategies to reduce these challenges. It is a fact that several challenges impede women from playing leadership roles across sectors, but some of these challenges persist for decades. Reviewing ten years of past studies, this study identifies major persistent challenges affecting women's participation in senior leadership in South African public universities. Identifying these persistent challenges is imperative for the higher education sector to rethink its gender policies and practices and take all necessary measures to ensure gender equity within the institution and achieve real gender parity in senior leadership positions. Achieving gender equity in top academic leadership positions is essential for institutional effectiveness, research, and innovation (Muyambo, 2023).

## **2. Literature Review**

Following the end of the Apartheid regime, South Africa established a democratic state to address the diverse needs of its citizens. One significant reform was the commitment to ensuring gender equity in workplaces and academia (Singh et al., 2024). Diverse and inclusive leadership teams are more effective in driving institutional transformation and improving academic outcomes (Muyambo, 2023). However, there is still an unequal representation of women in senior leadership positions compared with their male counterparts in South African public universities (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021).

Studies found that women adopt a people- and value-oriented leadership approach, which features in inclusive leadership (Kulkarni & Mishra, 2022). Women present unique characteristics and traits, particularly their motherly approach to leadership (Fauzi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, many sectors, including HEIs, are still not wisely utilizing the decisive leadership qualities of women. Gender disparity in senior leadership positions is evident in every country (Maheshwari et al., 2023) but is more severe in Africa and Asia (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). There are numerous factors that contribute to gender imbalances in upper

leadership positions within South African higher education. Among these factors, key contributors to gender disparity include social structures, cultural expectations, and the glass ceiling, which creates invisible barriers that hinder women's progression to senior positions (Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Kela et al., 2024).

Gender disparity in South African higher education leadership positions is further complicated by the inter-sectional nature of gender discrimination in South African academia (Pillay, 2025). Another comparable study by Mabokela and Mlambo (2015) identified significant gaps between gender policy intentions and practical implementation in promoting women to upper leadership positions. A study conducted by Moorosi (2020) further found that current approaches to promoting women's leadership in South African higher education primarily focus on individual capacity-building, neglecting systemic barriers and institutional culture change.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach***

In this systematic review, we employed an interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative research approach, as these support contextual meaning-making and allow for the synthesis of diverse perspectives and observations reported across studies rather than the pursuit of a single objective truth (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The selected paradigm and approach were appropriate for addressing the research questions, as they facilitated the exploration of persistent challenges, lived experiences, and strategies reported across different studies (Hatch, 2023).

We ensured the trustworthiness of the findings according to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The credibility of the data is achieved through the triangulation of multiple document types. The transferability of findings is achieved by providing thick descriptions of document contexts, which enables readers to assess applicability to other settings. Dependability or consistency is maintained through an audit trail documenting sources, extraction notes, coding decisions, and analytical procedures. Finally, confirmability is ensured through reflexive memo-writing and transparent presentation of evidence-based interpretations.

### 3.2 Data Sources and Search Strategies

We thoroughly reviewed relevant journal articles for our research questions. We used different well-known electronic databases to get pertinent information for the review. We accessed information for our review from electronic databases, principally Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), and the Taylor and Francis Group. To ensure a comprehensive search, we employed the population, exposure, context, and outcome (PECO) framework to break down the research topic into four core concepts, namely population (women), context (South African HEIs), exposure (accessing senior leadership positions), and outcome (persisting challenges). We then developed keywords and subject headings to enhance sensitivity and precision for four distinct concepts (Lefebvre et al., 2019).

Once the keywords and subject headings were finalized, we developed search strings using the OR operator to group synonyms within a concept and the AND operator to join the different concepts together (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). For example, ("women" OR "female leaders") AND ("senior leadership" OR "career advancement"). Finally, since we employed different electronic databases to search for journal articles, we followed search-strategy adaptation protocols to match the specific syntax of each platform while maintaining identical core keywords (Barends et al., 2018). Table 1 summarizes the database and search adaptations employed in the present review.

**Table 1**

*Summary of search strategy adaptation for each database*

Database	Search strategy adaptation
ERIC (Ovid/ProQuest)	We utilised Thesaurus Descriptors, e.g., (women OR female OR gender) AND ("senior leadership" OR "career advancement")
EBSCOhost	We applied advanced multi-box searching to handle complex Boolean logic, e.g., Box 1 women OR female OR "female academics", Box 2 "senior leadership" OR "executive management"
ScienceDirect	Due to the Boolean operator limit, a simplified string was used, e.g., (women OR female) AND ("senior leadership" OR leadership)
Google Scholar	We used a non-nested, simplified, e.g., "women" "senior leadership" "higher education"
JSTOR	We utilized a highly targeted string, e.g., ("senior leadership" OR "executive management") AND ("South Africa higher education" OR "South African university")
Taylor & Francis Group	We applied an advanced search, e.g., (women OR female OR "female academics") AND ("senior leadership" OR "career advancement")

### 3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Prior studies that employed quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and systematic literature review approaches were included to gather comprehensive data across different research paradigms. Since empirical studies on women's leadership in South African universities are relatively few, non-empirical or peer-reviewed systematic reviews were included in this review to substantiate empirical studies (Robinson et al., 2014). Table 2 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

**Table 2**

*Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline/ Dates of publications	May 2015-February, 2026	Prior May 2015
Document type	Journal articles	Any literature other than journal articles
Language	English only	Studies have been conducted in other languages
Educational Level/echelon	Studies conducted on South African higher education only	Studies conducted in other South African public and private sectors
Focus of the study/ exposure of interest	Studies that focus on status, gender equity, lived experiences, and barriers regarding women's leadership Studies that suggested possible strategies to reduce persisting challenges that obstruct women from accessing leadership positions in South African higher education	Papers that do not show status, lived experiences, and barriers about women's leadership Studies that do not suggest any possible strategies to reduce persisting challenges that obstruct women from accessing leadership positions in South African higher education
Journal type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Not peer-reviewed journal articles
Access	Online	Printed
Geographic location	Studies conducted in South African higher education only	Comparable studies conducted outside of South Africa
Research Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative and mixed studies and systematic reviews	Conference proceedings, book chapters, poorly designed studies

Studies published between May 2015 and February 2026 were included to focus on the most recent available data; hence, studies published prior to May 2015 were excluded (Meline, 2006). We included articles published from May 2015 onwards for two main reasons: (1) we wanted to show the ten-year trends about persisting challenges that affect women from

reaching top leadership positions, and (2) to argue how similar barriers remained persistent without appropriate intervention and suggest possible strategies.

Regarding document types, studies conducted in South African HEIs were included, while those conducted outside South Africa were excluded to ensure attention to the study context. Studies conducted in South Africa but outside the higher education sector were also excluded to focus solely on higher education. We included only journal articles that focus on our study questions, mainly women's lived experiences, gender equity, status, and/or barriers to women's leadership in higher education. Based on these exclusion and inclusion criteria, 24 research documents were retained.

### ***3.4 Data Screening, Extraction and Eligibility Check***

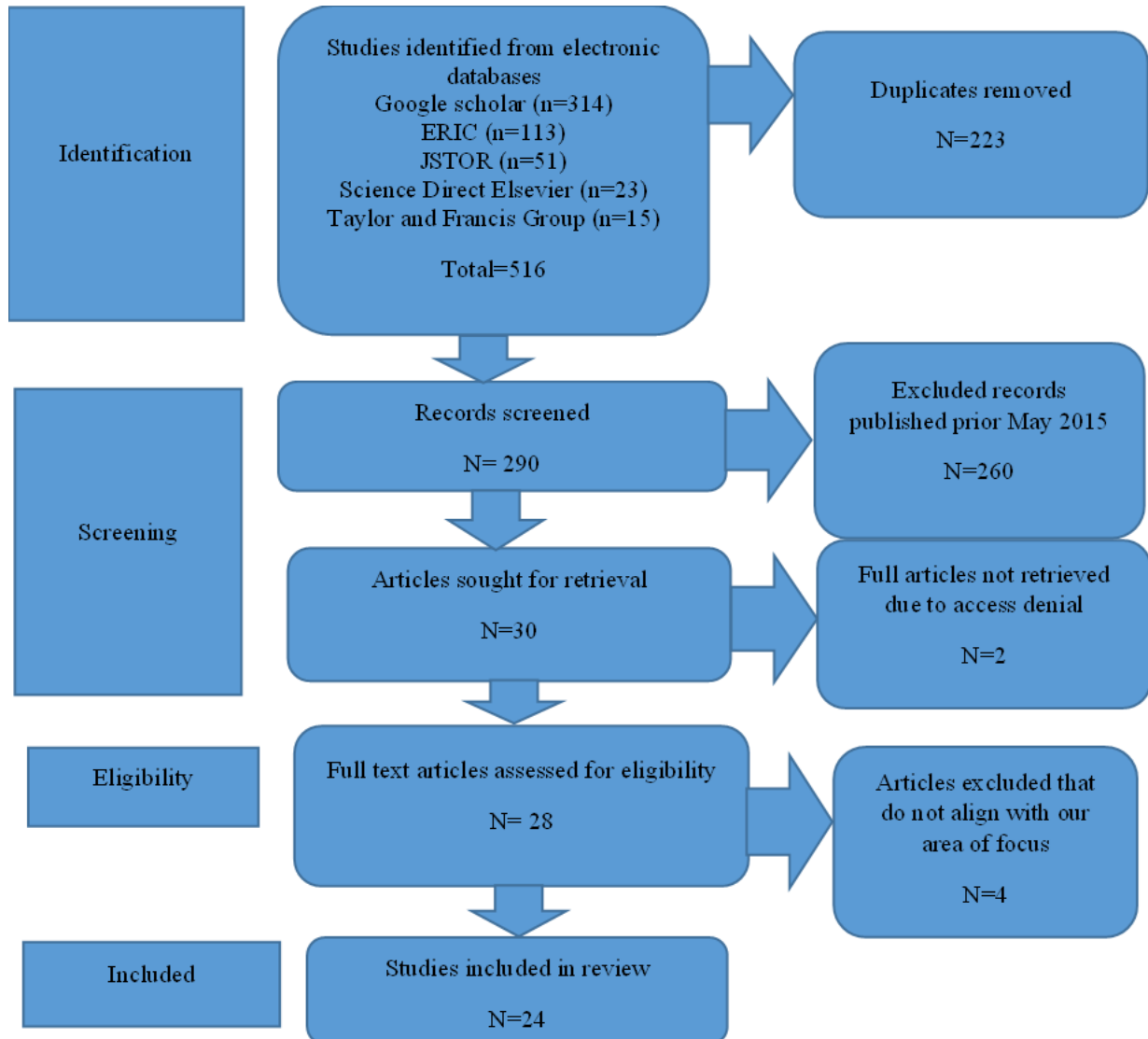
We conducted document screening and extraction using the PRISMA checklist, which ensures transparency, completeness, and accuracy in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram has been revised and visually improved to align with the PRISMA 2020 statement guidelines. We have enhanced its formatting by standardizing the alignment of boxes, establishing a clear typographic hierarchy, and ensuring that distinct, mutually exclusive reasons for exclusion, along with the number of accessed documents, are clearly indicated during the screening and eligibility phases for better visual readability.

The screening was conducted according to our predetermined exclusion and inclusion criteria, as illustrated in Table 1. We screened the studies by examining the titles and abstracts of each article. This screening process enabled the review of full articles relevant to the inquiry (Sinha et al., 2022). The preliminary search yielded (n = 516) documents: Google Scholar (n = 314), ERIC (n = 113), JSTOR (n = 51), Science-Direct (Elsevier) (n = 23), and the Taylor and Francis Group (n = 15). Of the total (n = 516) documents that we accessed during the preliminary search, we removed 223 duplicates. We further screened the remaining (n = 290) documents on their records and retrieval. During record screening, 260 studies published before May 2015 were excluded. After excluding (n = 260) studies, (n = 30) remained; these were sought for retrieval. Accordingly, we could not access full articles for (n = 2) studies due to access denial. We further checked the eligibility of the remaining (n = 28) studies. Among the remaining (n = 28) studies, (n = 4) studies were excluded, which do not align with our area

of focus. Finally, in the review, a total of (n = 24) journal articles were included. Figure 1 briefly summarizes the procedures that were followed to screen the documents.

**Figure 1**

*Flow chart for screening documents*



*Source:* Authors' own work or creation

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

Once the relevant literature had been identified, an analysis was conducted using the following procedures.

*Content analysis.* We divided a total of 24 pieces of identified literature into two researchers for content analysis. Accordingly, the principal author of this paper reviewed the

content of 18 research papers, and the remaining 6 research papers were reviewed by the co-author. Each researcher thoroughly reviewed the content of the assigned literature several times against the present research questions, and each researcher summarized their review results. In our personal computer, we adjusted a one-column word processor and typed all review results from the hard copy. We identified and labeled the major related ideas by highlighting them in different colors. We critically reviewed and examined the labeled concepts or categories to determine whether related concepts are clustered or whether the existing concepts are divided into sub-dimensions.

*Thematic analysis.* The primary author coded major concepts derived from the reviewed literature using a descriptive coding system, as suggested by Saldaña (2009), for thematic analysis. To ensure methodological rigor and reduce the likelihood of researcher bias in the thematic analysis, a multi-stage coding validation process was utilized. The initial codes and emerging themes developed by the primary author were independently assessed and confirmed by a co-author. Any differences in data extraction and theme categorization were addressed through ongoing discussions and consensus-building until complete agreement on the final thematic framework was reached. This collaborative review acted as a means of intercoder validation, improving the conceptual depth and reliability of the synthesized findings.

We organized and grouped these major related concepts as major and sub-themes. Once organizing and grouping major and sub-themes have been completed, the theme validation was conducted. The theme validation was accomplished through a two-step review process to guarantee conceptual coherence. Initially, proposed themes were cross-referenced with the original extracted data units to ensure they accurately reflected the source literature without distortion. Subsequently, the finalized thematic framework was assessed against the primary research questions of the study, thus confirming the internal validity and significance of the synthesized themes. Finally, we described and analyzed carefully reviewed and validated data thematically.

### ***3.6 Research Ethics***

Ethical issues were seriously considered, though the study did not involve human subjects as primary data sources. Research ethics in the use of publicly available information, intellectual property, and proper attribution, integrity and accuracy, respect for institutional

sensitivity, transparency, and accountability were carefully followed during the review process. All publicly available documents were obtained through legitimate institutional repositories, and sources were acknowledged through appropriate referencing to avoid plagiarism. Interpretations were grounded in the analyzed materials, avoiding misrepresentation or selective reporting to ensure integrity and accuracy. Findings were reported objectively and respectfully to maintain institutional sensitivity.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents data extraction of the studies included in this review, along with a thematic synthesis addressing the two review questions. The main purpose of this review was to explore the persisting challenges that continue to obstruct women's advancement to senior leadership positions in South African HEIs and to suggest comprehensive strategies to reduce these barriers. Table 3 depicts the summary of major and sub-themes identified during the review process. On the other hand, Table 4 presents a comprehensive summary of data extracted from the reviewed studies. The data include the author(s) and year of publication; the research methodology adopted in the study; sample size; data-gathering tools; analysis methods; the principal findings pertinent to the current research questions posed in this review; and suggested strategies.

**Table 3**

*Summary of major themes and sub themes*

Themes and Sub-themes	Source
<b>Major theme 1: Persisting challenges</b>	
Sub theme 1.1: Lack of mentoring, support and networking	Loots & Walker, 2015; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022; Msiza, 2026; Sokani, 2025; Toni & Moodly, 2019
Sub theme 1.2: Lack of clear recruitment and selection procedures	Kele & Pietersen, 2015; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022; Sokani, 2025
Sub theme 1.3: Role Conflict	Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Kela et al., 2024; Khumalo, 2021; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Sokani, 2025; Wheeler & Wiese, 2025
Sub theme 1.4: Discrimination	Bayaga & Mtose, 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Jali et al., 2021; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Ramohai, 2019; Raymond & Canham, 2022; Sokani, 2025
Sub theme 1.5: Gendered organizational culture	Kela et al., 2024; Toni & Moodly, 2019
Sub theme 1.6: Gaps in policy formulation and practice	Loots & Walker, 2015; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Pillay, 2025
<b>Major theme 2: Possible Strategies</b>	
Sub theme 2.1 Refusal to discrimination	Bayaga & Mtose, 2021; Raymond & Canham, 2022
Sub theme 2.2 Effective Training and development programmes	Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026
Sub theme 2.3: Institutional change and reform	Jali et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2024; Sokani, 2025
Sub theme 2.4: Collaborative work	Singh et al. (2024)

**Table 4***Summary of reviewed prior studies*

Author (s) and year	Sample Size/documents included in the study/review	Methodology adopted	Data collection tools	Major Findings	Suggested Strategies
Hlatshwayo et al., 2022	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: gender stereotypes, gender inequity, and discrimination against women	-Reforming gender equality and equity policies
Singh et al., 2024	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: gender-based violence and economic barriers	-Encouraging collaborative work, ongoing advocacy and policy intervention
Mbukanna & Strydom, 2022	19 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: unfair recruitment processes, intrinsic societal attitudes, low self-esteem and a lack of mentorship programs	-Tailored mentorship and support platform
Pillay, 2025	98 academic works	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: institutional barriers, gaps between policy and implementation, resistance to cultural transformation, and inadequate enforcement of gender equity policies	-Robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks -Developing contextualized leadership development programmes
Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021	Not stated	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: recruitment and selection biases, gender stereotypes, lack of support, networking and mentors	-Personal development programmes, Provision of support and networking platforms, mentoring programmes, and research
Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026	12 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: patriarchal ideology, stereotypical behaviors and biased evaluation in the career progression of women	-Dialogues and measures -Mentorship programmes -Designing family-friendly policies
Jali et al., 2021	13 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: patriarchal ideology, political influence and interference, gender inequality and discrimination, and stereotyping	-Empowering women in effective leadership skills
Khumalo, 2021	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: role conflict, lack of support and mentoring	-Ensuring diversity in higher education upper echelons, affirmative action, frequently monitoring and evaluating, and employment equity policies
Herbst & Roux, 2021	42 participants	Mixed	Survey questionnaire and interviews	Challenges: toxic leadership	-Creating and sustaining a healthy institutional culture free of toxicity.
Msiza, 2026	Not stated	Qualitative study	Secondary sources	Challenges: lack of mentors, lack of supportive policies and practices, and narcissistic behavior of women in leadership	-Conducting a survey to know how subordinates are treated at work, leadership programs, and flexible work arrangements
Bayaga & Mtose, 2021	10 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: stereotypes, gender, race, and ethnicity-based discrimination	-Creating appropriate grounds/platform, rejecting racialized heritages -Implementation of transformative policies, affirming male and female role models, institutional support structures and career planning
Moodly & Toni, 2017	3 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: psychological factors at the micro-level and cultural factors at both the micro and meso-level	-Institutional commitment, reimagining gender related issues
Woldegiorgis, 2025	4 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: institutional, epistemological, and ideological challenges	-Incorporating gendered issues into the professional training and development
Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024	37 journal articles	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: gender bias and stereotyping, family-work conflicts, workload and financial constraints,	

Author (s) and year	Sample Size/documents included in the study/review	Methodology adopted	Data collection tools	Major Findings	Suggested Strategies
Muleya & Mothoagae, 2025	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	male-dominated leadership culture, intersection of race and gender, and lack of role models Challenges: patriarchal heritage and cultural norms, structural barriers and work-life balance, lack of mentorship and support networks, economic challenges, and intersectionality	programmes, promoting organizational change and policy agendas -Mentorship programmes, nurturing inclusive organizational culture, designing policies that promote work-life balance
Moodly, 2024	6 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: patriarchy and institutional culture	-Men's advocacy and agency
Wheeler & Wiese, 2025	85 participants	Qualitative study	Focus group discussion	Challenges: institutional (some male colleagues prefer to work solely with other male colleagues, resulting in women being sidelined and feeling voiceless, sexual harassment, difficulty in work and family life Challenges: gender-based discrimination, which is compounded by the intersections of race, gender, and motherhood, patriarchal and racist institutional, disciplinary and departmental cultures	-Re-imagining gender equality
Raymond & Canham, 2022	30 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: institutional culture	-Refusal to racial discrimination
Toni & Moodly, 2019	3 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: institutional culture	-Extended leadership programmes that challenge the status quo
Ramohai, 2019	3 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: stereotypes	-Reforms in institutional structure and culture
Sokani, 2025	130 studies	Systematic review (2010-2023)	Document review	Challenges: deep-rooted systemic and cultural obstacles, along with an absence of supportive legislation	-Institutional commitment, continued institutional reforms
Kela et al., 2024	Not stated	Systematic review	Document review	Challenges: gender biases, lack of mentorship, challenges in balancing work and family life, and institutional cultures favoring men were significant barriers.	-Comprehensive policy reforms, strategic mentorship, and the promotion of an inclusive organisational culture
Loots & Walker, 2015	38 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: structural and societal cultures, institutional practices and culture	-Public dialogues
Kele & Pietersen, 2015	8 participants	Qualitative study	Interviews	Challenges: gender bias	-Empowering women

***Theme 1: Persisting Challenges***

***Lack of mentoring, support, and networking.*** In South African universities, the lack of mentoring programmes, support, and networking for women remains evident and that hinder women's advancement to upper leadership positions (Loots & Walker, 2015; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022; Msiza, 2026; Toni & Moodly, 2019). A lack of network is another barrier for women in accessing senior leadership positions within academia. Studies found that men build more networks through the university system than women, which helps them access leadership positions (e.g., Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Moreover, a study conducted by Sokani (2025) found that women staff members lack support from their colleagues and identified this as one of the challenges that affect women's access to senior leadership positions in South African academia. Women feel isolated and unsupported in their professional development, which can lead to decreased confidence and ambition to access leadership positions (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). A supportive environment from the institution and colleagues plays an immense role in encouraging women to access leadership roles though colleagues have no authority to appoint people to leadership positions.

***Lack of clear recruitment and selection procedures.*** In South African public universities, a lack of clear recruitment and selection procedures is one of the critical barriers to women's career advancement (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Despite the availability of qualified women in South African tertiary institutions, they face invisible recruitment and selection biases when competing for senior leadership positions (Kele & Pietersen, 2015). A phenomenological study conducted by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) found that, because top management positions in South African universities are largely held by men, selection criteria are crafted to favor male candidates. This corroborates what feminist institutionalism theorists contend, which highlights how seemingly gender-neutral institutional rules, norms, and practices are inherently gendered and actively preserve male privilege (Holmes, 2021). The most recent study by Sokani (2025) further found that gender bias in recruitment and promotion is widespread in South African higher education, hindering women's advancement to senior leadership positions. This practice is unlawful and contravenes the country's Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, which aims to achieve equality in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment (RSA, 1998).

***Role conflict.*** Role conflict between workplace and home duties is a pressing and persistent challenge that negatively influences women's availability and their ability to reach leadership positions in South African academia (Kela et al., 2024; Khumalo, 2021). This role conflict arises when women attempt to manage these two responsibilities simultaneously. Since leadership positions demand high commitment, women prefer duties that enable them to balance work and family responsibilities (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Recent studies conducted in South African higher education found that managing professional and family life, or experiencing family-work conflicts, is a challenge for women and sets them back from playing leadership roles in South African academia (Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Sokani, 2025; Wheeler & Wiese, 2025).

***Discrimination.*** This review further identified discrimination as a persistent challenge that affects women's ability to access senior leadership positions. Intersectional theorists argue that discrimination in senior leadership pipelines does not operate as a uniform barrier for all women. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional matrix of structural exclusion where sexism dynamically intersects with racism, classism, and other systemic biases to marginalize women (Crenshaw, 1989). Two forms of discrimination, such as gender based and racial discrimination against women, are evident in South African universities. A study conducted by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) found that gender-based and racial discrimination hinder the advancement of women to top management positions. Many other studies further observed that gender bias and stereotypes, gender inequity, and discrimination adversely impede women from progressing to leadership positions, and are still evident in South African academia (e.g., Bayaga & Mtose, 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Jali et al., 2021; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Ngonyama & Adewumi, 2026; Ramohai, 2019; Raymond & Canham, 2022; Sokani, 2025). This violates the country's law, which was introduced to promote equality and the prevention of unfair discrimination. The South African Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 No. of 2000 (PEPUDA) prohibits gender-based discrimination and provides remedies to protect any person who experiences discrimination across the full spectrum of society, including gender-based discrimination (RSA, 2000).

***Gendered organizational culture.*** In South African universities, an organizational culture also influences women's access to leadership positions. Gendered organizational

culture hindrances are rooted in three views: glass ceiling, patriarchal norms, and gender stereotypes. The glass ceiling is closely associated with agentic managerial traits, which suggest that men are better suited than women for leadership roles (Kela et al., 2024). Glass ceiling theorists contend that the invisible and systemic barriers prevent qualified women from progressing to top leadership roles despite having the same qualification as men. This phenomenon is heavily reinforced when “organizational culture frequently materializes in predominantly male cultures, where women are often excluded from informal networks and decision-making processes” (Kela et al., 2024, p.44). Toni and Moodly (2019) noted that organizations with patriarchal norms foster environments that marginalize women’s contributions, and this problem is worsened by gender stereotypes, which nurture prejudices against women’s leadership capabilities (Kela et al., 2024).

***Gaps in policy formulation and practice.*** Despite South African public universities working to improve gender-related issues within their respective universities, there are gaps in the implementation of those gender policies. Furthermore, studies observed that in South African universities, there is a lack of comprehensive policies that address gender issues within the academic environment. Loots and Walker (2015) contend that, although transformative policies are in place at the national and institutional levels, their inconsistent implementation impedes the advancement of gender equity in higher education. Another recent study by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) and Pillay (2025) further found that many HEIs lack comprehensive gender equity policies that outline clear objectives and strategies for promoting gender equality.

### ***Theme 2: Possible Strategies***

***Refusal to discrimination.*** At the individual level, refusal to discrimination indicated as one of the strategies to reduce gender discrimination against women. In this regard, Raymond and Canham (2022) suggest refusal as a generative theoretical lens to surface the complexity of women academics. Bayaga and Mtose (2021) stated that women would be able to reject the constantly imposed gendered and racialized discrimination that limits women’s academic growth to leadership positions.

***Effective training and development programmes.*** Effective training and development programmes are significant in empowering women to reach leadership positions. Universities take a lion's share in arranging several leadership training and development programmes for women staff. Ngonyama and Adewumi (2026) suggested that barriers to women's advancement to senior leadership be addressed through effective training and development programmes that focus on the development of women's leadership skills. They further urged that higher education must ensure that addressing gender discrimination and the barriers associated with the glass ceiling is channeled through open dialogue and measures that promote opportunities for women's development. An empirical study conducted by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) further found that personal development programmes, support, networking platforms, mentoring programmes, and research are effective strategies for overcoming the persistent challenges women face in accessing senior leadership positions.

***Institutional change and reform.*** The introduction of institutional change and reform programmes are necessary when there is persistent gender inequality and inequity in university leadership positions. Sokani (2025) indicated that continued institutional reforms challenge traditional gender norms, foster mentorship, and promote work-life balance policies to achieve sustainable gender equity in academic leadership. Another study by Jali et al. (2021) argued that to promote women to leadership positions, policy reforms are vital to balance gender equality with the implementation of quotas. In addition, studies have confirmed that building an inclusive and healthy organizational culture is imperative for promoting gender equity in leadership positions (Herbst & Roux, 2021; Kela et al., 2024; Muleya & Mothoadae, 2025).

***Collaborative work.*** Government and civil societies also play an imperative role in reducing gender disparity in leadership positions of South African public universities. In this regard, Singh et al. (2024) noted that the government, universities, and civil society organizations must continue to work together to address gender disparities in higher education and ensure that women have equal access to and success in leadership positions. The ongoing advocacy and policy interventions are vital to achieving true gender parity in higher education leadership positions and to reducing the dynamic interplay of gender, race, and discrimination.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although numerous studies have examined gender and leadership in South African public universities, no comprehensive systematic review has synthesized the persistent barriers to women's advancement into leadership positions and the strategies for addressing them. By reviewing 24 studies on women's leadership in South African higher education, this study contributes to knowledge by consolidating evidence on the challenges women face and the interventions proposed to promote their progression into senior leadership roles.

The review revealed a predominance of qualitative and systematic review studies, with only one mixed-methods study identified. Across the literature, common themes emerged relating to barriers to leadership, women's lived experiences, gender equity, and strategies for overcoming institutional obstacles. The findings indicate that women's advancement into leadership positions continues to be constrained by inadequate support systems, limited mentorship and networking opportunities, recruitment and selection biases, work–family role conflicts, discrimination, gender stereotypes, gender inequity, gendered organizational cultures, and ineffective implementation of gender policies. The review also identified several strategies for addressing these challenges. These include strengthening mentorship and support networks, implementing targeted leadership training and professional development programmes, integrating gender-related issues into institutional training initiatives, establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, promoting institutional reforms, and fostering sustained collaboration among governments, universities, and civil society organizations.

A significant finding of the review is the persistent gap between legislative frameworks and institutional practice. Although South African higher education institutions are required to comply with national legislation, including the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) of 2000, implementation remains inconsistent. Existing policies are often inadequately designed, poorly enforced, or insufficiently monitored, limiting their effectiveness in achieving gender equity. These provide important insights for university governing bodies, policymakers, and government agencies seeking to improve women's representation in senior leadership positions across South African public universities.

Based on the review findings, several recommendations are proposed. Universities should invest in leadership development programmes that equip women with the skills and

competencies required for senior leadership roles, preferably through partnerships with organizations specializing in women's leadership development. Recruitment and selection processes should be transparent, equitable, and aligned with employment equity legislation, while affirmative action measures should be strengthened to increase women's representation in leadership positions. Higher education institutions should also cultivate inclusive organizational cultures that discourage discrimination, bias, and stereotypes and promote equal opportunities for all employees. Furthermore, universities should ensure the full implementation of existing gender policies and develop comprehensive frameworks that address broader gender-related concerns. To address work–family role conflicts, institutions should adopt family-friendly policies and flexible work arrangements that support work–life balance and facilitate women's career progression.

This review has several limitations. First, only studies published in English were included, potentially excluding relevant research published in other languages. Second, the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and other forms of scholarly output that may have provided additional insights. Third, the search was restricted to five databases, Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis, which may have resulted in the omission of relevant studies indexed elsewhere. Finally, the review considered studies published between May 2015 and February 2026. While this timeframe ensured manageability and included high-quality peer-reviewed research, it may have excluded valuable earlier studies that could have enriched the analysis. Despite these limitations, the review provides a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence on women's leadership in South African public universities and offers practical recommendations for advancing gender equity in higher education leadership.

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### ORCID

Zelalem Zekarias Oliso - <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5231-216X>

Sibongile Simelane-Mnisi - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4213-7959>

### AI Declaration

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to design, conduct, analyze, or interpret this study. Grammarly was used solely for language editing, including spelling, grammar correction, and the paraphrasing of some lengthy statements to improve clarity and readability.

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