Gender equality in the boardroom: An exploration of the perceptions of female board members

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by
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Abstract

Although women are gaining progress in terms of being represented in middle management roles, female board members represent approximately 17% of board composition in South Africa. This article examines the perceptions of women serving on boards in South African companies and provides insight into the challenges and influencing factors that women experience getting to this position, as well as the value add that women add to the corporate world.

Exploratory qualitative research methodology was used based on semi-structured interviews with a sample consisting of 20 participants. All respondents were board members on companies within corporate sectors in South Africa.

The findings of this study provide interesting insight into challenges that women face in business, factors that influence the career progression of women into board positions, as well as perceptions of female board members on gender equality within boardrooms. The findings show that a combination of specifically feminine characteristics work to mitigate the challenges and strengthen the influencing factors to success. Pertinent insights regarding gender equality reveal that the old boys’ networks, the effects of legislations supporting female empowerment, choices women make, as well as gender role stereotypes and biases were revealed through the analysis process.

Gender equality in the boardroom is an issue that needs to be addressed in a proactive way through the education of women starting from an early age. It appears that the reason for low numbers of women in board positions is no longer a result of exclusionary measures by male-dominated workplaces, but is rather due to gender role reinforcement.

Keywords: gender equality; female board members; women in business; gender role stereotyping; challenges; networking
1. Introduction

1.1. Research area and problem

The research studied perceptions of board diversity within South Africa, particularly exploring increasing gender equality within the diversification process. The perceptions of female board members served as the starting point from which the research was conducted. The term diversity refers to both observable and unobservable aspects, and van der Walt and Ingley (2003) describe it as a variation of attributes, expertise, and characteristics of individuals that contribute to create a diverse group. In this study, diversity focuses on gender and race, with the former being the major focus of the study. In the context of South Africa, gender equality and racial equality are important concepts to take into consideration when looking at diversity due to the oppression that was experienced by different genders and races over a lengthy period of time.

The history of South Africa, and in particular the apartheid era, was based on a system of racial segregation, enforced through legislation. This separation and categorization governed all spheres of life, and included patriarchy, with women being subordinates to males, regardless of race (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005). Under the apartheid system, there was an established hierarchy of race and gender that led to unequal power relations, with white women being consigned to working in the home or involved in stereotypically female jobs (e.g. nurse, secretary etc.), while African women were mostly confined to domestic work (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010). This view has changed since democracy, yet women still experience the after-effects of such a segregated system in various spheres of life.

Various governmental initiatives have been developed to redress the segregation of the past. The South African Cabinet approved the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill in August 2012, but since then this Bill has lapsed in parliament and there seems to be no consideration for rescheduling it in the future (Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance, 2015). This Bill, and the legislative proposal outlined within it, intends to develop measures towards reaching at least 50 percent representation and relevant participation of women in decision-making roles. This would be an incredible advancement for women, but the clear lack of implementation and no future plan for rescheduling shows the challenge that women face without the support and backing of governmental parties. The efficiency and success of other frameworks, acts and regulations is still debatable, including those to redress apartheid. These include the affirmative action and equal opportunity
legislation, and the passing of the *Gender Policy Framework* (GPF) to integrate gender policies and abolish all discrimination against women (Mathur-Helm, 2005). It is clear that although women’s issues relating to past oppression have begun to be brought to the fore, barriers and obstacles still exist in the integration of women in mainstream management, and women “are still under-utilized in the South African employment market” (Mathur-Helm, 2005, p. 57).

The starting assumption of this research is that board membership is comprised primarily of male members, and that the female gender is underrepresented within the management domain within South Africa. A large amount of the literature around women in business globally focuses on the representation of women within management positions, rather than the representation of women at board level (Sheridan & Milgate, 2005). Various studies show the impact of female board members on firm performance (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008; Dobbin & Jung, 2011; Erhardt, Werbel, & Shrader, 2003), yet there seems to be little to no information or studies conducted on the qualitative elements of becoming a board member, and the perceived benefits of a more gender-equal board. The findings of the study have attempted to provide insight into the gender equality debate within the boardroom setting.

Around the world, women occupy only around 5-20 percent of the board seats of substantial firms, including Fortune 500 and FP 500 companies (S. Vinnicombe, Singh, Burke, Bilimoria, & Huse, 2009), with South African registered boards having an average of 17.1 percent female membership (Catalyst, 2014a). Women hold only 24 percent of senior management roles globally, and the results of one study showed that over 50 percent of the 142 countries involved in the research did not have laws that prohibited gender discrimination during hiring (Catalyst, 2014b). From the 2009 annual census by the Business Women’s Association of South Africa, it was found that women still lag far behind their male counterparts with regards to executive management representation and CEO positions, despite a slow increase of women filling senior positions (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010); a recent survey showed that only 5.5 percent of South African women hold board chair positions (Catalyst, 2013). A point to highlight from these statistics is that gender inequality is problematic since the talent of nearly half the population is not being utilized efficiently (Davidson & Burke, 2011; Handa & Singh, 2015; Hossain, Naser, Zaman, & Nuseibeh, 2009), indicating a waste of natural resources.
The study provides insight into what value women feel they contribute to the business sector of South Africa by serving as members on various boards. Through an assessment of current board dynamics, including the purpose and function, the researcher attempted to establish how gender diversity could positively impact a board, aligning it towards a global context. By understanding the challenges and strengths of board diversity, as well as the challenges and successes that women have experienced within the business sector and within boards, the researcher was able to highlight similarities and differences in experiences, and explored further ways of reducing the challenges and building on the successes. The report provides insight into areas that may help in the development of initiatives to promote women into directorships. Several researchers have found that literature and studies remain descriptive, or explore theoretical perspectives of the forces explaining underrepresentation of female board members (Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009), and so through the analysis of perceptions of female board members, the study has addressed some of the gaps that are found between theory and reality.

As a young female South African attempting to make her way in the business world, the researcher was particularly interested in understanding gender equality and board room diversity within the corporate sector. As noted by Donham, Heinrich and Botswick (2010), research that is conducted within a setting shaped, influenced, and born from real experiences encourages true inquiry to take place. The research findings provide more detailed insight into the personal experiences of female board members and provide recommendations on how to harness these experiences to empower future generations.

1.2. Research questions and scope

The main research question for this study is: “What are the perceptions of female board members towards gender equality on boards within the South African context?” Through this research project, the perceptions of gender equality on boards within South Africa have been assessed by addressing three sub-questions:

- What challenges do women experience within the business sector?
- What factors play a role in facilitating career progression, including securing a board position?
- What are the views of current female board members on why they serve on boards and what they feel they contribute?
The scope of the research was limited to the study of female directors serving on boards within South Africa at the time of the study. The assumption made was that female board members experience specific challenges in becoming board members based on their gender, especially within South Africa. Board members were selected based on location due to time and travel restraints, resulting in the majority of the sample stemming from the Western Cape District. Although the majority of the board members resided in the Western Cape region, the scope of their area of operation varied throughout South Africa.

1.3. **Research assumptions**

The research was carried out under the assumption that the researcher had access to female board members who were willing to engage in an in-depth, face-to-face / telephonic interview with the researcher. An inherent assumption of this research project was that the participants involved in the study would be willing to share all information and perceptions regarding the process of becoming a board member. Data gathering for this research was important for the study since it gave credence to the report, and so it was critical that the subjects felt free to answer all questions without the fear of being identified. To prevent participants from feeling the urge to refrain from answering questions, the researcher engaged with the participants and explained how the rules of confidentiality outlined in the participation agreement would be followed, and provided participants with their transcripts to approve before use within the report if desired.

A topical assumption was that within South Africa there are not enough women with the experience and skills to become board members and so the small numbers of women suitable for the position are being used repeatedly on different boards in various different companies. The research also assumed that boards are still male-dominated. A further assumption was that male-dominated boards are hesitant to engage in change. It also assumed that boards do not understand the value of diversity, especially with regards to gender, and so are not incorporating more women into the board due to a lack of understanding.

1.4. **Research ethics**

The University of Cape Town and the Graduate School of Business requires that all research conducted on human subjects is evaluated and approved by an ethics committee before it is undertaken. The approval of the research looks at the participants and organisations involved, as well as the acquired consent, the confidentiality of the data, and any risks that may be posed to the participants. The *GSB Research Ethics Application Form* (attached as Appendix
1 – Ethics form) along with the final report followed the evaluation process to ensure that the highest ethical standards were adhered to. For each of the participants of the study, a consent form was provided (attached as Appendix 3 – Consent form). This form stated the full purpose of the research project as well as any expectations of the participants, and stipulated that at any stage of the process the participants would be free to terminate their involvement. The confidentiality of the research and the findings, and the anonymity of the participants were guaranteed in as far as possible. The steps taken towards achieving this included changing all names and references to any company or person, as well as sending the transcripts to the participants to ensure that they were satisfied with what was being included and that they were sufficiently protected.
2. Literature review

2.1. Understanding board composition

What factors play a role in securing a board position?

In order to understand how a board is comprised, it is important to understand the power that a board holds, and the role that it plays in firm success. van der Walt and Ingley (2003) explain how board members combine their capabilities to serve as an amalgamation of social capital working for the organisation, with this social capital adding value to the organisation through the social networks that come with it. The board, and the directors serving on the board, acts as the link between the shareholders and the managers, the former being those providing the capital, and the latter being those who create value from this capital use (Monks & Minow, 2011). The power in this grouping serves to establish and enhance the success of the firm.

In order to ensure this success, certain characteristics or traits are desired of the board members to guarantee that the board fulfils its directive and controlling function. There are several factors that lead to effective involvement and participation of board members in organisational monitoring, including qualification and experience, social networking capital, remuneration practices, and even level of share ownership (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008). Forbes and Milliken (1999), as cited in Ingley and van der Walt (2003), identify board task performance and board cohesiveness as criteria for effectiveness and success, with board task performance relating to the combination of tasks performed by individual board members and board cohesiveness relating to the fit between individuals within the board.

Director qualities can be linked to a broad base of information, skills and knowledge, which have been found to be effective in providing innovative and alternative ways of thinking from various fields. Petrovic (2008) found that the skills required by board members involve director qualities as well as behaviours necessary to ensure firm performance as stated by the direction and control roles. The key qualities discovered by Petrovic (2008) include:

- Being prepared and informed / having knowledge and understanding of the company business
- Knowledge of other directors’ skills and abilities
- Understanding of the context within which the company operates
• Strategic awareness, breadth of perspective, and the ability to see a “much wider horizon”
• Professional reputation, expertise and experience
• Interpersonal and communication skills
• Motivation and commitment to the affairs of the company and individual responsibility toward achieving the goals

The behaviours that are found to be most desirable in board members are those promoting high-effort, including:

• Obtaining information on issues that show initiative
• Questioning and challenging the beliefs and assumptions of each other
• Considering decision-related alternatives carefully
• Devoting enough time to the role, including advance preparation and learning in order to make informed decisions
• Active participation in discussions and providing solutions and ideas that are constructive (Petrovic, 2008)

The findings of a study by Shivdasani and Yermack (2014) showed that directors are selected differently depending on CEO involvement, with directors who are less likely to be aggressive monitors being favoured by highly involved CEO’s. Non-executive directors with conflicts of interest are often favoured with involved CEO’s as their participation and contribution is limited, leaving the majority of the deciding power to the CEO. Members also vary depending on the type of company ownership structures of the members, as well as their associated social, governance and performance requirements (van der Walt, Ingley, & Diack, 2002). Further literature shows that members are usually current or retired executives, are academics, former government officials, or leaders of non-profits, all of whom have a range of boardroom perspectives and skills, including a thorough understanding of financial reports and obligations related to being a board member (Monks & Minow, 2011). Monks and Minnow (2011) highlight that each individual should “demonstrate independence, energy, curiosity, collegiality, and commitment” (p. 261).

In terms of gender requirements for boards, Deloitte found that only 49 countries around the world follow either diversity legislation or have significant programmes for gender diversity (Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance, 2015), and there are currently no
requirements for the recruitment of ethnic minorities (Monks & Minow, 2011). The literature reviewed by Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh (2009) showed that female board members are significantly younger than their male counterparts, with around 47 per cent being married, and the percentage of directors having children ranged from 44 per cent in Australia to 70 per cent in USA and Canada. Further sociodemographic profiles found that female board directors also often have a higher level of education than their male counterparts (De Anca & Gabaldon, 2014).

From the literature, it is clear that the common traits required by board members are skills, knowledge, experience, as well as capital value. Each member has a particular combination of these traits that is deemed to be desirable by the firm. Boards combine the expertise and skill of the members, operating within internal and external environments, resulting in an ability to work with or combat threats, take on challenges, and adapt to enhance the strategic positioning of the firm (Brauer & Schmidt, 2008). In the work done by Petrovic (2008), it was found that, aside from their collaborative role in assisting with cohesion, board members must also remain individuals with independent thoughts and a firm ability to contribute to the work of a board, challenging colleagues’ opinions if necessary in the name of board and company interest.

2.2. Diversity in the board room

What is diversity and what are the implications for boards and firm performance?

As stated by van der Walt and Ingley (2003), “the idea of board diversity reflects the structure of society – the fact that we are now a much more multicultural, and ostensibly, gender sensitive society, and that personal backgrounds are also diverse” (p. 219). Research on diversity usually highlights two distinctions: demographic (observable) and cognitive (non-observable) (Erhardt et al., 2003). Ingley and van der Walt (2003) provide further insight into these two differences by naming race, age, ethnicity and gender as examples of observable/visible diversity; with knowledge, skills, education, personality, values and perception as non-observable diversity examples. Gender “is arguably the most debated diversity issue, not only in terms of board diversity, but also in terms of female participation in economic activity and in society in general” (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008, p. 4).

The value of diversity is that it increases creativity and innovation, and Campbell and Mínguez-Vera (2008) have found that these characteristics tend to differ with demographic
variables, such as gender, instead of being randomly found within the overall population. They further argue that more alternatives are evaluated when seeking solutions to problems as diversity allows for various different perspectives. Having a diverse range of individuals assess the business environment helps to achieve a better understanding of the complexities that exist. Various studies have shown that a broader range of skills, information and knowledge allows for alternative ideas and various contributions to be presented in decision-making processes by boards (Petrovic, 2008).

For businesses with a more customer-focused agenda, studies have shown that a more diverse board, that is representative of the customer base, appeals to stakeholders as it shows a sensitivity for customer behaviours, preferences and concerns (Bilimoria & Wheeler, 2000). Diversity also promotes better marketplace understanding through the concept of matching the board to the customer base, and this in turn increases market penetration capabilities (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008). Direct and indirect benefits of equality of representation arise from diversity as it shows a reflection of the demographic characteristics of key stakeholder groups such as investors, customers, and employees (Brammer, Millington, & Pavelin, 2007). In this way board members can become a beneficial element to the firm as they directly improve the brand image and corporate reputation (De Anca & Gabaldon, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, agency theory and resource dependency views both underlie the rationale for board diversity. Agency theory follows the idea that the board operates in a manner that protects the shareholder interests from the self-interests of management (van der Walt & Ingley, 2003). Women, external stakeholders, foreigners or ethnic minorities may all bring an alternative perspective to firm-specific problems that may help prevent self-interest actions by managers otherwise unseen without outside assistance (Francoeur, Labelle, & Sinclair-Desgagne, 2008). In other words, a diverse board is more likely to pick up internal faults and agency costs that may lead to decreased performance, and women are often more likely to ask questions not asked by male counterparts that can lead to increased board dependence.

Resource dependency view, as discussed by van der Walt and Ingley (2003), looks at the organisation and key resources needed to maximise profits for the organisation, and sees the board as the essential link between the two. In this way the members of the board, with their social capital, work to provide links between the elite, access to capital, information about
competitors, and knowledge and intelligence on markets and industries. Stakeholder theory assumes that appointing more diverse board members comes from a broad set of people, including shareholder activists, politicians, consumer groups, and large institutional investors (Francoeur et al., 2008). Social network theory proves to be particularly relevant to the cause of supporting boardroom diversity, as it follows the idea that individuals who have access to valuable resources for the company can be seen to have a higher chance of entering the elite network due to this network capital (Terjesen et al., 2009).

Demographic similarities are known to be linked to trust and attraction between board members (Petrovic, 2008), which serves as a risk to board diversity. But on the opposite side of this, Petrovic also found that this attraction has been found to influence individual’s behaviours as the high levels of commitment often deter people from sharing opposing or alternative views in fear of ruining the bond. “Groupthink” – the subconscious tendency of groups to censor non-preferred points of views – is an example of this risk. Francoeur et al. (2008) found that “firms with more diverse boards hold more frequent board meetings and female directors have fewer attendance problems, which would rather contribute to board effectiveness” (p. 5).

In terms of a competitive advantage viewpoint, Campbell and Mínguez-Vera (2008) found studies that showed that diverse boards can improve the image of the firm, which can lead to positive customer behaviour. Board of director diversity was also found to be positively associated with return on assets, as well as return on investments, showing that board diversity has an impact on firm performance (Erhardt et al., 2003). Farrell and Hersch (2005) believe increased board diversity may be demand-driven as board diversity can lead to increased firm value, external pressures may demand more diversity, or internal firm dynamics may develop a preference for diversity.

Often, female directors are considered to be role models, who are able to inspire others (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2006; Terjesen et al., 2009). The same authors highlight how role modelling differs from mentoring, as there is not necessary a direct contact between individuals, yet mentors can still be seen as role models. The implication of this is that, through having a more diverse board, with some members presenting a desirable, accomplished self-image, positive work identity development may occur in more junior employee positions, and female board members can symbolise career possibilities to potential female employees looking to be recruited (Bilimoria, 2000).
2.3. Challenges and opportunities for women in business

What are the challenges and opportunities women experience in the process of achieving success in corporate life?

Women are increasing their entry into the workplace globally due to several different trends, with attitudes towards working women and mothers, and political and legal initiatives supporting the change (Davidson & Burke, 2011). Yet studies show that the number of women in corporate decision making positions around the world is still very low. This gender inequality is a serious problem since the talent of almost half the workforce in many countries is not being fully utilised (Handa & Singh, 2015). Terjesen et al. (2009) found that the dominant group in a work setting tends to see women first as female, and only later as individuals, which shows the embodiment of the sex role stereotype. The resulting implication is that it becomes increasingly challenging for female directors to feel listened to and obeyed on an equal basis to male members of the board. A study conducted within the South African context found that enabling factors for career progression of women include fair work evaluation, working twice as hard as men to prove their worth, having an extensive work experience, pre-existing career opportunities, and high education levels (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). The challenges for women are immense, and there still appear to be many limiting factors to addressing these challenges.

Although women seem to be increasing their numbers within management positions, the rise into upper management ranks seems to have stalled, with reasons for this being a possible regression to traditional, culturally-embedded gender behaviour modes as well as second-generation forms of gender bias (Henderson, Stackman, & Koh, 2013). It seems that it is a worldwide phenomenon that women are underrepresented in leadership and senior management positions, regardless of the sector (Appelbaum, Shapiro, Didus, Luongo, & Paz, 2013b). April, Dreyer and Blass (2007) note that many South African women take breaks in their careers, work less hours, or attend to raising children or meeting family needs, often mid-career. The significance of this is that this time is valuable for the “ideal worker” to be working their way up the corporate ladder, showing commitment to the organisation and to a strong work ethic (Williams, 2000). With women going against this societal perception, they may limit their potential candidacy for higher positions, and may even affect other women being hired due to these gender biases. Sama and Papamarcos (2000) found that women
needed to work harder to be valued at the same level as their male counterparts when gender biases exist.

There seems to be a commonly held assumption among board recruiters that women lack the required qualifications and experience to be a director, or that they lack the necessary human capital for positions on boards (Burke, 2000). Singh, Terjesen and Vinnicombe (2008) found that often the contrary is actually the case, since women need to acquire more extensive human capital and skills to try and fight against the glass ceiling and to gain more recognition by employers. The glass ceiling acts as a barrier to women who, when reaching a certain level of success, are prevented from reaching more senior levels of management or leadership (Strategic Direction, 2008). Thus women may be at a disadvantage regardless of the fact that they have been found more likely to have MBA degrees, international experience, and various other qualifications in higher amounts than their male counterparts, particularly in the Financial Times Stock Exchange’s top 100 (FTSE 100) companies (Singh et al., 2008).

The suggestions made by social roles theory are that women playing roles such as single breadwinner, wife, and mother can create self-imposed barriers towards progress (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). The meaning behind this is that these roles inhibit freedom of movement, or relocation, which limits career advancement opportunities. The same authors found that gender discrimination, insufficient support of the multiple roles of women, and a lack of respect from males, serve as internal barriers to workplace progression for women. Appelbaum et al. (2013) have found that “gender stereotypes are strong hindrances that impact on the evaluation of female leaders in organizations” (p. 13), and find that they may cause unfair evaluations of the competencies of women. With this being said, “more women are entering the labour market around the world, making critical contributions to household income and frequently heading their own households” (Kabeer, 2005, pp. 17–18). This clearly becomes a challenge since, although they are gaining ground in terms of equalising work roles, women are still expected to perform gender-based tasks associated with outdated roles of stay-at-home mothers and housewives.

In the research by Kabeer (2005), it was shown that gender stereotyping in schooling and education promotes the portrayal of boys as brave, assertive, and ambitions, while girls are encouraged to be shy, modest, and passive. The challenge is that these traditional gender roles become reinforced within society and cause limitations in terms of what girls see and imagine themselves to be (Kabeer, 2005). As a result, girls grow up socialised to have less
confidence in themselves, and believe that being non-competitive and modest is a preferred feminine trait (Budworth & Mann, 2010). Budworth and Mann further state that "the modest behaviours that women exhibit in order to fit into their gender roles may result in likeability, but at a cost to access to leadership positions and economic reward" (2010, p. 182). Early in childhood, girls are taught to behave in a way associated with a nurturing role, whereas boys are expected to show achievement, authority and dominance, which is believed to be associated with the role of a breadwinner (Straub, 2007).

In one study, evidence showed that female board membership aligned with tokenism, with female board members being added only when there was low or no gender diversity (Farrell & Hersch, 2005). The same study found that boards with existing female representatives only added more when current candidates left. This shows the challenge that women face in the business sector, where they are not necessarily welcomed for their skills and value, but rather to meet a perceived requirement. In their research, Torchia, Calabro, and Huse (2011) also found that most corporate boards have a small minority of women, and often only one female director, which indicates that they are still considered as tokens. With women being viewed as tokens, their ability to integrate with other board members is decreased, and only if she is an integral part of the decision-making process of the board will she be able to positively contribute. The challenge for women here is to move from being seen as a token, to being seen as a value-add to the firm.

The old boy’s network, or boy’s club, is described as an “exclusive club for individuals who are similar to those in power” (Susan Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011, p. 202), being comprised of male members. The members of these clubs partake in traditionally masculine interests including golf, hunting, and fishing, and Gamba and Kleiner (2001) attribute this to the historical male dominance experienced in the industry. This network often works to the advantage of its male members in that friendship patterns and alliances often form within it, resulting in the preservation of positions and preferential candidacy choice for promotion (Oakley, 2000). These clubs serve not only as social settings, but serve as events in which organisational information, or business plans, are discussed and shared (Mooney & Ryan, 2009). The challenge for women is that “women’s clubs” don’t exist and so females often miss out on opportunities for support and the development of links and contacts, and even view each other as competition (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). The Queen Bee Syndrome, first proposed by Staines, Tavris, and Hayagrante (1973), has been identified amongst executive
women, where they become reluctant to promote other women in fear of risking their own careers (April et al., 2007). This is supported by Kanter (1977), who showed that the lack of support for subordinates stems from the fear that other female’s success may impact on their own power within the organisation.

The changing view of the workplace has helped alleviate the challenges of work-life balance. Straub (2007) reported that supporting work practices enabling women to balance family and work responsibilities include flexitime, tele (internet) working, child care services, and even working hours that are shortened. For some women, the stress of balancing a family and working can be too much, resulting in them taking on less demanding roles, or “softer” positions, or even leaving the workplace entirely (Appelbaum et al., 2013b). Studies have found that support in the personal domain, in the form of nannies, parents, spouses, or even communities, alleviates the stress of this balance and even assists in the enhancement of women’s careers (R. J. Burke & Vinnicombe, 2005; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009; Logan, 2014; Sandler, 2014).

Networking refers to “activities by individuals attempting to develop and maintain relationships with those who have, or are perceived to have, the potential to assist them in their work or career” (Singh, Vinnicombe, & Kumra, 2006, p. 2). Networking has been shown to increase career advancement and development as social relationships enhance promotion opportunities, yet women are often “less likely than men to participate in networking opportunities” (Strategic Direction, 2008, p. 27). The role that networking plays is that it provides social capital, as pointed out by van der Walt and Ingley (2003). The people with this social capital have more social ties which positively influence a wide range of situations, including having a wealth of links and knowledge at your disposal. Gamba and Kleiner (2001) state that the ability to network often helps in success at work since these networks provide access to information and resources.

Women have been attributed to having a more transformative style of leadership, which involves developing positive relationships with subordinates by adopting a mentoring role, using more innovative problem-solving approaches, and encouraging self-development (Strategic Direction, 2008). These managers encourage employees to focus on the interests of the group instead of on personal interests, and provide them with a sense of purpose (Appelbaum, Shapiro, Didus, Luongo, & Paz, 2013a). The particular traits of transformational leaders that seem to enhance their success have been identified by Burke
and Collins (2001), and include attributed charisma (role modelling), intellectual stimulation of employees, inspirational motivation, and individualised consideration. This style of leadership is ascribed to the facilitation of decision-making processes based on consensus, as well as diversity which enhances cooperation through crisis, and helps in nurturing a culture that facilitates crisis prevention (Appelbaum et al., 2013b). This type of leader is one who is not assertive and authoritative, but rather is supportive and encouraging.

Oakley (2000) found that challenges for women exist as a result of leadership stereotypes aligning to masculine characteristics such as speech patterns, voice volume and pitch, and even style of dress. Since women often do not share these physical attributes, Oakley (2000) believes that they are at a disadvantage when in leadership positions as they are often not taken as seriously without the specific attributes. The nurturing nature, and corresponding heightened emotional personality, is still attributed to women, while men are still seen as being the stronger and more independent gender (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005). With this comes the challenge that due to their nurturing and supportive nature, women are not considered to be effective managers or are not able to display astuteness in terms of management (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). For women in senior roles, it is often hard to maintain their feminine traits, as the social expectation for top leaders is that of a more masculine nature (Terjesen et al., 2009). The result of these challenges is that women more often believe that emulating masculine images or downplaying their feminine side will strengthen the respect towards them within their organisations.

Society has served to offer opportunities to women as well as create challenges. One of the opportunities presented include new legislations and acts, including the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill. As in the report from the Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance, the Bill is aimed to increase female representation and participation in decision making roles within the South African business sector (2015). In terms of other opportunities, the Gender Policy Framework (GPF) is in place to correct some of the wrongs committed in the past, helping create more gender equality in the workplace through Employment Equity (EE). The challenge of this, as pointed out by Cummings (2004), as cited in April et al. (2007), is that women may be appointed as part of these initiatives instead of due to possessing the required skills, having the required and relevant experience, or being suitably qualified for the position. Fisher and Katz (2003) further expand on this challenge as
they found that it may create stress for women who fear that career progression occurs often as a result of legislation, rather than due to hard work and determination.

2.4. Conclusion

The literature reviewed helps to explain how boards are comprised, detailing the qualities and characteristics desirable of each of the members. This understanding of boards, including their purpose and function, serves as a base for understanding board diversity. The literature that has been reviewed with regards to board diversity critically assesses the benefits and challenges of diverse boards and looks into the meaning of diversity. Different theories are evaluated that provide insight into the motivation for diversity, or the support of homogenous boards so that all sides are taken into account when approaching the research question.

The final element that has been assessed in the literature involves the challenges and opportunities that women experience in business. Again, this looks at both sides of the spectrum to ensure that a full understanding is gained, and to ascertain how to link the challenges and opportunities to the concepts of board diversity. Understanding female businesswomen and reviewing the results of studies to determine the differences in leadership styles between women and men helps provide insight into how they can be of value to boards. The concepts that have been explored within the literature help to highlight the setting in which women in business operate, as well as the factors that influence women’s experiences. The lack of information relating to the experiences of women serving on boards supports the need for, and relevance of, the study. Through the research, an improved understanding of the perceptions of female board members has been attained and used to facilitate the development of strategies to increase the upward mobility of business women.
3. Research methodology

The purpose of this research was to learn about the experiences of female board members and their perceptions of increasing gender equality on boards within the South African context, with the objective of exploring the successes and challenges experienced, as well as characteristics required to become a board member. The intention of the study was not to numerically calculate female board membership or assess increases in board positioning, but was rather to discover what factors assisted female board members in getting to their current position, and to understand their challenges and successes from an experiential perspective.

The research method was qualitative and inductive in nature, as the researcher hoped to induce a conclusion from a number of observations attained through interviews. Flick (2007) defines qualitative research as research that “uses text as empirical material (instead of numbers), starts from the notion of the social construction of realities under study, is interested in the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study” (p. 2). Following an interpretative approach implies that meaning could be drawn from the thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions of the participants and that this meaning could then be interpreted through understanding the context within which the words were expressed.

3.1. Research approach and strategy

The approach used was a phenomenological approach, concerned with the perception of events or objects by individuals (Smith, 2004). A phenomenological approach follows the idea that researchers cannot be detached from their own presuppositions and should not even try (Groenewald, 2004). The phenomenological approach makes efforts to understand the meaning of events that individuals have in certain situations, according to Bogdan and Bilken (1997). Further, Bogdan and Bilken explain that researchers can interpret events in a multitude of ways, depending on the frame of reference applied.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used by the researcher to ensure that the interpretations of the participants were understood in the best possible manner. Instead of focusing on just the events and their causes, IPA concerns itself with meaning and processes as well (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The authors further describe it as “an approach to qualitative analysis with a particularly psychological interest in how people make sense of their experience” (2012, p. 101). The relevance of IPA for this study was that, through the
collection of the detailed first-hand accounts of the participant’s experiences, the researcher could gain better insight into the participant’s own board experiences through the meanings they created in terms of their perceptions.

Symbolic interaction was also an important approach that was compatible with IPA, as it showed how the meaning given to experiences and the way individuals interpret this meaning was essential to the experience itself (Bogdan & Bilken, 1997). This was valuable to understand since people interpret elements from their experiences, their past, and their interactions, beliefs and values that all impact on their own interpretations or perceptions. This was particularly important for the study, as the interplay of historical elements, and gender and diversity issues, possibly played a role in shaping the perceptions of female board members; phenomenology helped to enable a lived-experience exploration (Küpers, 2009).

3.2. Research Design, Data Collection Methods and Research Instruments

Research design:
In line with the phenomenological research approach chosen for this study, the design of the research was interpretational, as the researcher was interested in the participants’ perceptions on gender diversity on boards. Individuals are assumed to be self-interpreting beings, meaning that “they are actively engaged in interpreting the events, objects, and people in their lives” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). An insider’s view approach was adopted, where the researcher attempted to understand and interpret the meaning that was created from the participant’s perspective.

Data collection methods:
The data for the research came from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that encouraged research participants to provide descriptions of their experiences leading up to, and during, their time as a board member. It also looked at their perceptions regarding why they serve on boards and the contribution they feel they provide. In-depth interviews were most suitable for this research because they provided more detailed information about each individual’s thoughts and behaviours, and helped to explore issues in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006). IPA is concerned with gathering detailed, first-person accounts of the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and so by implementing semi-structured
interviews that allowed for in-depth dialogue, enough flexibility and leeway was provided to ensure that all issues, expected or not, arose and then were able to be investigated further.

The time of each interview averaged at one hour, providing sufficient time for the researcher to explore various concepts relating to the research topic. To ensure that the researcher was able to record all data accurately, a digital recording device was used in the process. Following the recording, each interview was transcribed and then coded through the use of Atlas-ti data analysis tool in order to identify themes and emergent families. In an attempt to interpret the interview findings better, the researcher held as many interviews in person as possible. Interviews conducted face-to-face are preferred within phenomenological research, as the interplay of nonverbal elements can be recorded and taken into account. As several of the research participants were not available for face-to-face interviews, the researcher conducted these in-depth interviews over the telephone. This did not serve as a limitation as non-verbal patterns and gestures did not form part of the analysis process.

**Research instruments:**

In order to highlight key areas of inquiry and focus the discussion on the research questions relating to the study, a semi-structured interview guide was used. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) explain how an interview guide facilitates the natural flow of conversation, which is one of the primary concerns of IPA. The guide (attached as Appendix 2 – Interview guide) assisted to ensure that the questions or issues being explored were remembered during the interview and helped establish direction for the interview, while still allowing for flexibility and freedom of expression. Probes were used to ensure that questions were answered in as much detail as possible. An interview protocol was implemented, which assisted to guide the administration and implementation of the interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

### 3.3. Sampling

Research participants were selected from one population group, being female board members within South Africa. A total of 10 research participants from this population were used in the study. Convenience sampling was used to obtain the majority of the participants as it enabled the researcher to freely select samples from the population based on availability. Convenience sampling aligned well with IPA in that purposefully selected participants allowed the researcher to find individuals most relevant and significant to the research problem (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were contacted via email to initiate the
process, and were provided with a brief overview of the research topic before being requested to participate.

Snowball sampling was also used, being “a special type of non-probability sampling where respondents are difficult to identify and are best located through referral networks” (Adams, Khan, Raeside, & White, 2007, p. 91). This sampling method worked well for the study when limited respondents were available as those who partook in the study were able to recommend other participants for the researcher to engage with. The weakness of this method of sampling is often that referred participants stem from similar backgrounds, thus creating a skewed sample towards one company or sector. In the instances where snowball sampling was used, the researcher was recommended to participants from dissimilar sectors, therefore adding value via diversity instead of creating limitations.

3.4. Research criteria

Qualitative research validity refers to “the degree to which you are measuring what you are supposed to, more simply, the accuracy of your measurement” (Adams et al., 2007, p. 237). Recording the interviews and then transcribing them enabled the researcher to be able to refer back to them, assisting in ensuring that the findings were actually about what they appeared to be about (Bryman & Bell, 2015). External validity refers to “our ability to generalise the results of our study to other settings” (Adams et al., 2007, p. 237). External validity is usually weak as a result of the small sample size of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Due to the nature of the research, and in particular the small sample size, generalisation is not possible. This is a limitation of the research since the findings cannot be generalised across broader populations.

Reliability questions whether the results of the study are repeatable and refers the extent to which the data collection methods or analysis instruments will yield consistent findings (Adams et al., 2007). Through the application of an interview protocol and interview guide for each interview, consistency was maintained between interviews, which led to higher reliability with regards to the findings. Ensuring that the quality of the information gathered was more than adequate, and that the tools used to gather the information were effective, influenced the reliability and validity of the study (Adams et al., 2007). In order to ensure that the coding of the interviews resulted in findings that were as close as possible to their meaning, the researcher used the participants’ answers and words as found in the recordings.

To increase the validity within the data obtained from the participants, the researcher
formulated the questions for the interviews to be as neutral as possible, keeping in mind that alternative sides or views on an issue may exist (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This neutrality prevented any leading by the researcher that may have affected the validity and reliability of the answers. Authenticity in terms of fairness refers to whether different viewpoints are being adequately represented in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Fairness was ensured by identifying varying participants for the study, including varying race, age, sector, qualification and board position.

3.5. Data analysis methods

As noted by Eatough and Smith (2008), analysis is “an iterative inductive process, beginning with several close detailed readings to provide a holistic perspective, noting points of interest and significance” (pg. 18). The analysis of data followed a four-stage process, as for Storey (2007), which began with an initial thorough reading, re-reading, and review of the manuscripts. This assisted in the development of an overall “feel” for the interviews. The re-reading step involved making notes in response to the text. The second stage involved returning to the transcripts and, with the assistance of the notes from the first step, identifying and labelling themes. These themes assisted in making the most sense of the data that was collected.

The third stage in the data analysis process involved linking themes and identifying connections that existed. This ensured that an amalgamation of the themes occurred, and so that material from abandoned themes was incorporated into the analysis. The result of this was the creation of superordinate themes from the data, which were used in the final stage of the analysis process. This stage involved producing a summary table of the themes, sub-themes, and illustrative quotes as examples.

After the four-stage process, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used analyse the transcripts, in the form of Atlas/ti software. This software provided coding and text interpretation features to link and map the themes and connections discovered in the text analysis.

3.6. Limitations

A limitation of in-depth interviews is that they may be prone to bias (Boyce & Neale, 2006), since respondents may want to prove a certain point, or may want to sound politically correct and tell the interviewer what he/she wants to hear. Another limitation is that generalisations
about the findings cannot be made due to the small sample size and since random sampling methods are not employed. This does not mean that the information attained is not valuable, but rather that the researcher is aware that the findings can only be related to a specific population within the context explored. The sample was made up of executive women serving on corporate boards, who usually have very full schedules and limited availability.

As the research was conducted during a common period for the compilation and distribution of company annual reports, the number of participants was limited based on availability. It was clarified that the researcher was not attempting to quantify the extent to which the participants experienced the phenomena, but rather to understand the phenomena being studied. Interview results were also based on the knowledge and perceptions of the interviewees at the time of interview, and as a result, further research in this field could be affected by future developments within the industry and associated changes or implementation of acts, Bills or legislations. The final limitation is almost always present in qualitative research, where the researcher is at risk of his/her own interpretation overshadowing the participant’s meaning. The possibility of interpretation bias was reduced as thoroughly as possibly through a rigorous and systematic process of comparison and continuous review of narratives in the content analysis.
4. Research Findings

4.1. Introduction
Qualitative research was undertaken in order for the researcher to be able to answer the research questions that were outlined in chapter 1. Data was gathered through a combination of face-to-face interviews, as well as telephonic interviews, with the interviews lasting around one hour. The data collected from the ten female respondents involved in the study will be presented in this chapter.

4.2. Demographic information

Gender
All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted with female board members and so there was no gender divide within the participants.

Race
Figure 1: Participants by race group below depicts a breakdown of the racial grouping of the participants. White and coloured participants each made up 40% of the sample, with African participants being less represented, making up only 20% of the sample.

![Racial grouping of participants](chart.png)

Figure 1: Participants by race group

Age
The average age of the participants was 45 years, with youngest being 35 years and oldest being 58 years of age.
Figure 2: Respondents by Age Category

Marital status

In terms of the marital status of the participants, only two were single, while the remaining 8 were all married at the time of the study. Only one respondent reported being divorced, but further revealed that she had remarried. The results are shown below:

Figure 3: Participants Marital Status

Children

Out of all of the participants, only one reported that she did not have children. This was the same participant who fell within the single category of marital status. The researcher did not feel that it was necessary to inquire as to how many children each participant had.

Figure 4: Divide of participants with and without children
Qualifications
The most common qualification for the participants was chartered accounting, with six of them having completed their articles. Other qualification ranged from Bachelor of Commerce (BComm) to Human Resource Specialisation, to Teaching diplomas and Master of Business Administrations (MBA). Four of the respondents reported that they also had additional qualifications attained previously, including building surveying, quantity surveying, journalism, and other diplomas. The sample did not contain any participants who did not have a qualification of some sort. Figure 5 depicts the divide of the highest qualification.

![Highest Qualification]

Company sector
Only 2 of the participants were currently employed in the same sector, being that of investment instruments. The remainder were employed between eight other regions as shown in the figure below:

![Sectors of Participants]
Board position held

In terms of the board positions held by the participants, three positions were more dominant than the remaining four, each representing 20% of the sample, as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Participants grouping by board position
4.3. Emerging themes

4.3.1. Challenges women face in business

The emergence of the theme regarding the challenges women face in business occurred through asking direct questions regarding the perceived challenges that the women felt, as well as through the open discussion that took place throughout the interview. From the below findings it is clear that challenges exist for women at all levels, and are often discovered through the analysis of all topics under discussion. These challenges align with one of the key research sub-questions, namely “What are the perceived challenges and opportunities women face in becoming board members?” The challenges include:

Half of the participants reported that BEE or government regulations, including various policies and acts, served as a challenge for women in business, and did not view it as a valid method to developing and empowering women. Participants felt that having women in top management positions isn’t something that should be enforced, and that often when it is enforced, women lack experience and know-how. Participants felt that women should be promoted to higher positions because they have worked for it, and deserve it, as said by P1: “I would hate to see something like BEE being applied to women. Like forcing the issue, it’s got to be because we deserve it and because we work for it and we push for it and we have the tenacity to get there”. P10 discusses this factor and comments “sadly I think many of
them [female board members] lack the experience because we now have the whole BEE drive, and I think companies are putting females into positions because of necessary rules, not because of experience and know how”. BEE and government regulations were believed to also cause suffering for women, as participants felt being placed in a position due to policy rather than skill can cause stress, as shown from P6: “I don’t think the regulations must make it that much easier because I think women suffer in that.”

Being a woman was also considered to be a challenge for many of the participants, down to physical aspects including voice pitch, temper management, as well as looks. P1 experienced this challenge and commented “I mean just practical things like men’s voices are louder.” One participant (p7) even commented on how men often feel that women need to be treated differently because they are more “fragile”: “…almost that feeling that women are slightly more fragile.” The assumed nurturing nature of the participants was perceived to be a challenge as they were not viewed as being straightforward enough when giving orders.

The feeling of being excluded from business decisions was experienced by many of the participants. The participants felt that exclusion was a challenge for women as often it resulted in information being edited before their opinion was consulted, or they found that decisions were made before being presented to the board for the final vote. The idea of sanitising information is clear from P4: “And my view on board is that by the time the information gets to the board it’s sanitized...Because there are certain people on the boards that they would sound out about decisions outside of the board meeting.” Her statement also reveals the closed network that is experienced for women. P2 expresses a similar view, and elaborates on the pre-determined decision making process: “So I sometimes do feel a little bit left out and lots of decisions are brought to the table to be validated ... So that is my only concern, that sub company decisions are put on tables basically just to be rectified, and there being a backstory before, and the backstory has been approved by the group and the exec directors”.

More than half of the respondents felt that gender role stereotypes still appear to be a major stumbling block for women looking to advance their careers. Pressures arise once women have partners and families, and the stereotype of women being the primary caregiver while men remain the primary breadwinner still remains, as with P10: “There is a lot of pressure being put on the females because the husband sees himself as the breadwinner and therefore
his career comes first and the pressure on the female is to give in and give up because the husband is expecting it of them.”

In the interviews, most of the participants pointed out various faults that expressed as being directly linked to the female gender. Some examples include not promoting themselves enough, losing touch with old school ties, settling for softer positions, and even becoming too apologetic for issues that should not even be a matter for discussion: P9: “I think women tend to believe that they are not good enough, or they lack confidence”, P10: “Women start working in their younger years, then they fall pregnant and they never come back, or they come back and they want a softer job or a half day job”, and P4: “You must just listen to the language that women use. So if you phone in or something and you say ‘I am really sorry but I need to leave early... I am really sorry to do this’. I am saying why are we apologising?”

The concept of the glass ceiling still seems to be prevalent within corporate society, yet participants had mixed feelings regarding how it comes into play. Several felt that the glass ceiling is created by women themselves, whereas others felt that it was society and the corporate world that is still restricting the growth of women beyond softer roles. The view on women creating the glass ceiling for themselves is shown from P9: “I think it’s a little bit of a difficult question because I do think women make their own, I sometimes believe that women do make their own glass ceilings”. P10 also talks about the glass ceiling, but more in relation to executive positions: “I deal with 1100 companies just with XX alone, and if you look at the top management in those companies, and they include large, medium and smaller enterprises, I want to say you are still looking at 90% of the top executives still being men. Where you do find women in positions, it’s HR, so that is as far as it generally goes”.

Another finding in the theme relating to challenges revealed that respondents felt women did not support each other enough. It appears that men, on the other hand, support each other and lobby for each other more often, making corporate life harder to infiltrate for women. P9 supported this finding: “I also think women don’t promote each other enough because women are jealous of other women. It’s as if they don’t want to see other women move above them, and I just don’t know why that is”. For P6, this was expressed in terms of a lack of comradery: “I think one of the things women directors don’t do is; we don’t sufficiently build a comradery and support for each other within the board”.
The existence of the boy’s club within corporate life still hinders the integration of women into company culture. P10 explains what takes place in these clubs, and how it serves as a challenge in terms of allegiances: “While they are on the golf course, while they are on the boat fishing, while they are shooting and killing animals, they are bonding and they are talking work. They talk strategies and they have got each other’s back”. Participants felt that the boy’s club served as a closed network where bonds are formed, strategies are discussed, and business is done, during events such as golf, fishing, hunting and other “masculine” activities. For P5, the activities practiced in the boy’s club inhibited women from being accepted, or being part of the group: “Because a lot of people, a lot of women tend to complain; if you don’t cycle then you are not part of the group, if you don’t play golf you aren’t in”. In terms of the purpose of the club, P4 explains how they usually involve a planned agenda regarding particular business decisions: “Men go and they play golf, but before they tee off they have three or four points or things that they want out of that round of golf, which is not necessarily around the golf game, it’s around the business association”.

Upbringing has a major impact on confidence and the development of determination and self-belief, as is confirmed by P1: “[it goes] all the way back to early childhood development. And they claimed that it’s part of how you bring up boys vs. girls. Boys are told “you are going to be the breadwinner, you are going to be the confident smart one, and you are going to be successful”. Girls are not brought up with the same sense of confidence. And so it actually starts back there”. Boys are taught that showing leadership qualities is commended and expected, whereas girls are dissuaded from displaying such qualities, and are often negatively perceived when portraying similar traits. P9: “It comes back to that statement: If a girl does something in the family home, the family says she is bossy, whereas for a boy they will say he is just showing leadership qualities. It’s that whole upbringing thing.” When male figures are seen as the decision makers, and women are raised to remain close-mouthed and subservient, the results carry through and are often hard to break free of, as was experienced by P6, saying “if you come and you been raised in a very closed conservative Afrikaner background where the man makes all the decisions, then you can see the person is wanting to be open but struggling with it”
4.3.2. Influencing factors for women

The second theme emerged as the researcher found that many influencing factors were believed to have supported the career progression of the participants, with specific sub-themes occurring repeatedly for many of the participants. These findings assisted in providing answers to the sub-question, “What factors play a role in facilitating career progression, including securing a board position?”

Figure 9: Influencing factors for women

Statements from the participants indicated that having a clear area of expertise served to positively influence their position in business as it assisted with being listened to and being respected, and mitigated any experiences of disrespect or feelings of incapability.

P7 explains the role of her expertise: “I can say that having that knowledge has been helpful as the people I work with are then aware that I am an expert in the area and that I am really looking after business which is important as I know what is happening.” P3 gives an example of the role of her financial expertise: “So when I talk about anything financial they do listen because they know that I know more than them.” This statement is supported by P2: “It might also be that I have brought a lot of technical expertise to this board specifically so they have to listen to me.”

Confidence was identified as a strength, and assisted in getting points of view and opinions across, especially when they are opposing the majority view of the board, as is seen in the
following quote by P6: “You do need one or two strong personalities on the board who is quite happy to go against the grain, who say ‘actually I don’t agree with that’, and you say ‘why’, and then people start listening and unpacking... But you need to be confident. You can’t express your view in a non-confident way because that doesn’t reflect well.” P10 gives an example of the power of being confident: “It’s all in the delivery, and the way that you deal with the people, that drives that message home.” Talking of raising girls with equal amounts of confidence to boys, P10 reveals how it affects women in all aspects of life: “When you raise girls they are raised with equal amounts of confidence and belief in themselves. And then that really does filter through to the rest of your life.”

Traits unique to women were found to be beneficial to boards, such as a softness and guidance-like behaviour. P9 said “This [gender] value add is often some of the softer skills that I think women can bring to a board, and a lot of guidance in that regard”. P5 feels that thinking, behaving and dressing like a women is important as “that’s why we need women on the board; we need that diversity, that different mind-set.” P4 supports this in her view on women who assimilate work and personal problems: “we come in and we say ‘oh shit my hair is so shit today, I can’t find anything in my cupboard to wear’, whereas men, for them it’s like ‘we don’t go there’, we don’t talk about our personal life, we don’t talk about what happens!”. Other traits that were identified as unique to women included calculated decision making processes, multitasking and organisation skills, personality traits, as well as personal strengths.

Examples of the decision making skills included phrases such as “I think we as women, we kind of want more information. I like as much information before I make decisions”; “I find that women are very, very calculated... they are not quick to make a decision”; and “females I notice, contrary to popular belief, do not make impulsive decisions”. “Look again all working mothers will either know, or have to learn very hard the art of multi-tasking”, and “You have to be super organised, and you have to have a super support structure” were statements that highlighted the multitasking and organisation skills women have. Terms that appeared with regards to personality traits include “workaholic”, “integrity”, “confidence”, “nurturing”, “caring”, “driven”, and “perfectionist”. The variation in these terms points to the fact that personality traits often serve as strong points to personal development. And finally statements relating to personal strengths included “I definitely do challenge the status quo, not everyone likes that”; “I am direct, inquisitive, but also I get the job done”; “we think holistically, we do
not think segmental in any way”; and “I find that the women can ask the questions that people think are the stupid questions.”

In response to questions relating to factors that assisted in the participants getting to the positions that they currently felt, it was clear that having a wide knowledge on the sector in which women work, as well as a broad understanding of all elements of the business, was highly sought after and served to strengthen the position the participants held. This is clear in the answers below, provided as a result of being asked “what helped get you onto the board?”

P7: “My knowledge of the business and my skills. Having the business knowledge that firstly got through and being able to handle all the questions that might come. And having industry knowledge as well because sometimes questions arise around how are you managing the regulator on this issue, and I can say that having that knowledge has been helpful as the people I work with are then aware that I am an expert in the area and that I am really looking after business which is important as I know what is happening.”

P6: “And you need to start, this is the most important thing I find they don’t do, you need to start reading far more broadly about the economy, not only in SA, but globally... You need to be able to impress them with your understanding. And I find that if you are well versed and have put in effort in understanding the industry and the company, then they very soon realise but actually she knows the industry and then its equality.”

Networking is seen as vital, and as stated by P9, “I think your network is probably your most valuable asset. It’s something that you need to look after... I think looking at your network and building it is important”. Networking helped to forge relationships at all levels, within different companies, and is seen as a contributor to being influential within the business world. For P8, regardless of your IQ, goal orientation, or motivation, “if you can’t network at this level you shoot yourself in the foot. Because there is so much that goes on behind the scenes, so many relationships that if you only build those relationships, you will get so much information”. Two respondents even felt that their current job placement had occurred because of their strong ties formed in previous employment networks. P10 gave further insight into networking, explaining how it is important internally as well as externally: “And [networking] internally is just as important; one must never forget that your internal colleagues are also a network. If you want to be influential in a business, you have got to work that network as well. It’s no good sitting in your office doing good work and nobody...
knows about you. You have got to get there; get to the meetings, be presentable, always look and be presentable so that people look up to you and that you build your own internal network as well and get other people to know you and to know what level of service you are delivering and the good that you are doing for the business, that you become part of the decision making plan in the business.”

When respondents were questioned about how they came to serve on their first board, being nominated or referred by someone was a commonly provided answer. More than half of the sample indicated that previous colleagues or employers had referred them to board positions, as is clear for P4: “And I think all of my board appointments kind of came in response to the relationship networking, where somebody new me and had seen me in one or other kind of work or professional engagements somewhere, and then approached me. But that was also the former CEO served on a structure that I was on once, and he recommended me to the Foschini board.”

Another form of network identified as an influence to success included support networks, made up of partners, husbands, family members, and caretakers. Three of the respondents attributed much of their growth in business to these support networks, while more than half of the remaining participants felt that a strong support network served to assist women in business, as with P9: “I think that a good support network is really central in business, if you are trying to be a mother and someone in the workforce you do need to have a good support network.” This point was affirmed by P10: “So your support systems at home need to be really, really good. You have to have a nanny, or support, or your parents, or somebody trustworthy if you want to be in a serious career and have children”.

4.3.3. Perceptions of female board members

The final theme emerged as there appeared to be a pattern within the responses of the participants regarding particular perceptions relating to being a woman in business, as well as to being a board member. Many of these perceptions relate to the challenges and influencing factors of the respondents, but were categorised within this theme as they related to views and perceptions, assisting to answer the final sub-question: “What are the views of current female board members on why they serve on boards and what they feel they contribute?”
Certain choices that women make appear to serve as challenges, and are perceived differently by female board members. Participants discussed these choices in terms of having a family, the role of being a mother, sacrifices made and the idea of a work-life balance. Examples of the different challenges experienced through being a mother and wife were numerous in most of the interviews. Having a family changes the working pattern of women, and P9 felt that “Once you have kids it becomes very difficult. Prior to kid I just worked around the clock, I am a bit of a workaholic, but then having had kids you are forced into a lot of non-working, which makes it very difficult. I work a lot at night”. The challenge of giving birth to children is explained by P4: “The fact that you are going to have a family means that for about four or five months at some point you are going to be out of the loop. Coaching women once they come back from maternity leave, how to re-integrate as you have been away for four months, how do you kind of pick up again, because you are a little bit out of touch. Also when you come in after having a baby, you are different. You are not the same person and the demands on you have changed, with work getting a little less focus than before.”

There are often sacrifices that must take place as a working woman, and P8 explains that in order to fulfil both the role of mother and of business woman, you need to be comfortable with this: “So if I am scheduled to go somewhere on Tuesday, and my son has a play thing, and I can move it I move it. If I can’t, then that is the sacrifice that you make. So I feel very in control. There are times where you miss out on big things, family things, because you have
got to be wherever it is you need to be, but that is a decision I am comfortable with, and sacrifices I am willing to make”. Work-life balance can also be a challenge, as there appears to be an ideal age for seizing opportunities, and for most women this also corresponds with getting married and starting a family, P6: “So women they need to understand that the corporate is not going to solve their work life balance, they need to choose. Not one at the expense of the other, but I think there is a period in your life where, and I think that period is particularly between 25 and 35, where you have huge opportunities and you need to decide whether you grab it or not. That is your best time to go ahead, and whether you decide that your life will be a little bit skewed, in other words it might be 70/30 towards work.”

The interviews revealed that the participants felt that there were not enough female networks existing between women, including old school ties. Participants felt that women don’t go have coffee, play tennis, or just meet to talk business as with the boys. Without these networks, women appear to be less supporting of each other, and P9 gives a clear example of the consequences of this: “Women won’t call up a friend and say “can you put me on the board?” whereas men will do that. Or “can you help me with this deal, or can you arrange finance or introduce me to someone”. I think women won’t do that, whereas men will without hesitation.” Another example of the perception that the participants have on female networks was stated by P6 who said “the women don’t tend to do that [meet with each other]. We don’t go to the nail salon together and just talk shop and so on. We don’t build the comradery outside the boardroom. And I think that is to our detriment.”

More than 70% of the participants felt that the boy’s club still exists, with the majority of them having seen it at boardroom level. Experiences range regarding the perception of the boy’s club, but most of the participants felt that they didn’t want to be involved in the club, and that it was not important, as with P8: “I have [experienced the boy’s club], but it doesn’t faze me. I don’t want to be playing golf; they mustn’t invite me because I am not interested; I don’t want to go fishing. I have no issue with the boy’s club, I really don’t care. It doesn’t faze me at all”. Several participants played golf with their colleagues, or went to dinner with others, integrating themselves into work activities and therefore showing confidence and assertiveness. The existence of the club was also perceived to be beneficial to career progression as with P10: “while the boys are hunting and fishing I make sure that I do my job and that I outperform them. That is how I got to the top job”.

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Participants found that there are definitely games that are played within the board room, and that women need to be aware of these games and the results of playing them. Participants felt that often women fall into the trap of trying to play the same game as men, as with P1: “And it’s hard to not fall into the trap… it’s like wanting to be one of the boys… it’s wanting to be on their level”. Others felt that in order to operate in a corporate environment one needs to understand the rules of the game in order for it not to become personal. Understanding the game was also identified as being a supporting factor in maintaining a position on the board, P4: “So I think for me the kind of ‘seat’ at the table is your ticket to the game. Once you are there you need to understand the rules of the game”

Almost all of the participants found that gender equality did not exist in the boardroom, with most reporting that they were the only female on the board they serve on. For some, this was not from a lack of trying to balance the divide, but rather was due to the fact that suitably capable and experienced women were not available. Participants felt that males still occupied more leadership roles than women, and that women still became qualified in careers that do not relate to executive power, but rather to mid-level supervision.

The perception of men being in higher management positions can be seen from P10: “So I think gender equality is; we are still lacking particularly in South Africa. If you look around you, I deal with 1100 companies just with [redacted] alone, and if you look at the top management in those companies, and they include large, medium and smaller enterprises, I want to say you are still looking at 90% of the top executives still being men. Where you do find women in positions, it’s HR, so that is as far as it generally goes. You will find a HR manager which is a female, which is seen as a softer type of role. So I think we are still a very far way away from, In South Africa particularly, in terms of how the world has progressed in terms of gender equality”. This is supported by P2: “In our area it is going to take a long time for females, especially on the high management level”.

The perception on serving on boards is that it is hard work, and requires a lot of commitment and even sacrifice. The quotation from P9 shows how women serving on boards need to be more aware of how they portray themselves and their messages in order to promote a belief or viewpoint: “The other thing about being on a board is that its hard work... You have got to be available for that and committed to the process. I do think sometimes when you are a woman and you are fighting for shareholder rights you are seen as obstructive; whereas if you are a man you are seen as a good negotiator... You need to be very careful too, how you
put across your objection to something, or how you fight for shareholder rights”. The general perception is that when women serve on boards there is a positive result for the company, as shown by P4: “where there are women on the board, that even the financial performance of that company is better... Women bring a different dynamic into the corporate world”.

Participants found that often women need to work harder than men to prove themselves, or even just to get the work done, P1 “I do think maybe some females in some industries need to work a little bit harder, or sometimes a lot harder, than men”. This seems to link with having a family, and the role of being a mother, since there are additional requirements placed on women beyond just those of the job, P3: “It’s very much you do you work, everyone works hard. I go home and see my kids, and if need be I log on at home after they are asleep. There are times when you are more busy, when you need to put in hard work”.

Physical appearance is perceived to be a difficult issue to work around, and is still perceived to be a challenge in the business environment. Looking presentable is important, but many participants felt that it was still important to dress like a woman, and to maintain their feminine edge, rather than trying to take on a more masculine role and appearance. The importance of this relates to being authentic and true to oneself, and to breaking down gender stereotypes by showing that appearances are irrelevant. One participant (P3) found that dressing more like the men, in a pants suit or similar, helped in terms of being respected: “If I go to a meeting I will wear a pants suit. Things that make me look like them, they take you more seriously”.

The predominant reason for board recruitment was the financial background of the women, stated clearly by P5: “I actually think the reason why I am sitting on all the boards I sit on is because of my finance background. Because all of my appointments have been when they are looking for someone with a finance background”. P6 supported this perception, but also felt that her recruitment occurred as a result of the combination of her financial background and government regulations: “In the initial years it was predominantly for the finance background because people needed that on the audit committees and risk committees as opposed to being the female issue. In later years of course I think as the government started putting gender and BEE on to the table I got recruited mainly firstly I think for finance and then as a secondary top of the pack that I am a gender, so that gave me a plus.... I think certainly my, I know that I get recruited to boards purely firstly for my finance background”.

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The participant’s perceptions on the skills that are desired on a board ranged, including having a broad understanding of the company, supporting the values of the shareholders, having knowledge of the relevant acts, engaging in discussions of possible options, as well as identifying and evaluating the consequences of the choices to be made. Participants were chosen for their ability to perform their fiduciary duties, as well as to ensure that the board is kept in safe hands. Different thinking styles were also perceived to be skills that are favoured, as with P5 and P6: “And they [the board members] are looking for women with an analytical mind, who think through issues”. “We [the board] are looking for something different. We are looking for the strategic thinker and the lateral thinker. We are looking for someone with diversity of knowledge”.

Although tokenism was not a view that was brought up much, it is still perceived to exist, and is believed to negatively impact other board members. Tokenism manifests itself in many ways such as in serial board membership, explained by P9: “I mean you do get some serial board members in South Africa who push themselves into various boards; but you often find those women don’t actually have any real business experience; they are just serial board members. I think people in South Africa, and this is quite a generalisation, put women on the board just to fill a quota”. The perceived effect of tokenism is clarified by P6: “Today the black women particularly, even the other women, you don’t necessarily need to be yourself. You are going to be there, and they are going to keep you. And some of the women they say they aren’t going to let me go because they need me. I don’t think anybody says that. But it is a subconscious effect”.

Two of the participants perceived their upbringing to be responsible for the position that they currently hold: P1: “I think maybe one of the reasons why, and it may sound really weird, but one of the reasons why I made it to be a board member could be because my dad passed away early and I didn’t have that male figure. My mother was the breadwinner, the caregiver, the everything; so it was never in my mind that I shouldn’t be able to make it”. P10: “I think I was lucky to have grown up in a boy’s world with my older brother and most of our friends, my parent’s friends had boys as kids, so I learnt to play soccer, to play rugby, cricket, everything with the boys. And to fit into that boy’s mould, not take things personally, rising above it, take it with a pinch of salt, and dish the punches out as much as you get them”. These two perceptions, although differing drastically based on opposite
circumstances, show how upbringing has been perceived to assist women in attaining more male-dominated positions.

4.4. Summary and conclusion

This chapter highlights the key themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants of the study, and helped the researcher get a better understanding on the perceptions of female board members regarding their participation in the boardroom. All respondents indicated that they experience challenges as a woman in the corporate world, with these challenges including legislation; being a woman; exclusion; gender role stereotypes and biases; the glass ceiling; lack of support; and the “boy’s club”. The findings also show that there is a multitude of supporting factors present that assist women in moving up the ranks in the business world, as well as in terms of attaining board membership. Key areas highlighted here include area of expertise; confidence; feminine traits; expansive business knowledge and understanding; and networks. The overall perceptions of the participants clearly shows the strength and determination that each has, as well as the hard work and dedication that has taken place in order to get the participants to the position at which they currently stand, and provides insight into the views and experiences of female board members.
5. Analysis and Discussion of Results

5.1. Introduction
This chapter serves to provide insight into the meaning behind the answers given to the interview questions that were presented. The discussions were derived from a qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts of the 10 participants involved in the study, selected through a process of convenience and snowball sampling. The process of analysis began by identifying themes that emerged across the responses of the participants. The results of this analysis served to provide answers to the research question and sub-questions, as outlined in chapter 1. The questions asked during the interviews stemmed from an interview guide developed as a result of the review of literature, and helped to keep the discussion loosely on track with the research theme.

5.2. Demographics of respondents
The demographics of the participants were classified under gender, race group, age, marital status, children, qualifications, company sector, and board position. As the research was gender based, all of the participants were female and currently occupied a position within the board of their relevant company. The racial division included 40% White, 40% coloured, and 20% African, being the minority within the sample. The age range was between 35 and 58 years, categorising the entire sample as being adults. Almost all of the respondents were married (8), and those with children worked out to be 90% of the sample. The trend in terms of qualification was towards the financial markets, with six participants being qualified Chartered Accountants. The remaining qualifications showed a wide variety, ranging from a Bachelor of Commerce, to Human Resources. There was only a 20% overlap in sectors of employment, with the investment instrument sector holding this percentage of the sample. There was also a strong divide of board positions, with CEO, independent non-executive and CFO having the highest sample with two members each.

In terms of the demographics of the sample, the wide range and broad diversity that is seen within all of the different categories ensures that the information is valid and is not skewed in one direction in particular. It helped the researcher to gain a richer understanding on the experiences of female board members throughout South Africa.
5.3. Emergent themes

5.3.1. Challenges women face in business

Within South Africa, legislations have been put in place to address the segregation effects that appeared in the apartheid era (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005), with the proposed result being an increase of female representation in business and decision making roles. Instead of supporting women in business, the respondents found that these legislations served as a challenge, as women were often placed in roles because of legal requirements instead of through their own achievements. This finding supports the explanation by Fisher and Katz (2003) where stress has been discovered in women who do not receive promotions or positions they deserve due to female colleagues being chosen above them based on policies. The view of P10, who said “sadly I think many of them [female board members] lack the experience because we now have the whole BEE drive, and I think companies are putting females into positions because of necessary rules, not because of experience and know how”, illustrates another problem with legislative acts enforced in South Africa as outlined by Cummings (2004, as cited in April, Dreyer, & Blass, 2007). Cummings found that often women placed in these positions do not have the relevant experience and even the right qualification to enact their duties. When looking at these two challenges it becomes clear that, unless well managed and monitored, legislative practices can cause more harm than good, as experienced by several of the participants.

In alignment with the findings of Oakley (2000), the participants found that feminine traits still served to decrease their acceptance and support in business settings. The statement from P1 regarding practical challenges that were experienced, such as men’s voices being louder, is a prime example of how leadership stereotypes align to masculine characteristics (Oakley, 2000). The experience of being seen as fragile is supported through the findings of Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh (2009), which indicated that sex role stereotypes are still embodied as women are seen as females before being considered as an individual with particular skills and strengths. The challenge of being perceived to have a nurturing nature supports the research by Kiaye and Singh (2013), where a nurturing nature is often linked to ineffective management. These responses show that although women are holding executive and high level positions, and even have a greater status than some of their male colleagues, feminine traits and stereotypes still impede acceptance.
The experience of exclusion may be a subconscious response to the threat of challenge to the status quo among boards, since it has been found that females, and especially female stakeholders, bring alternative perspectives and prevent self-interest actions from taking place (Francoeur et al., 2008). Thus they would be excluded from decision processes to ensure that buy-in is gained prior to the board vote, and so that previous positions of power can continue while diversity is seen to be employed. As the experience of exclusion only occurred between groups of male board members and singular females, it can also be linked to the idea of Petrovic (2008), who found that secluded groupings often occurred among demographically similar individuals (race, gender, etc.), where “groupthink” was encouraged to foster support for a particular idea by a key player.

Gender role stereotyping appears to occur from a young age, and the findings suggest that for many of the participants it is still a challenge in work and personal life. As pointed out by P10, a lot of pressure is placed on women as men are seen as the primary breadwinners, and women are seen as the nurturers and carers of the home. This is supported by Straub (2007), who found that in early childhood girls are taught to withhold from masculine expressions of achievement, dominance, and authority, commonly associated with the family breadwinner, and should rather act submissively and in a nurturing manner. Further support for this comes from Kabeer (2005), who found that education of girls encourages behaviours such as being shy, modest, and passive, while boys are taught to be ambitious, strong, and assertive. As stated by the participants, women appear to lack self-belief and self-confidence, which illustrates the outcome of such an upbringing. P4 points out the apologetic nature of women: “You must just listen to the language that women use. So if you phone in or something and you say “I am really sorry but I need to leave early... I am really sorry to do this”. I am saying why are we apologising?” Her reaction shows how embedded gender stereotypes have become normalized in business, and how women continue to display passive behavioural traits regardless of their status. These experiences highlight the fact that gender role stereotyping continues to influence female socialisation, and results in decreased self-confidence and a heightened non-competitive demeanour (Budworth & Mann, 2010). The challenge is that low levels of confidence and a non-competitive spirit are not affiliated with success, and although modest behaviours may increase likeability, Budworth and Mann (2010) have found that modesty negatively impacts access to leadership positions and economic rewards.
The findings indicated that none of the participants had experienced the glass ceiling within their own careers, but that they felt that it did exist with regards to other women who appear to be unable to advance beyond middle-management positions. In theory, the glass ceiling is a barrier for women who have reached a certain level and find that they can go no further (Strategic Direction, 2008). This is supported in the view of P6: “in the boardroom, and in corporate life, we employ a lot of women in our first line of management, because you need to get this gender diversity right, but we find that we are, even after a few years, not able to call them any further to senior management and executive positions”. Handa and Singh (2015) found that the number of women in corporate decision making positions is still low, confirming the view of P10: “I deal with 1100 companies just with [redacted] alone, and if you look at the top management in those companies, and they include large, medium and smaller enterprises, I want to say you are still looking at 90% of the top executives still being men. Where you do find women in positions, it’s HR, so that is as far as it generally goes.” This supports the evidence that the glass ceiling is seen most dramatically for women in senior management position (Oakley, 2000). A differing challenge in this regard was outlined by P9, who stated: “I sometimes believe that women do make their own glass ceilings”. A possible explanation for this relates back to gender role stereotypes, and the research of Budworth and Mann (2010), where modesty has been found to prevent career growth. Although there still appears to be a large amount of women who are not making it to executive levels as easily as their male counterparts, an inhibiting factor may also be the women themselves, and more broadly society at large that reinforces and commends modesty and non-promotional behaviours.

The Queen Bee Syndrome best explains the lack of support experienced among the participants and other women within their own organisations. From this point of view, April, Dreyer, and Blass (2007) found that female executives fail to promote or support other women as they fear losing their own jobs or missing promotional opportunities given to other women when support and guidance is given. For men, support networks at work have been found to create relationships and assist in the development of alliances between male colleagues (Oakley, 2000). As P6 found, “what women directors don’t do is we don’t sufficiently build a comradery and support for each other within the board”, serving as an example of how even though women work together, the Queen Bee Syndrome can still affect the development of much needed support structures internally.
Vinnicombe and Singh (2011) describe the boy’s club as a male-only club comprising of members who are similar in power, usually at an executive level. Through further research, Mooney and Ryan (2009) discovered that organisational information, including, but not limited to, executive and strategic plans, is often discussed, and usually an agenda for discussion is planned prior to club activities or events. For men, the benefit of being part of this club is that bonding occurs, as illustrated by P10: “while they are on the golf course, while they are on the boat fishing, while they are shooting and killing animals, they are bonding and they are talking work. They talk strategies and they have got each other’s backs and will look out for one another in the boys club”. The impact of this bonding is that it assists in social network development, and as Singh, Vinnicombe, and Kumra (2006) explain, this inevitably leads to greater opportunities for promotion or personal recommendation. The implication of this for women is that they may be overlooked for promotions, and are often not consulted when decision are being made.

The definition of masculinity in academia is “the innate qualities of men and also those that distinguish men from women” (V. Fisher & Kinsey, 2014, p. 46), which serves as an advantage point for the male gender. Fisher and Kinsey further reveal that this advantage is reflected in specific traits, such as aggression (contrasting to feminine passivity), strength (opposed to feminine weakness), and sexual drives (contrasting to femininity being sexually reserved) (2014), as well as leadership qualities and ambition. This gender discourse is evident in the results where the respondents were conscious of how girls are raised without such traits. The impact carries over later in life where as women advance their careers and attempt to fill historically masculine roles and positions, they are disadvantaged based on internal gender stereotypes from their childhood.

5.3.2. Influencing factors for women

As identified by Petrovic (2008), having professional reputation, expertise and experience are key qualities that are desired by boards. Petrovic (2008) further explains that boards praise members who have a commitment to the company affairs and who aspire to achieving company goals. One of the influencing factors that the participants felt assisted in attaining their board membership was their area of expertise, as with the answer provided by P2 when asked how she became a board member: “It might also be that I have brought a lot of technical expertise to this board specifically”. This illustrates how women display key director qualities, and serves to provide evidence that area of expertise is important in gaining
board recognition. P7 felt that being viewed as an expert meant that she knew what was important and therefore what was good for the company to achieve its goals, again aligning with board member qualities. The fact that the woman are considered to be experts within their companies directly contradicts the view of Burke (2000), who found that board recruiters believe women lack the necessary qualifications and experience required for directorship. As van der Walt and Ingley (2003) identified, having diverse board members with specific areas of expertise assists in maximising the achievement of company goals and increasing profits.

Top leaders, and the senior responsibilities that they hold, are socially expected to display more masculine qualities (Terjesen et al., 2009). Looking again at gender role stereotyping, research shows that these masculine qualities include being aggressive, assertive and even dominant (Straub, 2007). For the participants of the study, a factor that assisted in getting views across, or being heard, was confidence. For P10, “it’s all in the delivery, the way that you deal with the people; that drive the message home”, proving that being assertive, and even dominant, when making a statement assists in getting one’s view across. In support of this, P6 said “you can’t express your view in a non-confident way because that doesn’t reflect well”. This statement validates the findings of Kiaye and Singh (2013) which show that the nurturing and supportive nature of women is generally associated with an inability to be an effective manager. For P10, who is raising two girls with equal amounts of confidence and belief in themselves, it proves how upbringing filters through to later stages of life.

The idea that feminine traits serve to strengthen the desirability of women for directorships seems to be a contradiction to the view that the business world is dominated by leaders with masculine characteristics (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Yet certain traits were identified as being necessary in the boardroom and the workplace as a whole. For P9 who talks about the softer skills and guidance that can be brought to the board by women, Appelbaum, Shapiro, Didus, Luongo, and Paz (2013) offer an explanation to support this view. They have found that a transformative style of leadership, attributed to female leaders (Strategic Direction, 2008), helps to provide the board with a sense of purpose, as well as to maintain focus on company interests as a whole. Physical attributes, such as dress and appearance, along with behavioural attributes, such as an openness and willingness to share and express feelings, provide more diversity to the board. A more diverse board with “different mind-sets” often leads to achieving a better understanding of the complexities that exist within business (Campbell &
Mínguez-Vera, 2008). These different views, beliefs, and values provoke stronger discussions that result in more sound and calculated company choices (Nielsen, Huse, Nielsen, & Huse, 2010).

Other elements, such as attention to detail, in-depth decision making processes, and a wide knowledge and base of information, were some of the feminine skills that were presented in the findings. These all relate back to support for increasing diversity, which in turn is valued as it increases creativity and innovation within companies (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008). As said by P9, “I definitely do challenge the status quo, and not everyone likes that”, proving again that behaviours such as questioning and challenging the beliefs and assumptions of others, are highly desirable in a board member (Petrovic, 2008). Francoeur et al. (2008) found that women often ask the questions avoided by male colleagues who feel the answers are obvious, yet these questions often help in picking up internal faults. This is supported by the findings showing how female directors note that women often ask the questions that are considered to be stupid, yet which often result in a greater understanding and clarification of company matters. It appears that different traits, regardless of being personality or gender traits, assist in strengthening the acceptance and support of female board members, especially in environments characterised by high diversity.

Having a broad knowledge and understanding in terms of the business, the abilities and skills of all members, the context of the operations, and the different strategies and perspectives of the company while still being able to see a “wider horizon”, is a highly desirable trait for board members to possess (Petrovic, 2008). Campbell and Mínguez-Vera (2008) also found that having such a variety of knowledge and experience helps in organisational monitoring, which at the core is the primary function of the board, linking shareholder interests with management operations (Monks & Minow, 2011). When asked about the factors that enhanced their selection for the board, a pattern emerged showing that an extensive knowledge, skill and understanding of the business, industry and economy were key elements. The resulting acceptance and equality that is fostered is illustrated by P6 “[if you are] well versed [in broad economic and global business trends] and have put in effort in understanding the industry and the company, then they very soon realise ‘but actually she knows the industry’, and then its equality”. Gender and inequality issues are no longer barriers to board recruitment when such broad knowledge and wide understanding is held by women.
Singh et al. (2006) refer to networking activities as those that are embarked on by individual who are trying to develop and secure relationships with people perceived to be able to assist in work guidance and career enhancement. Through networking, individuals are able to build up social capital, which is subsequently used to one’s advantage in that interactions serve as a source of information (van der Walt & Ingley, 2003). This was evident in the results, as illustrated by P8 who stated that “if you can’t network at this level you shoot yourself in the foot. Because there is so much that goes on behind the scenes, so many relationships that if you only build those relationships, you will get so much information”. Another confirmation that networking assists in career progression is evident in the fact that over half of the participants received their first board appointment as a result of the strong network ties formed during their careers. Social network theory explains this occurrence as individuals with valuable resources (information, connections, industry insight) often have a higher chance of being promoted to an executive role due to their social capital (Terjesen et al., 2009).

As was found in the studies of R. Burke and Vinnicombe (2005), Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009), Logan (2014), and Sandler (2014), parents, nannies, spouses and even local communities provide support structures that reduce the stress experienced by ambitious women juggling multiple roles and workloads. The research supports this discovery as women found that a good support network and a supportive husband were central to having a serious career and a family. The study revealed that these support networks are vital to the process of women becoming board members, further supporting the findings of the authors as it was discovered that women were able to maintain their focus and commitment to the company without concerns of family distractions. The result of this increased work focus is that women are seen as being highly motivated and committed to company affairs, another trait found to be highly sought after in board recruitment (Petrovic, 2008).

5.3.3. Perceptions of female board members

The findings reveal that many women perceive having children impacts on their career advancement and development opportunities, as well as on their pattern of work. Williams (2000) noted that the “ideal worker” is one who is committed and is without competing family responsibilities. The results suggest that female board members do not fall into this image, yet still hold executive positions. As pointed out by one participant, women who break for maternity leave often come back out of touch, and need to work hard to catch up
again, while male colleagues are able to advance and gain more experience during this time. This leaves women in a vulnerable position as a lack of commitment and dedication may cause unfair evaluations of women’s’ competencies (Appelbaum et al., 2013b). Women felt that new mothers should be given support and coaching to assist with reintegration into the workplace, which increases work demands, but alleviates associated gender bias pressures. Sama and Papamarcos (2000) noted that for women to be valued at the same level as male colleagues, they need to work harder than them, supporting the belief that new working mothers need coaching.

Straub (2007) found that flexitime, tele (internet) working, adjusted work hours, and supporting work practices enable women to balance their roles, thus making choosing between family and career responsibilities less difficult. This is supported by the findings as women felt that they were able to work at night to keep up, or have someone fetch/drop-off children when work demands required attention. The changing structure of the workplace acts as a support structure, and has enabled the continued participation of women in the corporate world. Most women reported that they had to make sacrifices earlier in life in order to seize opportunities that led to being placed in their current position. The research of Appelbaum et al. (2013b) revealed that the work-life balance stress experienced by women often results in them leaving the workplace entirely, working half days, or taking on softer positions. The results show that not all women support this decision. Sacrifices need to be made and women need to work hard during the early years of their careers, often by placing more focus on work than family. Although it is a sacrifice, women find that this results in greater corporate success. In order to make these sacrifices and seize all opportunities, strong support networks need to exist for women.

Research shows that women have less well-developed and less influential social networks than their male counterparts (Forret (2006) as cited in O’Neil, Hopkins, & Sullivan, 2011). Linking to social network theory, without these social ties, women have a lower supply of social capital to use at their disposal (Terjesen et al., 2009). The research revealed that without female networks, women are not able to reach out to each other and utilise networks and information for their own good, showing a lack of social capital. As found by O’Neil et al. (2011), when women are excluded from male networks, women’s networks assist in information and experience sharing, yet the research shows that women are not engaging in female-only activities in which such sharing takes place. Singh and Vinnicombe (2006) found
that female directors can often inspire and support other directors through networks outside of work, but as stated by P6: “we don’t build the comradery outside of the boardroom”, supporting the fact that women perceived there to be limited support for other women in business. Those who are members of women’s networks are exposed to more mentoring opportunities, and mentoring, as a form of support between women, has been found to be a contributing factor to women’s success (O’Neil et al., 2011). Further to support the concept of role modelling, mentoring and the formation of women’s networks, Gamba and Kleiner discovered that “Women in successful positions who have similar career goals can help other women learn to deal with the old boys’ network and move into senior positions” (2001, p. 104).

For generations, the business world has been dominated by the male gender, and Gamba and Kleiner (2001) explain this to be the reason why the activities of the boy’s club usually involve golf, hunting, fishing, or heavy drinking. When women engage in these activities, barriers appear to be broken regarding their exclusion, supporting the recommendation of Gamba and Kleiner (2001), who suggested that playing golf and similar activities minimises the risk of exclusion by male colleagues. Perceiving the boy’s club to be non-threatening shows the existence of confidence among women, and that exclusion from events doesn’t mean exclusion from business discussions. The findings suggest that exclusion can actually be beneficial in that while men are trying to create ties, women are getting the work done. This view emphasises the point that women feel they need to work harder than men in order to be considered equal (Kiaye & Singh, 2013)

With the business world being perceived to be male-dominated, Pesonen, Tienari, and Vanhala found that the discourse of gender constructs the world of business, including the access to boards, as a “male game where the rules favour men and where women either lack the necessary quality or must constantly engage in a balancing act” (2009, p. 339). This correlates with the findings, where the existence of the game and the importance of understanding the rules have been identified. The findings reveal that women need to be aware of the game in order to avoid feeling like they are being treated unfairly, and that adjusting the rules to suit their own gender will ensure that they can partake in board activities.

Although women are increasing their entry into the workplace globally (Davidson & Burke, 2011), the number of women in corporate decision making positions is still low, with South
African women still being far behind their male counterparts in management roles (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010). The findings support this view as they show that women do not hold enough leadership or executive positions. Gender equality on the boards was close to non-existent, shown by the fact that most women are the only females on the board. This skewed gender representation confirms that corporate boards continue to be male-dominated (Pesonen et al., 2009). A contradiction to the view that not enough qualified women are available for board positions comes from Singh, Terjesen, and Vinnicombe (2008) who noted that often women, especially in the FTSE100 companies in the UK, have greater qualifications and experience than their male colleagues. It may be the case that the perception of women fulfilling non-leadership positions is correct within the South African context as women have not been in the education system as long as men due to the oppressive acts of the Apartheid era (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010).

As noted by Erhardt, Werbel, and Shrader (2003), board diversity has been showed to be positively associated with firm performance, confirming the view of the participants that with women on boards companies experience positive financial results. Being seen as obstructive when fighting for rights was perceived as a challenge and supports the notion that when women display assertiveness, it is often perceived negatively as aggressiveness by male colleagues (Susan Vinnicombe & Singh, 2011). The clear understanding that being a board member requires hard work and commitment, and that being a female board member requires even more hard work and recognition illustrates the findings of Kiaye and Singh (2013). They noted that within South Africa, women need to work twice as hard as men, have extensive work experience and have high education levels to be recognised in the same way. Making sacrifices and working longer hours as a part of being accessible, showing continuous commitment and getting the work done can be attributed to research that shows that female board members believe visibility and successful performance through task completion is a key factor in board membership retention (Sheridan & Milgate, 2005).

The perceptions regarding physical appearance seem to oppose the findings of Oakley (2000), where leadership role stereotypes have been found to align more with masculine characteristics, including style of dress and behaviour. Women feel that their feminine image is an integral part of their leadership quality, and were something that needed to be encouraged. Although the vast majority of women believe this, others supported the notion presented by Oakley (2000) that imitating men’s style of dress assists women in being taken
more seriously. It appears that the view of executive leadership roles being masculine is diminishing. Although appearance was still found to be a challenge for some women, overall the belief is that women should maintain their own image and should not succumb to societal stereotypes.

All six of the Chartered Accountants reported that their financial background and experience played a large role in their recruitment. Burke (2000) found that board selectors believed women lack the experience and qualifications needed on a board, which is a direct contradiction to what was found in the research. Financial positions involve a high need for experience, skill and qualifications, indicating that women are capable of fulfilling the requirement. The findings show that women are creating a niche for themselves by following career paths that are highly sought after, resulting in women increasing their selection for executive positions. The perceptions that women have regarding what skills are desired of board members confirmed the findings of Petrovic (2008) relating to director qualities and, in particular, towards having a firm knowledge of the company and its area of operation. Understanding the shareholders and protecting their views serves as an example of agency theory, which follows that boards operate in a manner to protect the shareholder interests (van der Walt & Ingley, 2003).

When female board members are the minority, or even a singular on the board, they are often considered to be tokens (Torchia et al., 2011). Farrell and Hersch (2005), when looking at tokenism, discovered that in some cases women were recruited in order to improve the gender diversity on the board as opposed to being recruited for their skill and experience. This was illustrated through the experiences of women who were aware of African women, in particular, being given a board position in order to fill a quota and not because of experience and skill. Interestingly, although most women were the only females on the board, and therefore fulfilling the definition of tokenism, none of them identified with being a token. This affirms the negative perception of tokenism (Torchia et al., 2011), where being a token implies lack of skill, entitlement, or acts of legislative empowerment. Women want to be seen as deserving of their positions and of their merit and do not appreciate the implications of other women taking on such tokenistic roles as it creates a higher likelihood of being questioned regarding their input and value add (Pesonen et al., 2009).

Being raised as equals with boys or with no concept of a male figure head in the family were attributing factors to success for some women, supporting the view that masculine leaders are
considered to be better leaders suitable of performing leadership functions (Terjesen et al., 2009). Due to a lack of socialisation with other girls at an early age some women learnt masculine traits such as being brave, strong, assertive, and ambitious; characteristics that boys are taught from young (Kabeer, 2005). Learning to fit into the mould reserved for boys, as well as “rolling with the punches”, helps to develop the specific masculine attributes leaders require in order to be taken seriously (Oakley, 2000). It appears that the impact of upbringing has the ability to alter patterns of behaviours for women, with being raised in a masculine environment supporting the upward mobility and career advancement of women, as gender stereotypes are not engrained and therefore gender is not seen as a barrier to equality.
6. Research conclusion

The researcher interviewed 10 female board members and, using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, analysed the meaning created by each of the participants regarding their experiences. The results of the analysis provide insight into the perceptions of female board members, including why they felt they were selected for board membership, what skills they provide to their respective companies, as well as the challenges and opportunities that they have experienced. By gathering the data through conducting interviews and reviewing literature regarding boards, board membership, and the South African context, the research took a multipronged approach towards analysing the debated subject of gender equality in the boardroom through the perspective of female board members. The major themes of challenges, influencing factors, and perceptions emerged as the most important topics as they pertain to the research sub-questions.

In answering the main research question, the research has revealed that increasing gender equality within the boardroom is not the key concern. One issue appears to be that women are creating their own barriers to career progression as a result of a lack of self-confidence. Further, the research has found that there is not enough support for and between women at all levels of business. The implication of this is that women are less exposed to positive role models and mentors, therefore lacking guidance and encouragement to overcome the challenges unique to businesswomen. Women are gaining more seats at the table, and are often able to match and even outperform their male counterparts in terms of qualification and skill, yet they are not using their achievements to highlight and encourage the destruction of gender role stereotypes and gender biases.

The perceptions of female board members regarding gender equality, challenges and influencing factors relating to business promotion reveal an interesting trend: the impact of upbringing affects career progression at all stages of life. Differing styles of upbringing serve to either enhance or prohibit career advancement, and the corresponding gender role stereotypes taught to children, especially girls, serve to be the main barriers in this regard. The research reveals that the changing view of the workplace enables women to equally balance their different roles, and even allows for a greater amount of focus to be placed on work during the years when, historically, women have removed themselves from the workplace in order to fulfil family responsibilities.
The research set out to explore the perceptions of female board members regarding gender equality in boards, particularly in the context of South Africa. The challenges experienced by female board members in South Africa in the progression of their careers, as well as in their current positions, mirror many of the challenges that have been revealed for all women throughout the world in various different studies. Legislative policies created to support and enhance the infiltration of women into executive roles appear to be felt as disempowering towards women, undermining their capabilities and skills. Feminine traits still impede acceptance, and exclusion is still experienced in decision making processes. Gender role stereotypes and gender biases still affect women, with the research revealing that the root cause of this is often upbringing. The resulting lack of confidence and belief in one’s own abilities carried through several themes proving the power of influence from a young age. Support has been found to be essential in getting women to the top, yet the findings suggest that there are no networks for women and often there is a sense of the queen bee, so women are seen to be blocking each other rather than assisting each other, creating challenges for the implementation of gender equality.

The findings show that when confidence levels are high, and when women are able to act in a manner truly representative of their own nature, they are able to offer skills that cannot be provided by male colleagues. Feminine leadership qualities increase the diversity of boards, leading to more objective and carefully analysed decisions being made. The literature regarding the value of board diversity is confirmed through the findings, giving further support in an area that has not yet been researched thoroughly. The influencing factors discovered in the study align well with the skills wanted on a board, enforcing the fact that women in business are able to fulfil the role of a board member as well as contribute extensively to the performance of organisations. The study has disconfirmed previous studies regarding the masculine dominance of leadership, as an important supporting factor to career progression was femininity, and the ability to be, act and dress like a woman.
6.1. Research recommendations

The research has practical implications for women in business and in particular for women looking to be selected for board membership and executive decision making roles. The implications of the study also extend to women currently serving on board as they can gain insight into the views of other female board members.

Recommendations to women wanting to get on boards

Become an expert in your field and never stop learning and expanding your knowledge and understanding

Understand what skills are required on a board, as well as what board recruiters are looking for in potential candidates.

Be confident in yourself and remain authentic and true to yourself

Network with people internally and externally, and specifically within the sector in which you want to serve as a board member

Go the extra mile. Although this involves making more sacrifices and changes, by making oneself available and seizing opportunities as they are presented, more respect is gained along with experience.

Recommendations for women on boards

Form connections with other females, either on the boards with you, or across other companies and sectors

Be available to women looking to improve their own situations. Mentoring is a strong tool that can help increase the number of women willing to take on executive positions
6.2. Future research areas

Further research could be conducted on the same study, but looking at a larger sample.

An opposing study could be conducted that looks at male board members who serve on boards with women, focusing particularly on their perceptions of female board members and the skills they bring to the boardroom.

Future research could investigate the application of mentoring programmes and female networks that deal with specific levels of management and executive decision making power. The results of this may provide practical and realistic strategies to assist in the development of women.

Another interesting direction that could be looked at is towards the experience of tokenism within South African boards, and the idea of “serial board membership”.
References


doi:10.1007/s10551-007-9482-5


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Appendix 1 – Ethics form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
FACULTY OF COMMERCE
Igniting Knowledge and Opportunity

Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee

Updated Ethics in Research Form January 2013

Any individual in the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Cape Town undertaking any research that involves the use of human subjects, or research that may hold ethical consequences for the University of Cape Town, is required to complete this form. The completed form should be submitted to departmental Ethics Committee representatives for submission to the Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE OF THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS:

1. All sections of this form must be completed.
2. This form should be completed electronically and emailed to your departmental Ethics Committee representative in the Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee.
3. To select any options please double click the appropriate box and select the option ‘checked’ under the heading of default ‘on’ — then click ‘OK’.
4. You should include your electronic signature under section 8.
5. You are required to attach your research proposal, questionnaire(s) with cover letter(s), informed consent forms, organisational consent documentation, and/or interview schedules.
6. NO RESEARCH CAN BE CONDUCTED UNLESS YOU HAVE RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL FROM YOUR EIR REP.

1. PROJECT DETAILS

Project title: Gender equality in the boardroom: an exploration of the perceptions of female board members

Principal Researcher(s): Philippa Smt
Email address(es): Smtphi012@gsb.uct.ac.za

Research Supervisor: Timothy London
Email address(es): Timothy.London@gsb.uct.ac.za

Co-researcher(s): 
Email address(es):

Brief description of the project:
An exploration into the perceptions and experiences of female board members on gaining access to boards, including the challenges and opportunities that they have experienced. The resulting findings will be used to offer recommendations on expanding gender equality and board room diversity throughout South Africa.

Data collection: (please select by double clicking the box which you would like to select – and clicking the default value - checked option)

☑Interviews ☐Questionnaire ☐Experiment ☐Secondary data ☐Observation
☐Other (please specify): 

Page 1

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FULL COLOUR THINKING
Procedure: (please describe)

Interviews will be conducted with female board members who will serve as the respondents in the study. The respondents will be contacted via email or telephone initially to be asked to be involved in the study. This first level of contact will be used to explain the study to the respondents and to ensure that they understand what their role is, as well as how the information will be used. Following their consent to take part in the research, an appropriate time and location will be chosen for the interview to take place. The respondents will also sign informed consent forms and confidentiality agreements at the interview.

Please remember to attach your research proposal OR a literature review with research methodology.
## 2. PARTICIPANTS

### Characteristics of participants:

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<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race / Ethnicity:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age range:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Location:</strong></td>
<td>Cape Town</td>
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<td><strong>Other:</strong></td>
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### Race / Ethnicity:

Have you included a "Prefer not to Answer" response category in your questionnaire? *(please select)*

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [x] Not applicable

If you answered 'No' why not?

### Affiliations of participants: *(please select)*

- [ ] Company employees
- [x] General public
- [ ] UCT staff
- [ ] UCT Students
- [ ] Other (please specify): ___

If your sample includes children (aged 18 and below), mentally incompetent persons, or legally restricted groups please explain below why it is necessary to use these particular groups. If subjects are minors or mentally incompetent, please describe how and by whom permission will be granted. If you are including children under the age of 18 and are not getting parental consent, please explain why you believe that their parents would consent if it was possible to contact them.

___

- [x] Not applicable
3. ORGANISATIONAL PERMISSION

If your research is being conducted within a specific organisation, please state how organisational permission has been obtained:

___

If you cannot obtain organisational permission, please justify why below:

___

Have you attached the letter from the organisation granting permission? (please select)
☐ Yes ☐ No ☒ Not applicable

Are you making use of UCT students as respondents for your research? (please select)  ☐ Yes ☒ No

If yes, please get your supervisor to sign below:

I Miss/Mrs/Mr/Dr/ Prof ___ (insert name) as supervisor(s) to ___ (insert researcher's name) agree to ensure that approval is granted by the Executive Director: Student Affairs prior to the researcher conducting the study.

Insert electronic signature below

Are you making use of UCT staff as respondents for your research? (please select)  ☐ Yes ☒ No

If yes, please get your supervisor to sign below:

I Miss/Mrs/Mr/Dr/ Prof ___ (insert name) as supervisor(s) to ___ (insert researcher's name) agree to ensure that approval is granted by the Executive Director: Human Resources prior to the researcher conducting the study.

Insert electronic signature below

Contact Emails: *Executive Director: Student Affairs (Monira.Khan@uct.ac.za)
**Executive Director: Human Resources (Minam.Hoosain@uct.ac.za)

4. INFORMED CONSENT

What type of consent will be obtained from study participants?

☐ Oral Consent
☒ Written Consent
☐ Anonymous questionnaire (covering letter required, no consent form needed)
☐ Other (please specify): ___
If you are making use of oral consent, please explain why written consent is not an option:

________

How and where will consent/permission be recorded?

Emails with attached consent forms will be sent to all recipients to complete prior to the interviews.
5. CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

What precautions will be taken to safeguard identifiable records of individuals? Please describe specific procedures to be used to provide confidentiality of data by you and others, in both the short and long run. This question also applies if you are using secondary sources of data that is not anonymous.

No names will be used for any of the participants, or for any companies discussed in the interviews. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed, with the names changed, and these transcripts will be sent back to the recipients.

6. RISK TO PARTICIPANTS

Does the proposed research pose any physical, psychological, social, legal, economic, or other risks to study participants you can foresee, both immediate and long run? (please select)

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, answer the following questions:
1. Describe in detail the nature and extent of the risk and provide the rationale for the necessity of such risks
2. Outline any alternative approaches that were or will be considered and why alternatives may not be feasible in the study
3. Outline whether and why you feel that the value of information to be gained outweighs the risks

1. ____

2. ____

3. ____
7. AUTHORSHIP

What authorship agreement have you reached with your co-researchers or supervisor?

☑ This research is not intended for publication

☐ Standard authorship agreement (principal researcher first author, co-researcher(s) and supervisor(s) co-authors)

☐ Customised agreement (please specify below):

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8. DECLARATION

I certify that we have read the UCT Authorship Policy, and Commerce Faculty Authorship Guidelines (http://www.commerce.uct.ac.za/Commerce/Information/research.asp)

☑ I certify that the material contained herein is truthful and that all co-researchers and supervisors are aware of the contents thereof.

I understand that it is my responsibility to conduct research in accordance with the ethical requirements of

UCT.

Applicant's electronic signature

Date: 29 August 2015

<table>
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<th>CHECKLIST</th>
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<tr>
<td>A full copy of a research proposal or a literature review with methodology is attached</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview schedules / cover letters / questionnaires / informed consent forms and other materials used in the study are attached</td>
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<td>Organisational consent letter / UCT student or staff approval letter</td>
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<td>On your cover letter to your questionnaire have you included the following?</td>
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<td>2. A sentence explaining the aim of the research</td>
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<td>3. Sentences of a similar nature to below must be included in the cover letter or consent form:</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>This research has been approved by the Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee.</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your participation in this research is voluntary. You can choose to withdraw</td>
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from the research at any time.

The questionnaire will take approximately X minutes to complete

You will not be requested to supply any identifiable information, ensuring anonymity of your responses.

Due to the nature of the study you will need to provide the researchers with some form of identifiable information however, all responses will be confidential and used for the purposes of this research only.

Should you have any questions regarding the research please feel free to contact the researcher (insert contact details).

4. Have you scanned in your signature for the last section of the form?
Appendix 2 – Interview guide

The following questions will help to guide the interview. Since it is a semi-structured interview, the questions will all be open ended and will not be limited to those specified below since the researcher is hoping for the interview to follow a natural progression. The use of a guide will assist the researcher to ensure that no topic is forgotten.

1. Introduction
   a. Who I am
   b. What I do
   c. My interest
   d. Background of participant
      i. Family
      ii. Origin

2. Qualifications
   a. High school education and achievements
   b. Degree / diploma / certificates

3. Board membership
   a. How did you come to be a board member
   b. How long have you been a board member
   c. How many boards do you serve on
   d. How many women serve on boards with you
   e. What role do you play (executive / non-executive)

4. Experience (work etc.)
   a. What position do you hold now
   b. What sector do you work in
   c. How long have you been working in your current field
   d. Have you worked in any other field

5. Challenges
   a. What challenges have you experienced in becoming a board member
   b. What challenges have you experienced in getting to your current position
c. Any other challenges related to work life balance
d. What challenges have you experienced based on your gender

6. Opportunities
   a. What opportunities have been present to get you to your current position
   b. What role has your gender played in providing you with opportunities if any

7. Perceptions
   a. What are your perceptions on board diversity
   b. What are your perceptions on gender equality
   c. What do you perceive to be the biggest implication of being a board member
   d. How do you think you are perceived by male board members
   e. How do you think you are perceived by female board members
   f. Did you perceive any changes in respect when becoming a board member

8. Experiences
   a. Have you had any experiences that you would like to comment on relating to your board membership
Appendix 3 – Consent form

Informed Consent Form

Principal Researcher

Philipa Smit
smtphi012@gsb.uct.ac.za
0827025555

Project Title:

Gender equality in the boardroom: An exploration of the perceptions of female board members

Brief overview of the project and its purpose, and what is expected from the respondent

This study focuses on the perceptions of female board members towards gender equality in the boardroom. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities that these women experienced, if any, in achieving their current position. The researcher will seek to understand what characteristics / traits / factors play a role in securing a board position within the South African context.

The primary assumption of this study is that boards are currently male-dominated, and hesitant to engage in change. The secondary assumption is that there are not enough women with sufficient skills and experience to become board members and so the small number that are suitable serve on several boards across various business sectors.

You have been approached to participate in this study because of your gender and board membership. As a participant in this study, you will be requested to commit to at least one hour of your time for the proposed interview, which will be conducted face-to-face.

There are no known risks or dangers to you associated with this study. Unless you provide an explicit approval, the researchers will not attempt to identify you with the responses to the questionnaire, or to name you as a participant in the study, nor will they facilitate anyone else’s doing so.

Consent to participate in the study

I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without penalty. If I wish, will be given a copy of this consent form. I also understand that all information provided by myself during the interviews will be used for academic purposes only, and that my identity will not be revealed at any stage of this study.

Subject’s signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

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