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Female Leadership in South African Policing: Social Identity, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study examines women's leadership in the South African Police Service (SAPS) by focusing on the relationship between policy, practice, and societal dynamics. It traces the evolution of women's roles in law enforcement since the post-apartheid era. The research assesses the landscape of female police leaders in South Africa, recognising significant achievements alongside persistent challenges. For instance, although there has been an increase in women's

representation in senior ranks, their influence on decision making remains limited. This is attributed to the fact that, while policies such as affirmative action have created formal opportunities, the male-dominated culture of the SAPS often undermines women's advancement. The study investigates the obstacles that women in leadership positions encounter, including institutional barriers, cultural stereotypes, and operational difficulties. It emphasises the importance of female representation in law enforcement leadership and its effects on organisational culture, community relations, and society at large. This qualitative study utilised secondary data from existing literature and policy documents for its analysis. The research illuminates the relationship between gender, leadership, and social identities within the South African policing context. The social identity theory is employed to explore the self-efficacy of female leaders in the SAPS and to provide insight into how women navigate leadership challenges, such as stereotype threat and identity negotiation. The study concludes that a profound redefinition of gender roles through an African feminist perspective, aimed at deconstructing patriarchal norms and sexism, is crucial in shaping gender dynamics in the SAPS.

Keywords: *Women Leadership, Law Enforcement, Employment Equity, Social Identities, Diversity and Inclusivity*

Introduction

The intersectionality of gender, race, class, and patriarchy has historically shaped the discrimination and inequality that hinder women's progress in education, employment, and leadership roles in South Africa (Abdulkareem & Khosa, 2024). These discriminatory practices persisted during the apartheid era and limited women's leadership opportunities in the police service (Abdulkareem & Khosa, 2024). On 1 January 1972, policewomen were granted full membership in the South African Police Service (SAPS) for the first time, with two white women appointed to lead the newly established "women police force" and trained at the Pretoria Police College (Khosa, 2019). While some SAPS units prohibited the involvement of women, a separate women's police section was created for matters specifically related to women (Newham et al., 2006). This occurred despite the Public Service Commission's 1971 instructions to avoid discrimination and to treat female members equally. Women hired after 1972 were initially underutilised in general police functions, with assignments primarily focused on peripheral tasks such as victim support and administrative duties like document typing and issuing firearm licences. Not until the late 1970s and early 1980s were

women allowed to work undercover, patrol, and conduct investigations (Newham et al., 2006).

The appointments of Duveen Botha and Anna Nel as the first two female leaders in the SAPS marked a significant turning point, as Duveen Botha assumed the role of Commanding Officer of the women's police wing with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, while Anna Nel was appointed as her adjutant with the rank of Major (Mouton, 2006). They approached their responsibilities with great dedication, reporting directly to the SAPS Commissioner until Duveen's retirement in 1985, having attained the rank of Brigadier (Khosa, 2019; Mouton, 2006). These appointments showcased the SAPS's commitment to diversity and gender equality in its ranks and established a foundation for future progress in the organisation. Although the appointment of white women highlights how race and class intersected with gender in early recruitments into the SAPS, it represented a significant stride for women's rights in South Africa that challenged traditional gender roles in law enforcement (Khosa, 2019). As the success of policewomen became evident, the SAPS Head Office recognised their potential and began exploring training and recruitment initiatives for women from diverse ethnic groups (Khosa, 2019). The SAPS recruited its inaugural female intake of 102 individuals, all white, including 11 with university degrees or tertiary diplomas (Khosa, 2019). They were initially placed at Head Office or other police stations before joining the Pretoria Police College for training. Recruitment processes occurred twice annually between February and July, and female applicants needed to meet the same academic and physical criteria as their male counterparts.

This study drew on the social identity theory (SIT), which allows us to understand that despite the occurrence of racial discrimination in women's appointments, it demonstrates how female leaders in the SAPS at the time negotiated belonging in a historically male-dominated institution. For example, the training, uniforms, salaries, and fringe benefits received were equally distributed across both genders, which created an environment of equality and fairness in the SAPS (Khosa, 2019).

Male and female recruits received training at the same colleges, using Afrikaans as the primary medium of instruction. To accommodate diversity among recruits, those who preferred English textbooks or examinations could opt for them, which ensured that female recruits could excel in both training and later roles in the SAPS without language being an impediment to success.

On 12 June 2012, President Zuma announced the establishment of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, which produced the National Development Plan Vision 2030 (Khosa, 2019). This initiative was part of Zuma's effort to transform the economy by promoting women's active participation and empowering them in leadership positions, yet it failed in implementation, leaving women symbolically included but substantively excluded from decision making (Khosa, 2019). In an effort to ensure the efficiency of this initiative, President Zuma appointed General Mangwashi Victoria Phiyega as the new National Commissioner of the SAPS, against all odds. Minister of Police Nathi Mthethwa stressed the need to support General Phiyega in the collective fight against crime in South Africa. This appointment marked an important step forward in the history of South African policing, especially considering the obstacles that had previously hindered the original minister from achieving his goals.

The establishment of institutions such as the SAPS was rooted in the race-based framework of apartheid society (Chetty, 2011). However, the post-apartheid era has seen significant efforts to reform these institutions, including the SAPS, to align with a new social order. This transformation has promoted a sense of belonging for all groups and genders by emphasising social identity and self-efficacy as key components in promoting leadership and inclusiveness (Mullen, 2025).

Today, male and female recruits of all races from South Africa attend various training colleges across the country to receive equal training in locations such as Pretoria, Chatsworth, and Johannesburg. Although progress has been made over time, women still face significant barriers when seeking leadership roles in law enforcement despite these efforts. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined the South African Employment Equity Act and affirmative action policies regarding the SAPS's recruitment processes. The paper also traced developments in the SAPS to assess the state of female police leaders. It discusses the challenges faced by female officers as they relate to their social identities, as well as the role female police leaders have played despite these challenges. Following the findings, the study highlights some recommendations to address the concerns of female police leadership in law enforcement agencies in South Africa. The study concludes that the SIT serves as an important transformative tool of African feminism for the negotiation and deconstruction of social structural norms that persistently hinder their progress toward attaining leadership roles in the SAPS.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in the SIT to examine leadership and the framing of gender roles in the SAPS (Chetty, 2011). It utilised secondary data analysis, a method commonly used in the social sciences and humanities, to conduct comprehensive examinations of existing information. The research drew on diverse secondary sources, including academic literature (books, book chapters, and journal articles), policy documents, empirical data from SAPS online records, and Government Gazettes. These sources were systematically identified and gathered through library research and Internet-based inquiries using the Google Scholar and SAPS websites. Keywords such as “SAPS”, “female leadership”, “social identity”, and “self-efficacy” were employed to prioritise materials that offered logical chains of evidence relevant to the research focus. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Content analysis served as the primary analytical technique for this study. The analysis process involved careful reading and re-reading of collected materials, identification of recurring sub-headings and patterns, and interpretation of findings in light of SIT and leadership concepts.

While secondary data analysis offers numerous advantages, such as access to a wide range of information, it also presents limitations, including potential biases in the original data sources and the inability to gather new, tailored information. The researchers acknowledge these limitations and took proactive steps to mitigate them through careful source selection and triangulation of references to academic sources and government policy materials to ensure robust analysis. All academic sources used are properly cited, and government policy materials obtained from SAPS webpages were handled responsibly, with interpretations made sensitively to gender-related issues.

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the SIT, which was developed by Tajfel and Turner in the late 1970s (Tajfel & Turner, 1978). This theory has been extensively employed by social scientists to understand how individuals cultivate their sense of self and belonging, and how these constructs influence their attitudes and behaviours (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Haslam et al., 2012; Neighbors et al., 2013; Trepte & Loy, 2017). The SIT underscores the significance of social categorisation, social comparison,

and group membership in shaping one's self-concept and behaviour. This understanding illuminates how social categorisation enables female officers to navigate the challenges associated with gender roles in a male-dominated police structure. Neighbors et al. (2013) utilised the SIT to propose three variables that predict the degree of social influence that a particular source may exert: strength, immediacy, and the number of persuasive agents. These elements are crucial for understanding how to enhance female leadership positions in the SAPS. For example, strength pertains to the extent to which individuals in a group value the opinions and influence of those attempting to persuade them, as well as their own benchmarks for attaining leadership roles. This aspect is particularly pertinent in the context of promoting women in leadership. This dimension bears similarity to social identity and is consistent with most theories on social influence. The SIT was particularly relevant for this study as it focuses on the interaction between gender and leadership roles in the hierarchical structure of law enforcement organisations in South Africa. The SIT provided the conceptual foundation for this inquiry by facilitating an exploration of how the social identities of female police leaders in South Africa, and elsewhere, impact their self-efficacy. Moreover, the SIT aided in understanding how structural and institutional inequalities – manifested through patriarchy, policy-practice gaps, and cultural resistance – interface with the progression of female leaders in the SAPS.

Female Police Leadership and its Impact on Social Identities: A Review

This section critically reviews scholarly works on the significance of female leadership and its impact on self-efficacy in the workplace. Ramchunder and Martins (2014) define self-efficacy as an individual's ability to complete tasks and achieve outcomes, highlighting its crucial role in the success of leaders, especially women. In South Africa, female police leadership is recognized for promoting gender equality and enhancing police effectiveness. Rauch (2022) observed that women in the SAPS have initiated positive changes that led to a more compassionate organizational culture. Their leadership has led to successful community policing initiatives that build trust and improve public safety by demonstrating the importance of female leadership as supported by SIT.

Kalnicky and Shutava (2022) contrasted Ramchunder and Martins (2014) by noting that while female leaders often have higher self-

assessments and receive favorable evaluations, many still struggle with self-doubt and remain underrepresented in national government. Female police officers possess qualities that enhance community relationships, yet research on the challenges they face is limited. Kalnicky and Shutava (2022) found that women are more likely to experience self-doubt and view their leadership abilities less positively than men. Ramchunder and Martins (2014) emphasized that self-efficacy is crucial for success in leadership, particularly for women, who often exhibit lower levels. Addressing these challenges and enhancing self-efficacy through training and mentorship is essential for empowering female police leaders in order to enable them to overcome obstacles and inspire their teams. This highlights the importance of social identity in towards female leadership success in policing.

Smith and Woodworth (2012) examined how social identities influence self-efficacy, with findings relevant to the SAPS in the context of apartheid, patriarchy, and race and gender issues. Their approach aimed to empower students as social entrepreneurs by enhancing their confidence to effect positive change. They utilized SIT to illustrate how factors like race, gender, and socio-economic status can shape one's self-efficacy. The authors argued that belonging to certain social groups can either enhance or diminish confidence in success, suggesting that female police officers should leverage their social group memberships to improve their success in law enforcement. More so, they noted that individuals from low-income or marginalized backgrounds often experience lower self-efficacy compared to those from more privileged backgrounds, due to societal advantages and representation. Addressing these demographic issues is vital for supporting female leadership in police services.

Arnold et al. (2016) emphasized that female police leaders positively influence gender dynamics within the police force and its perception in the community. Thus, with emphasis on gender equity and diversity, female police leaders have the capability to create an inclusive and diverse work environment that will benefit both the police force and the community. They also serve as role models for young women considering law enforcement careers.

Klein et al. (2007) argued that female leaders provide alternative perspectives that challenge male-dominated policing cultures and promotes an inclusive work environment. Veldman et al. (2017) explored how support from team members helps women in male-dominated professions mitigate conflicts between gender and work identities, revealing the importance of a supportive team environment.

While Arnold et al. (2016) and Klein et al. (2007) highlighted the role of female leaders in combating workplace discrimination, their findings contrast with Kalnicky and Shutava (2022), who noted that although female leaders in the SAPS can reduce self-doubt among junior female officers but institutional culture often hinders their advancement.

Gender equality in law enforcement has received significant attention in recent years. For instance, Veldman et al. (2017) suggested that female police officers, compared to their male counterparts, tend to rely more on communication skills than physical force when resolving conflicts. This approach is linked to the SIT and aligns with community-oriented policing styles that prioritise collaboration and problem solving between law enforcement officers and community members. Furthermore, Veldman et al. (2017) argued that female leaders serve as role models who challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Research has shown that police departments led by women exhibit lower levels of discriminatory behaviour towards women and minorities (Veldman et al., 2017). This is relevant to the SAPS, which remains an organisation with a culture of male militarisation, where women's gender identity may clash with professional police identity. It is therefore essential to have female police leaders to shape identities and promote social justice in law enforcement agencies. However, there has been limited focus on the social impact of female leadership on social identities in the literature.

According to Hogg et al. (2004), belonging to ethnic and racial communities has a significant influence on individuals' behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs. This theory can also be applied to police leadership styles. For instance, leaders strongly associated with a particular ethnic or racial group may show favouritism towards officers from that group when making decisions. Such biased decision making can hinder overall efficiency in the police force. This theory has sparked extensive debate regarding the relationship between social identities and the effectiveness of police leadership. According to this theory, individuals' affiliations with certain communities, such as ethnic or racial ones, heavily influence their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs. Furthermore, the SIT posits that people tend to favour their own group over others, which can potentially lead to discrimination or prejudice against other groups. Moreover, the SIT suggests that individual social identities can shape perceptions of an individual's leadership effectiveness. However, this argument recognises that effective leadership may be limited to specific group contexts.

From the foregoing review, it is evident that the presence of female police leadership is viewed as a means to address issues related to gender-based violence and to promote a more inclusive and diverse police force.

The review also highlights the dynamics of the intersectionality theory, as it illustrates how race and gender intersect in South Africa's policing context, where Black women may encounter compounded barriers that white female officers have not historically faced. Furthermore, the studies demonstrate that women in leadership positions can serve as role models for other women in the police force by inspiring them to pursue leadership roles and to challenge gender stereotypes in the organisation. The studies indicate that, although it is important to recognise that female police leadership alone cannot resolve the entrenched issues in the police force and society at large, it must be accompanied by systemic changes that challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. This is because feminine leadership has the potential to facilitate an inclusive organisational culture that can provide women and other marginalised groups with increased opportunities for advancement within a law enforcement work environment. The review also highlights that most existing research is situated in Western contexts, which reveals a significant lack of empirical evidence related to female leadership specifically in the SAPS. Addressing this gap bolsters the rationale for this study. While there is evidence that women enhance community relations and organisational culture, little research has focused on how their social identities influence self-efficacy in the context of the SAPS.

The South African Employment Equity Act and Affirmative Action Policies

This section examines how the South African Employment Equity Act and affirmative action policies have been utilised to influence the recruitment balance between female police officers and their male counterparts.

South African affirmative action is defined in terms of the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 (hereafter "the Act"). According to the South African Government Gazette of 1998, affirmative action includes measures designed to ensure that suitably qualified members from specified groups receive equal employment opportunities and are represented fairly across occupational categories and levels in an employer's workforce. These are known as diversity measures (Government Gazette, 1998). Designated groups refer to Black people, women, and individuals with disabilities. According to Section 6(2) of the Act, it does not constitute unlawful discrimination to take affirmative action measures that conform with its purpose (Government Gazette, 1998, p. 1).

The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (WEGE) sought to create greater gender equality in South Africa (Ministry of Women, Children and Others with Disabilities, 2013). Passed in 2013, the Bill allows for measures that increase equality, such as designing programmes to ensure women hold 50% representation in decision-making structures. Furthermore, it addresses social and economic obstacles to running for office, as well as enforcement measures although critics contend it brings nothing new to South Africans. Despite these criticisms, the WEGE was generally well received within both Houses of Parliament and went into effect in 2014.

The South African Employment Equity Act and affirmative action policies, as discussed by Booysen (2007), Mathur-Helm (2005), and Msimang (2018), are prime examples of such initiatives. These policies are designed to promote diversity, inclusivity, and equal opportunities in the workforce. The South African Employment Equity Act mandates that employers implement measures to ensure equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of their gender, race, or disability status (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2014). Affirmative action policies aim to address historical inequities by giving preferential treatment to individuals from underrepresented groups.

These labour laws and policies have effectively increased women's representation in senior positions by creating an environment that promotes gender equality and advancement. They have helped to dismantle barriers and challenge discriminatory practices that hinder women's progress in the workplace.

Mathur-Helm's research (2005) pointed out that while affirmative action policies may increase women's representation overall, they can also reinforce stereotypes and lead to tokenism. However, while Smith (2025) emphasised the importance of closing the gender gap in society, Hersch (2021) argued for the existential necessity of a successful long-term affirmative action plan that dismantles stereotypes and promotes a cultural shift away from patriarchy to achieve equality in leadership roles. This means that women may be placed in senior positions solely to meet diversity quotas, without necessarily being provided with the necessary support and resources to succeed in those roles (Msimang, 2018). Tokenism can undermine the legitimacy of women's achievements and contribute to a perception that they are not truly deserving of their positions.

It is crucial that laws and policies are continually assessed to ensure that they effectively promote gender equality without marginalising women. According to Mupambirei (2013), quota systems that aim to

increase the representation of women in leadership positions may inadvertently lead to tokenism or the perception that women are only selected to meet quotas rather than based on merit. Mupambirei (2013) further argued, that while women appreciate being selected and promoted on merit alone, selection processes may sometimes be compromised due to goals and quota attainment needs. A delicate balance must thus be struck to ensure that gender equality initiatives promote fairness and meritocracy while also addressing historical imbalances. Mupambirei (2013) further stated that corrective labour policies may either re-establish merit for female managers or breach it through violations. The author reiterated that unbiased selection and promotion processes and rewards for women in management positions must be in place to ensure that their performances and accomplishments are adequately recognised and rewarded. Mupambirei (2013) also suggested that this would not only build confidence among women in management roles but also contribute to a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

In a similar vein, Al Hamad et al. (2024) emphasised the significance of fair practices in creating an inclusive work environment. This aligns with the concept of the SIT, which suggests that laws and policies advocating for gender equality should be fair and must not inadvertently marginalise women. Fair practices, such as impartial selection processes and performance-based rewards, can address outcomes arising from gender equality initiatives. To achieve a more equitable and inclusive future, society must continually reassess and adjust laws and policies that support women's advancement in leadership. Such policies can reshape perceptions within the SAPS, legitimizing women as leaders. However, if women are seen merely as “quota hires,” it may undermine their social identity as competent leaders and create inter-group resentment.

The aforementioned arguments demonstrate that labour laws and policies, such as the South African Employment Equity Act and affirmative action policies, can be instrumental in combatting women's underrepresentation in senior and managerial positions in organisations. Such initiatives promote diversity, inclusivity, and equal opportunities and create an environment that supports gender equality and advancement. This is especially important in the SAPS, where the intersections of race, gender, and class influence equity policies. Implementation challenges must be addressed, particularly regarding corruption, insufficient monitoring, and resistance in the SAPS, which frequently undermine the effectiveness of policies.

The Current State of Female Police Leaders in South Africa

This section examines recent developments in the SAPS as they relate to the leadership positions held by female officers.

Promoting female leadership in the SAPS has been a significant achievement in recent years. For example, in 2009, Monnye Ngobeni made history by becoming the first female KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Police Commissioner (SA News, 2009). This marked a significant milestone for women in leadership roles. This progress was followed by General Khehla John Sitole's announcement of the appointments of two women to top management positions in the SAPS (SAPS, 2022a). However, in a statement by a women's group during the 30-year celebration of democracy in South Africa, it was pointed out that women need to occupy more positions. The women's group stated that it remains women's responsibility to continue to write new chapters in their history, challenge outdated views, and smash glass ceilings (Mokale, 2024). Since 1994, women have assumed leadership roles in all sectors of society, but more work remains in closing the gender gap and ensuring that women take their rightful place in all sectors of society (Mokale, 2024).

The SIT is relevant to this study as it encourages women to leverage their skills and experiences to distinguish themselves and enhance their leadership in the workplace. For example, the appointment of Lieutenant General Bongiwe Zulu marked a significant milestone for women in leadership, as she brought 16 years of experience to her new role as Divisional Commissioner for Human Resources Development (SAPS, 2018). Zulu's appointment highlights the importance of expertise and skill in promoting female leaders in the organisation. Another notable appointment was that of Major General Puleng Dimpane, who was named Chief Financial Officer of the SAPS (SAPS, 2023). Dimpane's promotion to Lieutenant General was a testament to her more than 10 years of dedicated service to the SAPS. She started as the Provincial Commander of Internal Audit in 2007 and later held the position of Provincial Head for Financial and Administration Services for six years (Njilo, 2018). Furthermore, momentum for female leadership in the SAPS continued as Lieutenant General Semakaleng Manamela was appointed as the Provincial Commissioner in Mpumalanga in November 2021 (SAPS, 2021). Her appointment served as a role model for aspiring female officers, inspiring them to pursue leadership positions (SAPS, 2021). Another significant achievement occurred in 2022 with the appointment of Lieutenant General Tebello Mosikili as the first female

Deputy National Police Commissioner (SAPS, 2022b). Prior to this role, Mosikili had been the Deputy National Head of the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation since August 2020 (SAPS, 2022b). This exemplifies the saying “breaking the blue ceiling”, as her appointment showcases the SAPS’s commitment to breaking gender barriers and promoting gender equality in its ranks.

These developments indicate that the SAPS recognises the importance of supporting female officers and has implemented various programmes to facilitate their growth and development. This implies that South Africa has made progress in increasing the number of female police officers in leadership positions. However, in 2012, only 19% of senior positions were held by women, despite women constituting nearly 40% of the total police force in South Africa (Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013). Scholars suggest that this disparity may be due to factors such as inadequate support for female officers in police organisations and the persistence of gender stereotypes in a male-dominated work environment (Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013).

To address these challenges, research by Van der Westhuizen (2020) indicated that there should be collaboration between the police, government, and civil society organisations. The SAPS Women’s Network and other women’s bodies have been urged to collaborate to ensure that proper monitoring of the recruitment and promotion of officers is justifiably carried out (Abdulkareem, 2023). Women’s groups will serve as voices for female police officers, as well as watchdogs in law enforcement organisations (Abdulkareem, 2023). While progress has been made in boosting female representation in the police force, there are still significantly fewer women in leadership positions compared to their male counterparts (Van der Westhuizen, 2020). There is still more work to be done to achieve gender equality in law enforcement. The current lack of women in the highest leadership roles presents an obstacle and hampers effective policing efforts.

According to Muntingh (2013), women have historically faced difficulties when joining and advancing within the South African police force due to the perception that policing is a male-dominated profession and that female officers may be viewed as less qualified. However, the SAPS has taken significant steps in recent years to address gender inequality and promote gender diversity.

Policymakers and law enforcement agencies need to collaborate more to create opportunities for women to advance into leadership positions in police departments. It is only then that an inclusive police force that represents South Africa’s diverse population can be achieved. This aligns

with research conducted in 2018 by Morabito and Shelley, which showed that including women in leadership positions can lead to more efficient and diverse decision-making processes (Morabito & Shelley, 2018). Moreover, the United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2024) has emphasised the importance of women in decision-making roles, as this better represents the people they serve. This is related to the conclusion drawn at the Fourth World Conference on Women to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action regarding the inclusion of women and girls in decision-making and leadership positions towards ending poverty and achieving sustainable development (UN Women, 2024).

In line with UN Women's (2024) declaration on gender equality, the SAPS has endeavoured to implement affirmative qualitative measures. This was achieved through its initiative known as the Women's Network, established in 2003 (UN Women, 2024). Subsequently, the SAPS set aside 40% of training opportunities specifically for women, with the aim of facilitating their mobility in the organisation, particularly into middle and senior positions (UN Women, 2024). Additionally, 70% of all spaces in the Emerging Leadership Programme are reserved exclusively for female participants, in order to expand the pool of female leaders in the SAPS (Morabito & Shelley, 2018). To ensure the achievement of gender equality goals, all senior appointments in the SAPS are carefully tracked according to the Employment Equity Plan's numeric goals (Morabito & Shelley, 2018). Recruitment and promotion efforts are closely monitored to ensure that business units in the SAPS are actively working towards meeting their numeric targets.

The SAPS Women's Network has also made commendable efforts to achieve gender equality and provide equal opportunities for women. However, despite recent progress in closing the gender gap in leadership roles for female police officers in South Africa, significant challenges remain, as these quotas have not translated into real positions of authority.

The Challenges of Female Police Leadership and its Impact on Social Identities

This section discusses the challenges faced by South African female police leaders in relation to the impact on their social identities in the law enforcement work environment.

The challenges faced by female police leaders in South Africa and their impact on social identities are complex and reflect broader societal

dynamics. To truly understand this issue, it is necessary to thoroughly examine both the progress made and the persistent obstacles that remain. The challenges that female police leaders face include structural barriers, cultural obstacles, issues related to work-life balance, and the need for identity negotiation.

Structural Barriers

This category of obstacles encompasses issues related to policies, promotions, and gaps in mentorship. Female police leaders often find themselves isolated in their positions, with limited access to mentorship and support networks. This lack of support can be particularly challenging when navigating the complexities of leadership roles. Mufamadi (2016), in a study published in the *Journal of Public Administration*, found that the absence of formal mentorship programmes and support structures significantly hampers the professional development and advancement of female officers. The scarcity of women in top leadership positions means that aspiring female leaders have fewer role models and sources of guidance (Mufamadi, 2016). This lack of representation exacerbates the gender imbalance and makes it harder for women to envision themselves as leaders.

Cultural Barriers

This encompasses issues related to stereotypes, resistance, and harassment. In a field like law enforcement, which has traditionally been dominated by men, women often struggle against preconceived notions about their capabilities and suitability for leadership roles. A doctoral research study conducted by Montesh (2019) at the University of South Africa highlighted the scepticism female officers face regarding issues such as sexual abuse, physical abilities, and leadership potential, which can undermine their authority and effectiveness.

These stereotypes are not limited to the police force; they extend to the broader community as well. As Montesh (2019) opined, Bezuidenhout (2011) also noted in the *Pakistan Journal of Criminology* that female police leaders often face resistance from both male colleagues and members of the public who may be hesitant to accept their authority. This resistance can take various forms, from subtle undermining to overt challenges, which affects their ability to perform their duties effectively. Despite legal protections and organisational policies, discrimination and harassment remain significant challenges for female police leaders in

South Africa. A report by the Commission for Gender Equality (2018) revealed that many women in law enforcement continue to experience various forms of discrimination, including unequal treatment in promotions, assignments, and professional development opportunities.

Moreover, sexual harassment remains a persistent issue, and the fear of retaliation often reinforces silence, which undermines solidarity and weakens women's collective identity. The South African Police Union (SAPU) has reported numerous cases of sexual harassment in the SAPS, with many incidents going unreported due to fear of retaliation or lack of trust in the reporting system (SAPU, 2024). This hostile environment not only affects the well-being of female officers, but also hinders their career progression and leadership aspirations (SAPU, 2024).

Work-life Balance and Identity Negotiation

This category of obstacles encountered by female officers is framed within the context of professionalism, personal development, and familial obligations. Female police leaders face unique challenges in balancing their professional responsibilities with personal and family commitments. The demanding nature of police work, characterised by irregular hours and high-stress situations, can be particularly challenging for women who are also primary caregivers. A report by Newham et al. (2006) highlighted that the absence of family-friendly policies and support systems in the SAPS contributes to the attrition of female officers, particularly those in leadership roles. Schippers (2015) argued that female police leaders continually find themselves needing to prove their competence and authority, which heightens their awareness of their gender identity. Successful female leaders challenge gender norms and inspire others to pursue leadership roles. However, the challenges they face also highlight gender inequalities that potentially reinforce negative stereotypes.

Summary of Challenges

These challenges have significant implications for the social identities of female police leaders (Newham et al., 2006). This suggests that failing to apply the SIT can result in difficulties in gaining recognition and respect. It may also lead to a complicated negotiation of identity as individuals balance their professional identity with societal gender expectations. Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. The SAPS has made efforts to increase gender representation in leadership positions, with

notable appointments of women to high-ranking roles. For example, the appointment of Lieutenant General Bonang Mgwenya as Deputy National Commissioner in 2016 represented a significant milestone. Yet, this progress must translate into a real shift in institutional culture. Furthermore, initiatives such as the SAPS Women's Network provide support and advocacy for female officers. These networks emphasise female leadership in terms of mentorship, skill development, and collective action to address gender-related issues in the force.

Concluding Remarks

The examination of female police leadership and its influence on social identities, particularly concerning South African female police leaders, constitutes a critical area of research with considerable policy and practical implications. The study revealed that challenges such as structural barriers, cultural barriers, work-life balance, and identity negotiation encountered by women in leadership positions in the SAPS can be effectively addressed through the application of the SIT. The failure to implement this theoretical framework may complicate negotiations for professional advancement. The research posited that the labour policies enshrined in the South African Employment Equity Act and affirmative action policies can be significantly beneficial in addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in law enforcement agencies, including the SAPS.

The study conducted a preliminary examination of the evolution of female police officers and leadership in the SAPS from the apartheid to the post-apartheid era through stringent rank-and-file processes. However, while the research indicated the progress made by the SAPS in incorporating female officers into its ranks, it also underscored existing gaps that remain inadequately addressed. These include the challenges faced by female police leaders in South Africa, which are deeply rooted in broader societal issues of gender inequality and cultural norms. The study asserted that these challenges necessitate a multifaceted approach, incorporating policy reforms, a cultural shift in the police force, and broader societal changes in perceptions of women in leadership roles. The findings emphasised that the challenges and successes of female officers not only influence the future of law enforcement but also contribute to the profound redefinition of gender roles through an African feminist perspective. This perspective is crucial in shaping gender dynamics in the SAPS by highlighting the significance of social

categorisation and group membership in leadership and rank considerations.

While some scholars argue for a positive relationship between female police leadership, social identities, and self-efficacy, others contend that further empirical evidence is necessary to substantiate these claims. Nevertheless, it is evident that promoting gender diversity in law enforcement and creating opportunities for female police leaders can substantially influence social identities and perceptions of gender roles in society.

The study's findings indicated that systemic and cultural challenges that obstruct the advancement of female police officers to the highest executive ranks persist in the country's law enforcement agencies. For instance, since Riah Phiyega served as the National Commissioner of the SAPS from 2012 to 2015, another woman has not been appointed to that position, even a decade later.

Utilising the SIT framework provides a novel perspective on the feminist approach to leadership in the SAPS, particularly regarding gender categorisation, comparison, and identity membership. The study revealed that the intersectionality of patriarchy, race, gender, and class played a significant role in the initiation of the recruitment process for female officers into the SAPS in the early 1970s, which limited women's self-efficacy and progression in the police service. Nevertheless, the research highlighted that female officers have made substantial progress in the SAPS since the end of apartheid, although significant discriminatory obstacles, such as gender stereotypes, continue to impede their upward mobility (Schippers, 2015). The study found that the SIT empowered the few female leaders in the SAPS to navigate their advancement in a historically male-dominated work environment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- ***Integrated strategy:*** Addressing the leadership barriers in law enforcement necessitates a comprehensive strategy. This involves fostering an inclusive and supportive environment in law enforcement agencies, while simultaneously cultivating a culture that values diversity and promotes equal opportunities.
- ***Enhance mentorship programmes:*** Organising mentorship programmes and professional development opportunities

tailored specifically for women may assist in dismantling existing barriers. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish mentorship programmes specifically for female officers to offer guidance and support in their career advancement.

- ***Commitment to gender equality:*** It is imperative for South Africa to maintain its commitment to gender equality in law enforcement by addressing the systemic challenges that hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. This commitment will create an inclusive and diverse system that promotes fairness and equal opportunities. It will help in achieving true gender parity in law enforcement and ensure women excel and lead alongside their male counterparts.
- ***Operationalisation of the Employment Equity Act and Affirmative Action Policies:*** The SAPS can effectively operationalise these policies by conducting regular audits of recruitment and promotion practices, in addition to aligning performance evaluations with gender equality objectives.
- ***Promote work-life balance initiatives:*** Introduce policies that promote work-life balance, including flexible working hours and family leave provisions.
- ***Address systemic and cultural barriers:*** Implement training programmes aimed at raising awareness of gender stereotypes and fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect. This will allow law enforcement organisations to ensure that women are afforded equal opportunities to attain senior and managerial positions based on merit rather than solely fulfilling diversity quotas.
- ***Utilise the SIT:*** Apply the SIT to address identity negotiation challenges and promote the professional development of female officers.

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