



# Experiences of female attorneys in private law firms: Exploring the phenomenon of the Old Boys Club



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**Orientation:** Female attorneys remain underrepresented at mid and senior-level positions in private law firms and must fiercely compete to advance in their careers. An informal but impactful barrier to their progress is the pervasive influence of the Old Boys Club.

**Research purpose:** The aim of this study was to explore female attorneys' experiences and perceptions of exclusion from career opportunities in South African private law firms because of the influence of the Old Boys Club and to understand its negative impact on their career advancement.

**Motivation for the study:** While the exclusionary effect of the Old Boys Club has been documented in gender equality literature, there are very few studies that provide an in-depth exploration into whether these male-exclusive networks act as barriers to the advancement and inclusion of women in the workplace.

**Research approach/design and method:** A generic qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool. Data were collected from seven female attorneys working in private law firms in the Gauteng region of South Africa. Themes were inductively derived from the data using thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** Results of the study indicated that female attorneys shared negative experiences of the Old Boys Club and viewed it as a barrier to career advancement in private law firms.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Private law firms need to actively strive to change their organisational culture so that social networking opportunities are inclusive and not directed at a specific gender. Addressing this will help to unroot systemic and structural barriers to women's career progression in private law firms.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study contributes to literature on gender discrimination and systemic barriers to women's career progression.

**Keywords:** old boys club; female attorneys; exclusive social networks; private law firms; social exclusion; barriers to women's career advancement.

## Introduction

Guo et al. (2020) define a male-dominated industry as one in which a majority (two-thirds) of workers are male. In the United States (US), although women now make up the majority of law school entrants, their representation declines at higher levels of practice, with women constituting only 27.8% of partners in law firms and at an even less at the senior-level, with only 24% of full equity partners in multitiered US law firms being women (National Association for Law Placement [NALP], 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK), the Solicitors Regulation Authority reported that while women make up 61% of solicitors, they only constitute 35% of partners and 32% of full equity partners (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2025). In the South African context, women constitute 57% of new entrants admitted into the profession, but only 47% are practising attorneys and 28% are partners in comparison to their male counterparts, who constitute 72% of partners (Meyer, 2024). Using the definition of a male-dominated industry provided by Guo et al. (2020), one can argue that while female attorneys might not be under-represented at the entry level, the legal sector can certainly be understood as male-dominated beyond the entry level, given the statistics, which indicate a clear decline of female representation at mid and senior levels. This suggests that despite an influx of women into the legal sector at entry level, under-representation and gender disparity persist at higher-level strategic positions, including partner levels and

above. The argument made in this article is that, given the decline of female representation beyond entry level in the legal profession, career advancement remains a key challenge for women. This is often attributed to structural and cultural barriers, such as the Old Boys Club, which will be explored in this article.

According to Lee et al. (2024), the legal sector has always been classified as a gendered profession. Implicit gender bias and discrimination, the gender wage gap, systemic structural and cultural barriers and unrealistic work-life expectations are all factors that hinder the career progression of females in the legal profession (Markovic & Plickert, 2023). While these factors significantly impede the career advancement of females, they do not necessarily present an issue for their male counterparts because of existing gender norms and societal expectations of women (Kay et al., 2016; Pillay-Naidoo & Vermeulen, 2023). This results in an increasing attrition rate of female attorneys, which heightens a gross gender disparity, specifically in leadership roles, as female attorneys experience difficulty in advancing in their careers (Meyer, 2024). These gender-specific barriers, which are challenges that disproportionately affect women, serve as one explanation for why women experience difficulties in career progression within the legal profession. The statistics presented in this article support this argument, as it is evident that while women enter the profession in substantial numbers, their representation declines at senior and leadership levels, highlighting persistent obstacles to advancement.

While most barriers to female career advancement such as the gender wage gap, work-life conflict because of unrealistic expectations, discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment (Barkhuizen et al., 2022) are overt and manifest itself in very visible ways, gender equality scholars (Hoobler, 2022; Meyer, 2024) have argued that more subtle, covert forms of discrimination and barriers that prevent the career advancement of women have been overlooked in gender parity research. The existence of informal gendered networks, particularly in the legal sector, has been identified as a covert structural barrier that operates to reinforce male power and privilege. Because membership to these networks is determined by gender (men only) and informal relationships, women are denied access to the social capital, mentorship opportunities and career-enhancing opportunities that members of the informal networks get to enjoy. Authors including Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2023), Meyer (2024) and Smit (2020) refer to these exclusive male networks as the Old Boys Club or Old Boys' network and argue that, because of its informal nature, it remains an under-explored but significant barrier to women's career advancement in the legal sector.

According to Meyer (2024), exclusive male networks such as the Old Boys Club usually thrive in male-dominated environments, and because law is a historically male-dominant profession at mid and senior levels where influential decisions are made, the Old Boys Club is a

structural and systemic form of discrimination that forms part of the professional culture. Members of the Old Boys Club, who are predominantly men, engage in networking opportunities outside business hours, and this provides them with career-advancing benefits, such as building their business profile, gaining access to career-changing clientele and expanding their social capital. Women, who often have more personal responsibilities at home than men, do not always have the time to join in these social interactions, which usually take place after hours, and as a result, are not given the same opportunities that men in the Old Boys Club have, which negatively impacts their career advancement (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023).

While it can be argued that evidence of the Old Boys Club can be seen across the legal sector, private law firms specifically have been criticised for their structure, which is said to be more open to informal networks such as the Old Boys Club (Rasivhetshele, 2020). The hierarchical structure of private law firms and the culture of competition are two distinguishing factors that make it a prime site for social exclusion of female attorneys, which negatively affects their career advancement (Meyer, 2024). Pandita (2022) argues that exclusive male networks such as the Old Boys Club are a form of discrimination, especially in private law firms, as they provide members of the network with opportunities that non-members do not have. Women are therefore denied career-advancing opportunities based on embedded mechanisms of social exclusion. Collegial meritocracy, which is characterised by informal insider networks that are typically gendered, that is, designed to provide men with networking and promotion opportunities and implicitly and explicitly exclude women, is also a key feature of private law firms, which acts as a barrier to advancement (Rasivhetshele, 2020). As a result of collegial meritocracy, career advancement in private law firms, which is determined through promotions and client referrals, depends less on objective performance but on membership in informal social networks, where men recommend other men (Rasivhetshele, 2020). Advancement is also heavily influenced by membership in the 'in-group', which in private law firms is predominantly male, particularly at mid- and senior-level positions. This concentration of men in positions of power often results in the preferential promotion of other men (Meyer, 2024).

According to Doris (2024), a survey conducted among South African attorneys in private law firms revealed that 72% of female attorneys believed that patriarchy and implicit biases were woven into the very fibre of legal work culture. Respondents also reported experiencing difficulty in accessing exclusive cliques at work. Oakley (2000) states that membership in these cliques can be seen as career-enhancing resources that women are being deprived of.

## Research purpose and objectives

When examining existing research on how women can overcome barriers to career advancement in the workplace, there has been a preoccupation with focusing on micro-

level and personal factors that influence career progression for women (Herbst, 2020; Koekemoer et al., 2023; Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). This approach is argued to perpetuate the belief that women themselves are responsible for their under-representation, that is, their personal factors determine their career advancement. Therefore, there is a call for studies that extend beyond the fixation on micro-level factors, but instead consider the impact of meso- and macro-level influences on women's career advancement, making for a more comprehensive discussion on the barriers that women face (Taser-Erdogan, 2022). This study answers this call by looking at informal gendered networks, such as the Old Boys Club, as a factor that contributes to the lack of career advancement of female attorneys in private law firms.

Existing literature on the under-representation of women in the legal sector (Meyer, 2024; Treanor, 2020) highlights that the challenges faced by females in the legal sector stem from a combination of structural, cultural and informal barriers to career advancement. While research (Rajah & Ruiters, 2025) documents structural barriers, such as the lack of family-friendly workplace policies, informal and covert barriers such as the Old Boys Club continue to receive limited academic attention because they are less visible and harder to prove (Meyer, 2024).

This study explores the informal and covert barrier of gendered social networks in the legal sector, which is the Old Boys Club. The purpose of this article is to understand the impact of the Old Boys Club on the career advancement of female attorneys in private law firms. To this effect, three research questions were stated:

- How do female attorneys in private law firms experience the Old Boys Club?
- In what ways do the Old Boys Club negatively affect female attorneys in private law firms?
- What are female attorneys' perceptions about the impact of the Old Boys Club on their career advancement?

## Theoretical framework

Drawing from the research of Allemand et al. (2022), this study and the assumptions made regarding the prevalence of the Old Boys Club are grounded in the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978). The link between the SIT and the phenomenon of the Old Boys Club lies in the concept of homophily. According to the SIT, people are inherently attracted to those who have similar demographic characteristics to them. In the phenomenon of the Old Boys Club, gender is seen as the unifying factor that allows men to share a stronger association with other men on the premise of gender social identity. When men associate themselves and choose to interact with other men, they form a strong social network on the basis of gender. According to Allemand et al. (2022), these networks that are defined by their members' homogeneous characteristics (in this instance, gender) are socially exclusive, making it difficult for members of the

outgroup (typically women) who do not share the unifying characteristic to join the network. In most cases, social networks such as the Old Boys Club are often gatekept by engaging in social interactions that appeal to men, ensuring that there is no place for women. These social interactions are usually characterised by social events, such as golf tournaments, drinks after work and weekend activities such as watching sport, all activities designed to appeal to men, thus further strengthening the bond between men and fostering a defined social identity and social obligation to each other (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023; Oakley, 2000). In this regard, because men identify more with each other, they feel socially obligated to recommend fellow men to clients and choose to share career-advancing opportunities with these men who belong to the same social network as them. Allemand et al. (2022) argue that SIT provides a basis to explain how networks are created on the basis of gender similarity. As a result, there is a homophily or bias towards similarity that encourages these gender segregated networks. These networks influence recruitment practices in private law firms to ensure that career-advancing positions are awarded on the basis of gendered social networks.

As an extension of the SIT, the Social Network Theory asserts that people are attracted to those within the same networks and the relationships they hold as a result of these networks. McDonald (2011) argues that the Social Network Theory provides an explanation for why men are more likely to assist each other, stating that being part of the same gender group or gendered social network makes men identify more with each other, which fosters an innate need to assist. Both the Social Identity Theory and Social Network Theory are relevant to this study and provide a theoretical foundation upon, which the assumptions of this study are made.

## Research design

This study used a qualitative research methodology and adopted an interpretivist paradigm. According to Saunders et al. (2019), the interpretivist paradigm is used when the aim of the research is to describe how people attempt to make sense of the world around them related to a specific experience. Dean (2018) argues that within this paradigm, the assumption is that reality is subjective, socially constructed and can be understood in many different forms and from many different perspectives. The specific design employed was a generic qualitative design, which Caelli et al. (2003) define as one that allows the researcher to freely explore the perceptions and experiences of the participants without being compelled by assumptions of specific qualitative traditions. According to Percy et al. (2015), when the researcher is interested in understanding the substantive, real-world content of their questions, that is, the opinions, experiences and reflections of participants as opposed to the inner structures of experiences, a generic qualitative analysis would be suitable. Based on the definition provided, the generic qualitative design is best suited for this study as the researchers aim to explore and

understand the perceptions and experiences of female attorneys relating to the Old Boys Club and the impact it has on their career advancement.

## Participants

Given that the target group of the study was specific, that is, female attorneys in private law firms, participants were identified through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Both sampling methods were relevant for this study, as purposive sampling allowed the researchers to identify female attorneys who had direct experience working in private law firms. In addition, the snowball sample allowed for access to more participants through professional networks. Given the use of purposive and snowball sampling, the researcher's positionality must be acknowledged, as the researcher was familiar with some of the participants. While this familiarity fostered trust and openness in the interaction, it also required the researcher to engage in constant reflexivity in order to mitigate bias. The researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to ensure that it was the participants' experiences being observed and not the researcher's assumptions. Participants in this study were required to meet all of the following selection criteria:

- Female attorneys
- Working at privately owned law firms
- Occupying entry to senior-level in terms of job positions.

Once the selection criteria were established, the researcher posted the call for participants on professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, and afterwards extended the invite to other social media sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. Participants who were interviewed also provided the details of the researcher to other female attorneys who were asked to contact the researchers should they be interested in the study. At the end of the participant recruitment process, a total of seven female attorneys were included in the final sample. Participants were recruited from privately owned law firms across Gauteng, South Africa.

Table 1 provides a description of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants over a 4-week period spanning between June 2022 and July 2022. The data collection instrument was designed after consulting literature on the Old Boys Club

and taking into account the research objectives. The interview schedule consisted of 14 questions designed to understand female attorneys' experiences of the Old Boys Club as related to the research questions. Examples of questions included in the interview schedule included:

*How often would you say that the men in your organisation interact with each other in a social way?*

*Do you feel as though you are left out of social interactions with men from your organisation? Please elaborate*

*Do you feel as though the men in your organisation have access to career opportunities that you do not have due to their social interactions with one another? If so, could you provide more insight?*

The reason for using semi-structured interviews was to allow the researcher to probe the participants and ask any further questions that may need clarification. Each interview took place virtually on Microsoft Teams and lasted between 40 min and 60 min. With the permission and consent of the participants, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## Data analysis

Using thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun (2017), the data were coded and analysed. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach beginning with the transcription of the seven interviews using *Descript* software. Once transcription was complete, the researcher listened to each recording while reading through the transcript to ensure accuracy and to become deeply familiar with the data. During this process, the researcher made a note of initial impressions and recurring ideas.

After confirming that the interviews were transcribed accurately, the researcher began manually coding the data to identify meaningful and recurring concepts as related to the research questions. Using a colour coding system, similar ideas that were found across the seven transcripts were highlighted, which led to an initial list of descriptive codes. Each code adequately reflected the experiences and perceptions of the participants on how the Old Boys Club influenced their career advancement. Preliminary sub-themes were formed by comparing and identifying repeated patterns across themes.

Once the preliminary sub-themes were identified, attempts were made to review, merge and redefine the themes. Through this iterative process, the researcher was able to consolidate the six sub-themes into three overarching main themes that

**TABLE 1:** Biographical information of participants.

Participants	Code	Age (years)	Race	Job level
Participant 1	P1	30–39	White person	Senior
Participant 2	P2	20–29	White person	Junior
Participant 3	P3	20–29	White person	Junior
Participant 4	P4	30–39	White person	Middle
Participant 5	P5	30–39	White person	Senior
Participant 6	P6	20–29	Black person	Senior
Participant 7	P7	20–29	Mixed race person	Junior

not only were a representation of the participants' experiences but also aligned with the study's main aim, that is, to explore the experiences of female attorneys with regard to the Old Boys Club. Each theme was then carefully defined and named to reflect its essence and relevance to the research objectives. Finally, the analysis was synthesised into a detailed narrative, integrating verbatim quotations from participants to illustrate each theme and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' realities.

### Strategies to ensure data quality and rigour

Various attempts were made to enhance the overall rigour and credibility of the study as a means to ensure that trustworthiness was maintained through the research process and not limited to the data analysis process.

Credibility was ensured in two ways. To ensure credibility, the interview questions were informed by relevant literature to ensure alignment with the study's objectives (Rasivheshle, 2020; Smit, 2020). This allowed the researchers to ground the questions in established research and theoretical frameworks, ensuring that the risk of asking irrelevant questions was limited, which enhances the trustworthiness of the data collected. Additionally, all interviews were audio-recorded to maintain accuracy and transcripts were verified by cross-checking them against the recordings. Transferability was promoted through the use of thick, detailed descriptions, which provided rich contextual information about participants' experiences. This was ensured through using direct quotations to indicate the participants' experiences as shared in the interviews. Presenting the interview findings in this manner, that is, verbatim, allows the reader to gain a vivid understanding of the participants' perspectives in their own words. To ensure dependability, an audit trail was used to aid with data management and to create transparency during data analysis. Using an Excel spreadsheet, the researcher logged all steps, including transcription verification, coding decisions and theme development during analysis. Electronic copies of the data emanating from the codebook and supervisory feedback on the themes were stored and constantly reflected on by the researchers. The constant documentation of these key activities allowed the researcher to easily track how data were transferred between raw transcripts to the codes and then to final themes, which added to the dependability.

Finally, confirmability was supported through reflexivity. The researcher engaged in reflexive journaling immediately

after each interview to record their own insights, assumptions and perceptions of the participants' experiences. This ongoing self-awareness helped minimise researcher bias and ensured that the findings remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

### Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Pretoria Department of Human Resource Management Ethics Committee on 1 March 2022. The ethical approval number is MMD/2021/6. The study received full ethical clearance. Principles of informed consent, voluntary participation and secure storage of data were maintained. Participants were assured that only two researchers would have access to the data and if published, the data would be de-identified to preserve anonymity.

## Results

The results of the data analysis are presented next. Findings are indicated per theme as aligned with the research questions. Relevant sub-themes as related to the main themes are presented. Direct quotations are used to indicate verbatim statements for participants as shared during the interviews. This allowed for the contextualisation of the data. The analysis yielded three main themes: the first encompasses three sub-themes, the second comprises two, and the third consists of a single sub-theme. Codes P1–P7 are used to represent the seven different participants. Table 2 presents the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the thematic analysis.

### Theme 1: Experiences related to the Old Boys Club

It was the perception of most participants in the study that an exclusive male network or Old Boys Club existed in the private law firms in which they were employed. While some experiences of exclusion were explicit and open, others were more subtle and covert. Participants believed that they experienced the strength of the Old Boys Club by witnessing perceived male superiority, backlash when trying to stand up against the Old Boys Club and through having direct and indirect experiences of exclusion.

#### Sub-theme 1.1: Male superiority

Participants in this sample shared their experiences in dealing with a sense of male superiority that was often enforced and promoted by the Old Boys Club. Most participants expressed

**TABLE 2:** Table of themes.

Main themes	Sub-themes	Definition
1. Experiences related to the Old Boys Club	1.1 Male superiority	How women experience a culture where men are seen as superior, reinforced by male networks.
	1.2 Direct experiences of exclusion	Ways women are socially and professionally excluded from networking and opportunities.
	1.3 Trying to combat the old Boys Club	Strategies women use to counter male dominance, including forming female networks.
2. Negative impact of the Old Boys Club	2.1 Effect on women's confidence	How male-dominated networks undermine women's self-esteem and professional self-efficacy.
	2.2 Sexist treatment	Experiences of gendered expectations, domestic roles and overt and subtle sexism in the workplace.
3. Impact of the Old Boys Club on Career Advancement	3.1 Hindering female career progression	How exclusive male networks and favouritism limit women's access to promotions, clients and career growth.

that they were often made to feel like men made better attorneys because of stereotypes of women often endorsed by gendered networks like the Old Boys Club. The overall feeling from participants was that they often face scrutiny for their behaviour, such as speaking up against injustice or asserting their rights. On the contrary, participants believed that men, that is, those within exclusive social networks such as the Old Boys Club, are treated more leniently and receive greater support for the same behaviour, indicating a double standard. They believed this occurred because members of the Old Boys Club stand in solidarity with each other and support each other in an attempt to maintain in-group dominance:

'If any guy stood up there and said exactly the same thing as me in exactly the same way, they would never have been called out.' (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

'If I stood up for myself, then I made it a thousand times worse for myself. Whereas, I had a male colleague who, if he stood up for himself, he didn't face the same consequences.' (P5, 30–39, White person, Senior)

Within this sub-theme, participants found that because of the existence of the Old Boys Club in private law firms, they often felt pressured to adopt certain behaviours in order to fit in or gain acceptance, reinforcing a sense of male superiority. In most cases, although they were not fully accepted into these networks, participants observed that they faced less scrutiny when they conformed to the behaviours of the Old Boys Club. Participants in the sample shared that demonstrating traditionally masculine behaviours appeared to afford them greater acceptance or, at the very least, reduced marginalisation in the law firms where they were employed:

'If you're a little bit of a tomboy then you're accepted more than if you were not.' (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

'You really have to know whisky and be willing to take a shot with the boys to be invited back.' (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

These narrations indicate how women in this sample experience the Old Boys Club and the difficulty they have in trying to be accepted into this social network. Participants believed that men seek to keep this club exclusive, accepting only certain behaviours. As a result, some women reported feeling compelled to adapt their behaviour in order to gain acceptance into these networks, which they felt reinforced notions of male superiority.

### Sub-theme 1.2: Direct experiences of exclusion

Participants in the sample shared their direct experiences of workplace exclusion as a result of the Old Boys Club. The general consensus among participants was that social gatherings that took place outside the workplace appeared as a means to socially exclude them and, in the process, denied them career networking opportunities. In most cases, these social gatherings allowed for client referrals and the strengthening of social networks. These social gatherings occurred after working hours when women are expected to be at home and fulfil their family responsibilities, and usually

involved alcohol or sporting events, that is, activities that appeal more to men than women:

'All the professionals go down to the bar ... the boys all stand together ... it's where boys get to be boys and talk about boy things.' (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

'The directors would go hunting and they would take some of the associates with them and then only obviously invite the men.' (P7, 20–29, Mixed race person, Junior)

'They would go overseas, and it was all the men, because rugby is a predominantly male sport.' (P7, 20–29, Mixed race person, Junior)

'We would have two beers and then the guys would head out, go somewhere else. We would go home to our families.' (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

Participants indicated that these social gatherings often excluded women, which they felt reinforced the bonds among men within the Old Boys Club. In addition to social events that take place outside the workplace, social interactions inside the workplace by members of the Old Boys Club were also perceived as a means to exclude women. The participants mentioned that men would exclusively socialise within each other's offices, which often involved no women. The women who shared their experiences in this indicated that these behaviours occurred in a very subtle or covert manner, yet had an exclusionary effect:

'Attorneys all have their own offices, so they would huddle in each other's offices.' (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

'They will have lunch together ... he buys them lunch everyday ... and they sit in his office, and they have lunch.' (P2, 20–29, White person, Junior)

From the data, it also appeared that participants felt that male colleagues were specifically blatant about not wanting them to be included in their social interactions. They classified this as an overt, direct form of exclusion:

'I didn't get invitations to the events unless I specifically raised it, because I was a woman. No doubt.' (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

'With the meetings thing, it was obvious they purposefully excluded me so I couldn't make the decisions and I couldn't overtly speak out against their decisions.' (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

'She's the only girl in the team of men and they are so cliquy, they purposefully exclude her off every email chain and every decision-making thing.' (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

The accounts of participants presented above indicate their experiences of being overtly excluded from key networking events, which limits their ability to participate in decision-making and prevents them from accessing opportunities in the workplace.

### Sub-theme 1.3: Trying to combat the Old Boys Club

The final sub-theme under experiences of female attorneys and the Old Boys Club revolves around women making attempts to stand up against the Old Boys Club and the effect

that it has on them. Participants made reference to a girl's club and stated that they believe that this should help mitigate the lack of networking opportunities for them. Participants were of the belief that women should stand together in the same way as men do. The participants mentioned the following:

'Support groups and events and conferences, where it is just females, so that the females can network.' (P2, 20–29, White person, Junior)

'We need to develop our own networks and establish our own connections.' (P6, 20–29, Black person, Senior)

Many women in the sample acknowledged the existence of the Old Boys Club but added that they felt establishing a girls' club might help combat this.

## Theme 2: Negative impact of the Old Boys Club

The findings of the data analysis indicated that some participants in this sample believed that the existence of the Old Boys Club had a negative impact on them. They shared their experiences of how the Old Boys Club has a negative effect on their self-esteem and self-confidence by denying them career opportunities. Participants also indicated that in some cases, the Old Boys Club perpetuated sexist treatment of women.

### Sub-theme 2.1: Effect on women's confidence

This sub-theme under theme 2 explores the detrimental effect the Old Boys Club has on the confidence and self-efficacy of the participants. Participants indicated that, in their perception, the negative impact of the Old Boys Club on female attorneys was linked to the network's exclusionary practices and its role in perpetuating gender role stereotypes. Some participants shared that they strongly felt that members of the Old Boys Club often depicted women as less capable or emotionally unsuitable for the legal profession. They believed that this was an attempt by members of the Old Boys Club to retain in-group power and influence:

'A lot of condescending things, and I think they mean well, but you are certainly treated different because you are a woman.' (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

'They see the emotional aspect of women of being kind and nurturing as weak.' (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

'That is a very common attitude amongst men that women must follow them.' (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

Most participants in the sample indicated that they constantly felt that they were undermined, underestimated and being indirectly labelled as fragile or not cut out for the legal profession:

'I was told at one point that if I didn't toughen up then this isn't the right profession for me.' (P5, 30–39, White person, Senior)

One participant explained that in her experience, members of the Old Boys Club perpetuate the belief that women are intellectually inferior or that their contributions should not be taken seriously:

'Within those spaces, women were seen as quite inferior, and our opinions were seen as lesser-than.' (P6, 20–29, Black person, Senior)

Participants reported that the constant undermining of women and devaluation of their contributions negatively affected their self-efficacy and perceived competence, often taking an emotional toll and contributing to self-doubt:

'Why am I not included here? Is it because I don't know the case or that I am not good enough to speak about what they're speaking about ... it does leave you feeling excluded?' (P2, 20–29, White person, Junior)

Some participants commented that in some cases, these feelings of exclusion begin to infiltrate their professional identity and cause them to question their self-worth and whether they are deserving of their jobs:

'You end up feeling the level of contribution that you're making is not impactful enough, and you're essentially just there as a statistic.' (P6, 20–29, Black person, Senior)

Overall, participants in the sample emphasised that not only does the Old Boys culture keep them out of exclusive networking circles, but through the stereotypes and gender norms perpetuated by the Old Boys Club, women are made to feel less confident and made to doubt their capabilities.

### Sub-theme 2.2: Sexist treatment

Female attorneys in the sample stated that it was their belief that the Old Boys Club was also responsible for fostering a culture that supported the sexist treatment of women in private law firms. They felt that they were often held or expected to conform to traditional gender roles by being expected to do what is commonly referred to as domestic labour, but was not necessarily related to being an attorney. One participant described this as a form of male chauvinism and stated:

'You have a meeting and you're always the one that takes the drinks order.' (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

In addition to being expected to fulfil traditional domestic roles, such as being responsible for refreshments, female attorneys in this sample also reported that because they were women, they were often asked to do what they deemed as 'less important' jobs or jobs that they were over-qualified for:

'A woman would be asked to be the one that has to write the notes.' (P6, 20–29, Black person, Senior)

A participant shared her experience of how it was assumed that because she was a woman who was accompanying her male colleague to court and she had to be a junior or subordinate to the male colleague, even though that was not the case:

'You are assumed to be the secretary or work underneath him.' (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

Another participant claimed that when they were eventually given an opportunity to progress in their career, their successes were always undermined and attributed to other reasons apart from hard work and capability:

*'Either way you'll never be promoted because they'll either be whispering that you have an affair going on with the guy.'* (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

In many of the examples provided above, participants perceived the Old Boys Club and the ideologies upheld by its members as exclusionary and believed that it actively reinforced and legitimised sexist beliefs and values within their member circles. These beliefs infiltrate workspaces and enforce traditional gender norms, maintaining male dominance, specifically at influential levels.

### Theme 3: Impact of the Old Boys Club on the career advancement of female attorneys

From the data, the identified pattern was that participants felt that the Old Boys Club hindered their career progression, as they perceived it to promote a sense of collegial meritocracy and favouritism among men within the network. This, in their view, led to their exclusion from important career advancement opportunities.

#### Sub-theme 3.1: Hindering female career progression

The final theme identified is the role that the Old Boys Club plays in hindering the career progress of women in this sample. A shared belief was that the existence of this exclusive male network denies them access to social capital and other career-advancing opportunities. While there are several strategies employed by members of the Old Boys Club to deny women career enhancing opportunities, participants in this sample indicated that collegial meritocracy stood out. Participants across all job levels shared how they often had to compete for career opportunities with their male colleagues, who had networks and connections through the Old Boys Club:

*'They've already filled whoever they could have with friends and family, those are usually men.'* (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

*'The majority of my male classmates all had secured articles, because their dads are friends with someone.'* (P1, 30–39, White person, Senior)

*'It's also generational, as in, their dad and their dads' friends promote the son, and it's a generational thing, and then it's also within their friend group.'* (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

These accounts highlight the perceived advantages of belonging to an exclusive male network, where men often advance in their careers through established connections and informal relationships, while women are left behind or overlooked in the process.

In addition to the aforesaid, two participants in the sample identified favouritism as a core aspect of the Old Boys Club, which significantly influenced who received promotion

opportunities and who did not. According to these participants, this favouritism allowed the men to be chosen over the women for career progression opportunities and was often a result of informal male bonding and social relations outside the office rather than merit:

*'This one takes you to golf one day where you then meet the director of this place, who then gives you that work.'* (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

*'If there are opportunities that do come about, they would obviously put them first before they would consider one of the female colleagues just because of their social interactions outside the office.'* (P7, 20–29, Mixed race person, Junior)

These participants indicated that they felt that their career advancement was negatively impacted because of the perceptions and viewpoints that the Old Boys Club perpetuated about women, such as being a mother makes you less committed to the profession, or women are more emotional and therefore do not make good attorneys. In their opinion, these stereotypes actively hinder women's career advancement as they often result in discrimination:

*'You have to be a lot more careful about the way that you talk about a matter or talk to a client, because immediately people think that you are more emotionally involved than the man in your team.'* (P3, 20–29, White person, Junior)

*'They ask questions in interviews that they're not allowed to ask. They ask, are you planning on getting married anytime soon? Are you planning on having kids anytime soon? Are you single? ... I don't know if they ask men that cause to men it makes no difference.'* (P4, 30–39, White person, Middle)

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how female attorneys in private law firms experienced the Old Boys Club and to understand the ways in which this exclusive male social network negatively affected these females and hindered their career advancement.

With regard to research question one, that is, How do female attorneys in private law firms experience the Old Boys Club?, the themes indicated that participants in this sample experienced the Old Boys Club to enforce beliefs and values of male domination through exclusionary practices and informal gendered power structures. Findings of the study are consistent with existing research, which indicates that the Old Boys Club, while often informal, is a powerful mechanism that excludes women from career-advancing opportunities and reinforces gender inequality in private law firms (Allemand et al., 2022; Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023; Smit, 2020). Participants in this study shared their experiences of how they perceive the Old Boys Club to manifest itself in the workplace and operate as a barrier to female attorney career progression.

Participants also shared their experiences of direct exclusion from being part of the Old Boys Club, which they believed also prevented them from networking opportunities and social resources. This is also alluded to in existing literature

(Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023), which highlights socialisation at bars and at sporting events such as golf as an exclusionary mechanism. These social interactions are often used as platforms for social networking and informal business discussions, which in many cases open the door for career-advancing opportunities. Greguletz et al. (2019) add that although women may sometimes attend said events, they often have to leave early because of their family responsibilities and are left out of important conversations. This is an indication of the deeply entrenched structural barriers that women must overcome in the workplace. Clashes between gender role expectations and incompatible work culture often result in women being deprived of career-changing conversations.

With regard to research question two, that is, In what ways do the Old Boys Club negatively affect female attorneys in private law firms? participants indicated that these exclusive male networks and the perceptions promoted by these networks have negatively affected their self-esteem and have perpetuated sexist treatment in the workplace. Because of the ideologies perpetuated by these gender exclusive networks, women are often left questioning their competence and whether they belong in the legal profession. Meyer (2024) documents that the highly competitive male-dominated culture of the legal profession often values machismo, pushing women into less valuable roles, causing them to question their ability to be successful attorneys. Because many women may not traditionally adhere to the stereotype of what it takes to be a 'good attorney', they are often left feeling inadequate and incapable. Informal gender exclusive networks such as the Old Boys Club often promote male-centric expectations of competence, which often results in individuals who do not meet these expectations feeling less than, causing them to doubt their capabilities. Barkhuizen et al. (2022) echo the same sentiments by arguing that when women are excluded from these networks, it undermines their confidence and contributes to perceptions of unworthiness for leadership.

The final research question looked at female attorneys' perceptions about the impact that the Old Boys Club had on their career advancement. Participants shared their perceptions of how the Old Boys Club hindered their career advancement. Perceived collegial meritocracy, that is, favouritism among members, and the negative perceptions of women perpetuated within the network emerged as key factors that, in their view, negatively impacted women's career progression.

Wang (2009) mentions that networking has a strong positive influence on the career progression of attorneys and that, because of the historical nature of the profession, longstanding connections are often only held by men. Wang (2009) asserts that male seniors prefer to have male protégées, providing fewer mentoring opportunities for women, as men hold most senior positions. This is supported by Lalanne and Seabright (2022), who mention that recruitment to high-level positions is

often based on word-of-mouth recommendations. It must be noticed that this study acknowledges that there are several systemic and structural barriers in male-dominated professions such as law that hinder the career progress of women, such as gender bias and stereotypes, a lack of mentorship opportunities, family and care giving responsibilities (Hoobler et al., 2014; Kela et al. 2024; Markovic & Plickert, 2023; Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). The Old Boys Club was the focus of this study because of its informal structure and the fact that it is not an open and visible barrier, as mentioned above, and more specifically, the lack of research on this phenomenon, especially among female attorneys.

## Limitations

Firstly, the study is based on understanding female attorneys' experiences of the Old Boys Network. Because the study relies on a self-reported version of events, there could be issues such as memory gaps or personal interpretation, which may inform the findings.

The study also did not consider other socio-cultural factors, such as race and whether female attorneys' experiences might be different among women from different racial groups. Meyer (2024) states that for every black African partner, there are at least seven white partners in the legal profession, indicating that not only is there gender disparity in the South African Legal Profession but also racial disparity. Thus, it would be interesting to see if women from different racial groups experience barriers to career progression differently.

## Implications for practice

The findings of this study have implications for private law firms and private organisations that employ female attorneys. Considering the role of social capital in career advancement in the legal sector, organisations should implement policies aspects as mentoring, social networking events and coaching. Opportunities to utilise these career-enhancing resources should be provided equally to all attorneys and not based on social connectedness or social relations. Initiatives could be put in place to ensure that mentors and mentees are paired based on similarities in characteristics, which would help them build strong relationships that are not based on gender. Teambuilding events and social activities, especially those that give access to clients and partnership opportunities, should include both genders, and activities that are undertaken should be more gender-neutral. Efforts should be made to ensure that all professionals are taken into consideration equally, and that activities are for the benefit of teams and the organisation as a whole.

## Recommendations for future research

While one might argue whether the same experiences could be reported in other countries. The findings of this study are consistent with the published literature, indicating a common experience in other countries but also other male-dominated

work environments, such as STEM or the police force (Pollack, 2016; Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Nonetheless, it would be interesting to observe if a similar outcome would be found when conducting a similar study in other countries around the world, or in other fields of the law profession, such as government.

Given the very specific nature of the target participants for this study, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study on men with regard to exclusive male networks. Future research could identify whether they are aware if they belong to, or do not belong to, these 'clubs', and how prevalent it really is in the legal sector from the perspective of someone who is considered part of the in-group. Furthermore, one could gather perspectives from both sides to avoid the limitation of subjectivity.

## Conclusion

This research highlighted the impact that social exclusion in the form of the 'Old Boys Club' can have on female attorneys. This phenomenon has been shown to be prevalent in private law firms, having a negative impact on female attorney's career progression. This study confirms the role of meso (organisation) level influences on women's career experiences and career advancement and indicates that organisations and male managers can serve as allies for women in the workplace if internal biases and subtle forms of workplace exclusion are identified and addressed.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, Daphne Pillay-Naidoo, serves as an editorial board member of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this article. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Daphne Pillay-Naidoo: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing. Deborah K. Brown: Formal analysis, Investigation. All authors reviewed

the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, Deborah K. Brown upon reasonable request at brown.debbie77@gmail.com.

## Disclaimer

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