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Resilience strategies to counter gender discrimination in South Africa's manufacturing industry

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Orientation: A deeper understanding of women's resilience strategies in the face of gender discrimination warrants exploration for theory building.

Research purpose: This study sought to examine the nature of gender discrimination as experienced by women leaders in South African manufacturing workplaces; the personal resilience strategies that they employ to counter gender discrimination; and how these strategies transform the praxis of resilience.

Motivation for the study: The study heeds the call for epistemologies of resilience to incorporate women's perspectives in response to systems of injustice and to provide insights for gender transformation efforts in South African manufacturing organisations.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research approach was used, supported by semi-structured interviews with 15 female leaders in South African manufacturing organisations whose narratives were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Main findings: This study confirmed the prevalence of gender discrimination in South African manufacturing workplaces, perpetuated by normalised masculine cultures. Women leaders in these environments have developed personal resilience strategies that reflect both a survivalist approach and a more transformative approach; however, the sustainability and systemic impact of these strategies are limited.

Practical/managerial implications: The research has practical implications for women leaders' resilience strategies in the face of gender discrimination, as well as implications for human resource (HR) practitioners and leaders committed to developing more inclusive workplace cultures in male-dominated environments.

Contribution/value-add: This article contributes to scholarship on gender discrimination and resilience within the unique context of South African manufacturing, incorporating gendered perspectives.

Keywords: personal resilience; gender discrimination; diversity; equity and inclusion; gender harassment; sexual harassment; manufacturing.

Introduction

The male-dominated legacy of manufacturing persists worldwide, with women making up only 32% of the industry globally (WEF Global Gender Report, 2024) and 29% of the South African sector with few reaching executive leadership positions (Maluleke, 2024). Of the 25% women candidate engineers in South Africa, approximately 6% remain in the engineering profession, creating a 'leaky pipeline' of women with technical skills to lead in production-based manufacturing environments (Engineering Council of South Africa [ECSA], 2022). Gender discrimination is often cited as the reason women leave manufacturing for more inclusive cultures or fail to progress in male-dominated hierarchies (Abbey & Adu-Danso, 2022). In a recent survey conducted in the South African supply chain industry, allied to the manufacturing sector, 64% of women reported having faced or witnessed gender discrimination in their workplace (The Professional Body for Supply Chain Management [SAPICS], 2024).

Discrimination is prohibited in the South African constitution, with *the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (*PEPUDA*) (2000) defining systemic gender discrimination as deeply embedded, persistent patterns of prejudicial behaviour. The act mandates private institutions to eliminate indirect and direct discrimination even through practices that appear neutral (Malatjie & Mbajiorgu, 2024). Legislative frameworks have been used in South Africa to

address gender discrimination in the workplace, most notably *the Employment Equity Act* (EEA) (1998) to address unfair discrimination and *the Labour Relations Act* (LRA) (1995) to protect the constitutional rights of individuals. In 2022, guidelines for dealing with workplace sexual harassment were introduced to the LRA as a response to its prevalence in South Africa, stemming from the high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) within the society at large (Malatjie & Mbajiorgu, 2024).

Despite South African workplaces overhauling unfair human resource (HR) practices in line with legislation, empirical studies provide evidence that gender discrimination persists, particularly in male-dominated spaces where societal forces and cultural norms sustain explicit and implicit prejudices towards women (Abbey & Adu-Danso, 2022; Malatjie & Mbajiorgu, 2024; Netnou & Strydom, 2020). Prejudicial behaviour is typically driven by gendered stereotypes premised on the belief that women are not suited to traditionally masculine environments and disregard for women's technical professional capabilities (Bridges et al. 2023; Jamshed, 2024). These behaviours tend to be accepted, consciously or unconsciously, in male-dominated workplaces, characterised through gender bias, gender harassment and sexual harassment (Cheryan & Markus, 2020). Failure to meaningfully address gender discrimination in organisations has been attributed to insufficient attention given to how power dynamics produce and reproduce conditions that foster inequality (De La Torre-Pérez et al., 2022). In industries such as manufacturing, where power remains vested in male leadership, women's advancement is primarily an individual pursuit, with employers assuming little responsibility for creating conditions for women to thrive (Netnou & Strydom, 2020). Women who succeed in manufacturing organisations do so despite these inequities, demonstrating 'strength' to deal with both overt and covert discrimination, often described as resilience (Masten et al., 2021).

Resilience research in organisations has gained increasing interest in a variety of scholarly and practitioner domains. While the context and framing of resilience is nuanced and varied, researchers gravitate to a shared feature: the ability to 'bounce back' from setbacks using coping mechanisms that defy negative outcomes (Masten et al., 2021; Métais et al., 2022; Powley et al., 2020). In their comprehensive handbook of organisational resilience research, Powley et al. (2020) encouraged further scholarship into the nature of the concept, the level at which is studied, the context it operates in and whether the concept is best suited to describing the phenomenon experienced in organisations. Concerning gender, management literature has typically reviewed how women develop and sustain resilience in workplaces that privilege masculine norms, failing to relate the effects of gender discrimination explicitly (Branicki et al., 2023; MacLeavy et al., 2021; Ramos et al., 2022). In response, there is a growing body of conceptual literature on gender and resilience in the workplace, arguing the need to rethink the way in which masculine norms have shaped the concept and praxis of resilience (Bentley-Edwards & Adams, 2024; Bridges et al., 2023; Witmer, 2019).

When it comes to empirical studies, there is a paucity of research on women's resilience strategies in the face of gender discrimination in the South African manufacturing context. Khilji and Pumroy's (2018) empirical study on the resilience of women engineers in the United States provides useful qualitative perspectives on women's career advancement in the profession. Aside from the contrasting national context, the women in this study came from a variety of industries and countering gender discrimination was not an explicit focus. Indeed, Khilji and Pumroy's (2018) findings call for more feminist-oriented research into women's resilience to highlight deep-seated gender issues and solicit women's perspectives on constructing effective coping strategies. In the African context, studies on gender, resilience and the workplace tend to focus on women entrepreneurs, where resilience is viewed from the lens of sustainable business models (Johnson et al., 2020; Rajak & Dolan, 2024) rather than personal resilience strategies. In their quantitative study on gender diversity in manufacturing across six African countries, Abbey and Adu-Danso (2022) reviewed the relationship between gender and productivity, without linking this to personal resilience. Recently a qualitative study on discrimination and marginalisation of women in the South African manufacturing industry was published by Syster et al. (2023) reporting on the widespread and severe nature of embedded gender discrimination in the sector. This study makes a valuable empirical contribution, capturing 13 women's perspectives on the marginalisation of women in the sector, but does not explore how women cope with gender discrimination. The study seeks to critically engage with underexplored areas between gender and resilience, thereby responding to the notable gap in current scholarly research.

The study explores the narratives of women leaders in the South African manufacturing sector to gain insight into their resilience strategies and responses to gender discrimination. Using a gendered lens to unpack their strategies, this study aims to understand resilience beyond the masculine attribute of survivalist strength (Bridges et al., 2023). This lens re-centres the voices of women on what it means to be resilient in systems where male power and privileges shape the notion of resilience (Branicki et al., 2023). The lens also serves a transformative purpose by exploring three sub-questions:

- *What are the lived experiences of gender discrimination of women leaders in manufacturing organisations in South Africa?*
- *What personal resilience strategies do women leaders use to counter gender discrimination?*
- *How do women leaders' personal strategies to countering gender discrimination transform the praxis of resilience in the face of gender discrimination?*

This article contributes to scholarship on gender discrimination and resilience within the context of South African manufacturing, where women's representation at leadership levels lags behind global trends and discrimination is often cited as a reason for this (Maluleke, 2024; WEF Global Gender Report, 2024). Practical insights are provided for

women leaders, such as tapping into formal and informal power in organisations. For leaders responsible for transforming masculine work cultures to be more inclusive, the study highlights the need to engage with women and men for collective action and to create safe spaces to address gender discrimination.

Literature review

Gender discrimination in manufacturing

Despite manufacturing organisations in South Africa addressing explicit gender discrimination through HR practices that are EEA compliant, typical workplace practices of manufacturing are common justification for women's exclusion (Abbey & Adu-Danso, 2022; Netnou & Strydom, 2020; Palumbo & Manna, 2020). These include 24-h shifts; the physical environment of industrial sites, often inhospitable with inadequate female facilities; as well as traditional industrial processes associated with heavy machinery and physical work. Manufacturing remains rife with artefacts contributing to women's sense of marginalisation designed around the 'ideal male worker' (Palumbo & Manna, 2020). Where organisations do attempt to address gender discrimination, these tangible factors receive attention, rather than implicit gendered dynamics that drive such discrimination (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2020; Chance, 2022).

Acknowledging sociocultural patterns that affect women is critical to understanding embedded gender discrimination and women's resilience responses at a more fundamental level (Groeneveld et al., 2020). Three significant and related forms of gender discrimination occur at this level, namely: gender bias, gender harassment and sexual harassment. While gender bias can be quite subtle (Branicki et al., 2023), gender harassment can manifest discretely or overtly (De La Torre-Pérez et al., 2020), whereas sexual harassment is an overt expression of power and dominance evidenced in unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

Gender bias manifests through prejudicial attitudes towards women in the workplace often as a result of unconscious conditioning, such as the view that women are incapable of working in 'tough' male environments, or when successful, as outliers who are 'unfeminine' (Branicki et al., 2023). These 'stereotype threats' when women's attributes do not match traditional gendered expectations contribute to prejudicial behaviour (Chance, 2022). Gender bias also leads to marginalisation and social exclusion of women (Bridges et al., 2023) evidenced in formal and informal workplace relationships that women lack access to. The negative consequence of gender bias on the mental well-being and career advancement of women is well documented in the literature (Khilji & Pumroy, 2018; Ramos et al., 2022).

Gender harassment is a more conscious, overt form of oppression through demeaning comments and hostile attitudes (Dresden et al., 2018). At the core of gender harassment is a lack of respect, manifested through microaggressions when women are denigrated with comments that judge or ridicule their behaviour according to gender stereotypes (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Gender harassment can result in debilitating feelings of self-doubt, self-blame and depression (Perez Gomez, 2022), which compromises the agency of victims. 'Gaslighting' is an abusive power tactic used by perpetrators of gender harassment designed to make victims doubt their experience (Sweet, 2019). The consequence of this is a culture of silence, which leads to limited evidence in cases of harassment (Hershcovis et al., 2021), making it difficult to hold perpetrators to account (Gómez-González et al., 2023). Inevitably, gender harassment can take a heavy toll on victims' work life, leading to withdrawal and disengagement (Bongiorno et al., 2020).

While gender harassment and sexual harassment may appear to have similar motives and consequences, they are significantly different. Sexual harassment legislation in the workplace in South Africa is predominantly covered in the EEA addressing behaviours that violate individuals' constitutional rights. South Africa's national GBV statistics indicate a culture of non-reporting of sexual harassment incidents, inside or outside the workplace (Malatjie & Mbajiorgu, 2024). Common organisational practices for addressing workplace harassment are sexual harassment grievance procedures and training. However, the efficacy of these initiatives has proven difficult to measure as victims typically quit their jobs after a harassment incident (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Gómez-González et al. (2023) point to retaliation by perpetrators as the key reason for under-reporting and lack of sexual harassment monitoring systems. Retaliation includes not being considered for promotions, being socially ostracised and being labelled a troublemaker (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

Given the low levels of reporting, gender and sexual harassment incidents are easily discounted as minor (Holland & Cortina, 2017), with victims having to develop personal coping mechanisms at work. Little attention is given to rehabilitating offenders to make workplaces safer and more comfortable for women (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Ramos et al., 2022); rather, organisations have put the spotlight on women for their apparent inability to cope with tough male-dominated environments. This is the typical motivation behind organisational interventions to develop women's resilience, rather than addressing entrenched systems of abuse (Bridges et al., 2023; Witmer, 2019).

Bosch (2024) critiques South African workplace responses to discrimination through diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives that fail to understand the complexity and conflicting agendas of achieving social justice at work. Many DEI resilience-building initiatives focus on remediation of women to assimilate into male-dominated cultures (Bridges et al., 2023; Ely, 2020) and ignore the intersecting effects of gender and racial discrimination (Syster et al., 2023; Wessels, 2020). Providing mentoring and coaching to support women's career development can promote resilience, but

these efforts are limited when gendered power dynamics are misunderstood and female role-models are lacking (Chance, 2022). While organisational approaches to discrimination continue to privilege a male perspective and warrant further investigation (Ramos et al., 2022), understanding the underexplored experience of women themselves who have succeeded in these environments and their construction of resilience in the face of gender discrimination is the guiding question for this study.

Resilience and gender discrimination

Resilience theory has evolved in its application to a range of scholarly disciplines, including psychology and organisational theory (Bridges et al., 202; Powley et al., 2020). While its conceptualisation is nuanced, in the behavioural sciences, resilience has become associated with overall well-being (Masten et al., 2021) and the ability to thrive, adapt and learn during and after crisis (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022). Rather than an inherent personal attribute, resilience has more recently been acknowledged as contextual and influenced by environmental factors (Bridges, 2023; Métais et al. 2022). Instead of an 'event'-oriented approach, recent literature on resilience emphasises its sustained nature over time as a dynamic process (Gayatri & Irwaty, 2022).

Miller-Graff's (2022) multidimensional taxonomy of individual resilience (MTIR) model offers an integration of existing theoretical work on individual resilience incorporating the contextual and dynamic nature of resilience. Their model breaks the construct into two categories of generative and manifested resilience. Generative resilience includes resources within an individual's social ecological systems that allow adaptation to and recovery from stresses (Gayatri & Irwaty, 2022), as well as agentic behaviours to address the impact of adversity, including coping mechanisms, a developmental mindset and responses that benefit others facing adversity (Ellemers et al., 2019; Mrazek et al., 2018). Manifested resilience refers to an individual's positive adaptation to adversity through skills developed to deal with challenging contexts, nurturing psychological health and a sense of purpose, and displaying generous and judicious characteristics (Chopik et al., 2021; Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018; Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

Recent developments in resilience theory, including Miller-Graaf's (2022) MTIR model, signal a more dynamic and systemic approach to the construct beyond the 'bounce back' rhetoric with potential for transformative agency. Resilience strategies have not typically been associated with systems of transformation, but rather strategies of endurance adopted to facilitate day-to-day existence, not really changing circumstances that make life difficult (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). However, feminist theorists Wakefield and Zimmerman (2020) examine the concept of resilience in relation to social justice and the role of social change agents. They describe resilience not only as the state of calm that returns after traumatic hyper-alertness but also as a sense of belonging and dignity. In their review of feminist futurity, MacLeavy et al. (2021) assert that resilient people make their own histories but not under conditions of their choosing. Métais et al. (2022) explain that individuals use strategies to counteract adversity to both negative and positive effect for themselves and others. For example, they may use their intellectual capability to mistreat someone to protect themselves, which is a negative adaptation or mentally reframe and support others facing difficult situations, which is a positive adaptation.

While reframing of resilience may have potential for personal transformation in the face of gender discrimination, Bridges et al. (2023) caution that high exposure to stress or trauma from discriminatory practices does not create resilient employees; instead, it negatively impacts their emotional well-being, leading to disengagement or resignation. In their article on resilience for gender inclusion (RGI) in male-dominated occupations, Bridges et al. (2023) argue that the lack of gendered understandings of organisational and employee resilience results in resilience theory being unable to provide an emancipatory framework for women in male-dominated occupations. They support Witmer's (2019) assertion that resilience is framed as a masculine construct with less emphasis given to 'normative feminine practices such as cooperation, inclusivity and collective transformation' (p. 511). Incorporating a more holistic framework of resilience is translated practically in Bridges et al.'s (2023) model of RGI, focusing on joint responsibility for resilience between the organisation and the individual. This is a valuable contribution to scholarship and a useful lens for organisational practitioners, incorporating practical suggestions such as mentorship networks, women role models in leadership and flexible work hours as resilience-building organisational initiatives (Chance, 2022; Ely, 2020). However, for women navigating discriminatory experiences themselves, affecting organisational interventions can be unattainable and render women feeling further disempowered (MacLeavy et al., 2021). A deeper understanding of women's resilience strategies in the face of gender discrimination warrants exploration for theory building and practice.

Research design

Research approach

The research adopted a qualitative methodology, using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, allowing the researcher to explore in detail the participants' lived experience of gender discrimination in male-dominated work contexts. According to Alase (2017), IPA considers humans as sense-making beings and consequently the narratives shared in interviews as a reflection of their attempts to make sense of their experience. Through this approach, the study gained insight into the women leader's personal resilience strategies in the face of gender discrimination. While the IPA approach amplifies the lived experience of the research participants, it also recognises that for the stories to make sense interpretively, the researcher needs to have a deep understanding of the participants' experience (Alase, 2017). In IPA, the researcher does not

access the participants' experience directly, but through a 'process of intersubjective meaning-making' (Cuthbertson et al., 2020. p.98).

Research strategy

Using semi-structured interviews, participants provided individual narratives about their experiences, which were analysed using the IPA approach (Alase, 2017). The IPA is grounded in phenomenological philosophy, which understands the structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view (the participants), and double hermeneutics, which understands third-person interpretations of perceptions (the researcher) and iteratively reflects on the role of the researcher in producing these interpretations (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). The IPA approach of paying attention to context and applying double hermeneutics was deemed valid for this study as the researcher interpreted women's perspectives on the underexplored phenomenon of resilience in the face of gender discrimination, within the organisational context of manufacturing where male norms have traditionally shaped perspectives.

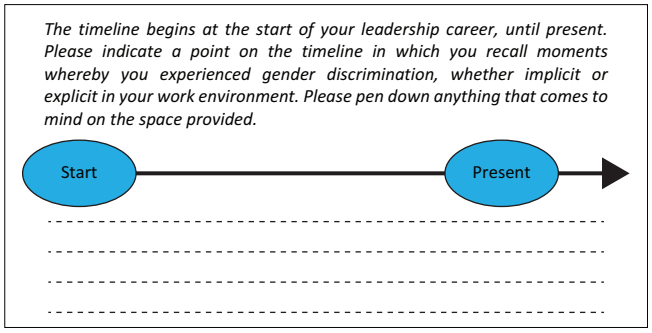
Research method

Research setting

The study was conducted with women employed in various manufacturing organisations across South Africa and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using a video conferencing platform. The women leaders held positions across a range of industries such as fast-moving consumer goods, automotive and pharmaceutical. All had occupied senior production roles, which are typically the preserve of men in South African manufacturing organisations. The participant organisations all employed more than 250 people, with senior leadership roles requiring high levels of technical expertise and the responsiveness, characteristic of the pressured environment of operations, which typically run 24 hours.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researcher initiated contact with the participants, explaining the purpose of the study and providing them with a pre-interview reflection exercise (Figure 1) prior to setting up the interview. As a South African-born African female engineer, the researcher was aware of the benefits and limitations of their 'insider status' (Ademolu, 2024). They declared this upfront to build trust and rapport with participants. The researcher's supervisor supported the researcher through guidance on the research design and providing opportunity for them to reflect critically on their interpretations through regular discussion during the analysis process.



Source: Adapted from Chance, N. (2022). Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 62*(1), 44–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211003000

FIGURE 1: Lived experiences timeline.

Research participants and sampling methods

Participants in the study were selected purposively to ensure meaningful contribution to the investigation (Kumar et al., 2022). The advantage was immediate access to a referral network, with selection bias as an acknowledged drawback (Ademolu, 2024). The first two participants were selected from the researcher's own professional network. Once they had been recruited, participants provided additional referrals from networks beyond the researcher's (Secules et al., 2021).

In research using an IPA approach, as few as two or as many as twenty-five participants are deemed appropriate (Alase, 2017). In addition, the researcher's judgement that new information has been saturated can inform the sample size (Carminati, 2018). In this study, fifteen women across a range of race groups and manufacturing organisations were interviewed before the researcher was satisfied that no new perspectives were emerging.

Criteria for participation were (1) women leaders who had experienced gender discrimination; (2) in management roles in South African manufacturing organisations for the past 10 years; (3) having spent time in a production management role during their tenure. Tenure and leadership criteria allowed women to draw from significant experience in recounting their narratives. Having fulfilled production roles meant their experiences were in roles typically associated with men, and leadership roles meant they had advanced in spite of barriers. Details of the sample are provided in Table 1.

Data collection methods

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, participants completed an individual reflective exercise before the interview to feel prepared and give them a sense of ease. The lived experiences timeline (Figure 1) was adapted from a similar study conducted by Chance (2022) and used for this pre-interview preparation phase. Preparation enhanced the depth of information shared by participants, flow of the interview, as well as greater reflection on their learning from experiences.

An interview guide was piloted with two individuals outside of the participant group, which led to the development of prompts for the unfolding narratives, such as 'How have you dealt with the feelings associated with the experience?' and 'How have you developed through this discrimination experience?'

TABLE 1: Sample details.

Number	Participant	Age group (years)	Race	Job title	Years in manufacturing
1	Cheryl	46–50	Indian person	Category & Channel Director	22
2	Lucy	56–60	White person	Human Resources Director	33
3	Rose	26–35	Black person	E-2-E Operations Director	11
4	Angela	40–45	White person	Operations Executive	11
5	Tracy	51–55	Mixed race person	General Manager	29
6	Fikile	40–45	Black person	Quality Director Sub-Saharan Africa	20
7	Gloria	50–56	Black person	Sourcing Unit Director	30
8	Nosipho	36–40	Black person	Senior Manager	12
9	Mandisa	26–35	Black person	Supply Chain Director	11
10	Samantha	36–40	Black person	Plant Lead	18
11	Khomotso	36–40	Black person	Head of Operations	16
12	Zama	30–35	Black person	Plant Manager	11
13	Slondiwe	26–35	Black person	Manufacturing Manager	10
14	Gladys	36–40	Black person	Site Operations Manager	16
15	Marion	26–35	White person	Strategic Planning Manager Sub-Saharan Africa	10

Note: Names used for participants are pseudonyms.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via the Microsoft Teams online platform and lasted between 1 h and 1.5 h. Most women narrated their experiences from the beginning of their careers with reflection on their gender discrimination experiences throughout and evolving resilience strategies. Pre-work, extended interview time and researcher's sensitivity deliberately accommodated potentially emotionally triggering accounts (Chance, 2022).

Data recording

All participants gave their consent for the interview to be recorded. Interviews were later transcribed using transcription software and checked for accuracy by the researcher.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Appropriate measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study – notably the absence of bias. According to Carminati (2018), trustworthiness in qualitative research is built through transparency, critical reflexivity and accuracy of research practice.

The researcher stating their positionality and identification with participants up front promoted transparency and was mindful of allowing participants to freely express themselves through the interviews with minimal prompting. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the researcher noticed emotional responses of both participants and herself during the interviews to allow for full immersion in their experience, while maintaining perspective (Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

While shared positionality allows for meaningful selection of participants and intimacy in the research setting (Kumar et al., 2022), the researcher's motivations and preconceived ideas needed to be constantly checked in relation to participants' accounts (Ademolu, 2024; Secules et al., 2021). The researcher needed to continuously interrogate how her journey of navigating gender discrimination in the manufacturing environment was shaping her interpretations. To do this, the researcher used critical reflexivity associated with the IPA approach (Cuthbertson et al., 2020) by journalling their personal responses to participants' experiences during the interviews and reflecting on these continuously through the data analysis process and in discussion with the supervisor (Ademolu, 2024).

Consistency and rigour through data gathering and analysis were achieved by recording and transcribing interviews verbatim, which were then checked by the researcher. In addition, interviews and coding were conducted in a consistent format, and recordings were revisited to confirm interpretations. Findings were presented as rich descriptions to ensure they conveyed participants' recollections and sentiments correctly (Carcary, 2020).

Data analysis

Recommended processes for IPA were followed, which started with the researcher's immersion in the data through close reading of the transcripts and field notes (Alase, 2017). This inductive approach was followed by the researcher moving between analysis of participants' accounts and the phenomenon under study through iterative cycles of review and reflection. This double hermeneutic approach focused on how the researcher was making sense of the participants' sense-making of their experience (Cuthbertson et al. 2020). Using colour codes to group quotes and documenting layers of interpretation within and across transcripts, the researcher ultimately recognised superordinate themes emerging (Alase, 2017). These were clustered around the research questions to report the findings.

Reporting style

The findings are presented as researcher interpretations supported by participants' quotes. Pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identities of participants. Participants' age and race have been included to give context to women leader's narratives and accurately represent their voices.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Gordon Institute of Business Science Ethical Committee, (Ref. No. 11123223). Informed consent

was obtained from participants before the interview, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Collected data were stored without identifiers, to ensure anonymity.

Results and discussion

Results are presented in relation to the three research sub-questions: firstly, perspectives on the nature of gender discrimination experiences; secondly, perceptions of strategies used to navigate these experiences; and finally, interpretation of the ways these strategies might be personally and systemically transformative in practice.

Gender discrimination experiences

Women shared experiences of explicit discrimination based on gender bias, despite equity legislation prohibiting these behaviours:

> 'And they were looking for this MD. And they were quite open with me they didn't want a woman. [*In the interview*] They actually said to me "no, we don't want a woman, we think a man would be the best choice"… I'm not joking. And they asked me, "are you finished having children now" But I got the job in the end.' (Angela, White, 40)

> 'They pushed me into the labs, the chemical stores. So my male colleagues were doing the work that all the other engineers were doing, but I was given softer roles. That is the first time I think I truly understood what it meant to be a female.' (Rose, Black, 33)

More implicit discrimination was related to masculine 'normative' practices at their manufacturing sites, as well as gender stereotypes and expectations:

> 'I think that's when I experienced the ill-preparedness of having a female, because I was the first female they had sponsored. I didn't have ablutions. They didn't have overalls for females, so they didn't have the size. They didn't have the right size for my shoes. So, I used to wear a man's size seven and they were big safety shoes – just because they were ill-prepared.' (Angela, White, 40)

> 'That person looks and feels like what you expect an engineer to look and feel like; they don't expect that when they see me, '"Who is your mechanical engineer?" and then I walk in, and people are like "What? Really?" (*laughs*) And they don't take me seriously.' (Slondiwe, Black, 34)

Implicit bias was also experienced in perceptions that being appointed to 'clean up a mess' (created by a male leader) was the catalyst for promotion rather than merit:

> 'A lot of times I felt like they moved me into a role to go and clean up the mess of somebody who was not doing their job … And I asked myself, had it been a female at the helm, would they have created a same situation, or would they have forced her to get everything under control?' (Samantha, Black, 38)

Systemic and implicit forms of discrimination were evident in marginalisation participants experienced being excluded from male networks:

> 'So there was a lot of concern about me being a mum and I worked long hours to disprove that. And there were fathers in the team but it seemed like expectation from the environment was different to mine. So often there would be conversations in the boardroom about things they had done on the weekend together that I knew nothing about.' (Nosipho, Black, 38)

> 'You are not part of the boys' club, you don't get invited to those Friday afternoon drinks, not that I want to go but I would like an invitation … I don't think it is deliberately hurtful, just men not really understanding the impact of their actions.' (Mandisa, Black, 29)

Gender harassment was reported by many women through microaggressions displayed towards them for their behaviour, being labelled as 'emotional' or 'unprofessional' according to gendered stereotypes:

> 'My boss called me aside … "Your approach in that meeting, it was not right … you were being too emotional." I was okay … I'm being too emotional. What does that mean? Was I shouting or what? Tell me, because for me, I felt like I was expressing my frustration at an incident, and as the plant manager I must do that for the team to understand this is serious. And he's like, No, I was being emotional.' (Zama, Black, 32)

Several women recounted examples of gender harassment as an accepted norm in the environment in the form of offensive taunts or aggressive behaviour from male counterparts. Although intersecting identity-related discrimination was outside the scope of this study, there was a clear relationship between participants' experiences as women and their race, with African and mixed race women expressing the 'double-bind' of dual discrimination and different standards of behaviour deemed appropriate across race and class:

> 'The shopfloor guys will say, "hier kom die swart meisiekind", but they'll never say that to a white woman boss.' (Khomotso, Black, 35)

> 'And then this guy on the shop floor started shouting in vernacular, "What is a woman doing here? You are not supposed to be here!" And swearing at me, and knowing I could understand him but my boss couldn't because he was white. So I said "What is going on?" and my boss was like "Oh sorry, we apologise, we should have warned you and told them there was a woman who was going to be coming".' (Nosipho, Black, 38)

Alarmingly, the study revealed sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment as the most frequently cited examples of discrimination, despite women leader's seniority within their organisations:

> '… I was offered the job, but I needed to go on an overseas trip with him [*her boss*] before he could confirm my employment. From the moment I stepped into the aeroplane he had his hands all over me. And that is not gender discrimination but it is actually sexual harassment. And it was absolutely shocking he thought he could do that because of the unequal power relationship and I was wanting something from him – it was implied that you will get this, but on my terms.' (Lucy, White, 56)

The results exposed gender bias, gender harassment and sexual harassment as pervasive forms of discrimination in the masculine culture of manufacturing, with women

experiencing direct and indirect discrimination in hiring and promotion decisions (Groeneveld et al. 2020) and being excluded from formal or informal networks of power (Bridges et al., 2023). Projection of hegemonic male attributes onto women both undermined and marginalised women (Branicki et al., 2023). 'You are too emotional' was a frequently reported microaggression, perpetuating a stereotype noted in literature that women are less suited to the 'rational' construct of leadership (Ramos et al., 2022). Echoing Tabassum and Nayak (2021), participants highlighted how expressions of anger and verbal abuse by men in professional settings are not regarded as gender harassment, but rather an organisational cultural 'norm'. In addition, this had racial overtones as participants felt white and black male colleagues were more tolerant of denigrating behaviour towards black women, displaying dual discrimination (Wessels, 2020). Also concerning were accounts of male leaders exploiting their positions through unwanted sexual advances, highlighting entrenched gendered power dynamics despite women leaders having achieved formal power within organisational hierarchies (Malatjie & Mbajiorgu, 2024).

Resilience strategies to counter gender discrimination

Women's resilience strategies were varied and nuanced; however, three themes emerged in their shared experiences. Firstly, women accessed their psychological capital to prove themselves. Secondly, women built community outside of formal power structures to safeguard them from discrimination. Thirdly, women used their experiences to reshape their leadership towards a more purpose-driven approach.

Some women recounted the act of using psychological capital to assume a persona reflecting masculine derived notions of 'toughness':

> 'I needed to leave the person that I am, my fabric, the beliefs that I have about the people that I work with because I now need to be tough. Because for you to make it, you need to be tough.' (Mandisa, Black, 29)

Others psychologically reframed negative associations of gender stereotypes as an opportunity to disprove them:

> 'Coming into this company and there's that view of, ooh, black and female supply chain director? Who's this EE candidate, from a lot of white males in the company. And being able to come in and perform and do a great job is what fuels me as well. So, I'm not limited in my thinking anymore, right?.' (Samantha, Black, 39)

Common among participants was their demonstration of competence to invalidate misconceptions about women's capabilities as a form of psychological capital. However, this typically came at a direct cost to their well-being:

> 'Being appointed as the first female director in Africa, the pressure to perform that you take on is huge, right? I always say, I almost killed myself in that company. It was a tough, probably the toughest job I did. And I gave it 200% … because I didn't want to fail.' (Samantha, Black, 39)

In developing communities of support, some participants described how over time they developed their most affirming support base from their subordinate teams as a resilience strategy to guard against acts of discrimination. This was an unexpected finding, given that this support base was outside traditional workplace hierarchies of power:

> 'So I think the best thing that I did was actually go and acquaint myself with the shop floor people, and even the shop floor people were literally showing me those little signs of sabotage – that's where the shop floor people are coming back like "Oh be careful, this is what we've heard this is what's being plotted" because sometimes there was literally acts of sabotage.' (Nosipho, Black, 38)

Another significant finding was that, despite the lack of organisation wide support, some men in positions of power within their organisations had become trusted advocates of female professionals, helping them advance their careers and develop their resilience:

> 'He [*male leader*] was one of those who were like the biggest cheerleaders of my career. Who were … you know, you can do it. You have all the right stuff. Somebody who's always positively claiming you, right? And that makes all the difference.' (Khomotso, Black, 35)

Interestingly, women did not emphasise the need for female mentors or networks in their work environments as a resilience strategy. Most women spoke of the need to access power through male leader networks with women forming their community of support outside of manufacturing workplace through friendships:

> 'And not women-to-women, those are my friends out of work. We want to be mentored by men, the leaders because we want to learn and sit at the table with them. I feel like such a hypocrite saying to other women I can do all these things. I would like to do all these things and I know that I've got absolutely no power.' (Fikile, Black, 40)

In contrast to developing a 'tough exterior', authenticity was mentioned as a key characteristic that developed over time and enabled female leaders to cope and felt liberating:

> 'In order to build resilience, I have to be myself. It's exhausting trying to be someone else. And it takes a lot of effort to remind yourself like, "No, I need to be this person". And people see through it as well. The best way that I can act is like, this is me. Take it or leave it.' (Zama, Black, 32)

Being purpose-driven rather than people-pleasing and self-critical reflected a strategy of adaptation and learning aimed at overcoming obstacles associated with gender discrimination experiences:

> 'You will make mistakes, but I've kind of gone past the stage of being too hard on myself. I feel like I've got a role to play. So, I always say to people, sometimes I forget that I'm a woman. Because that thing, I've parked it, I've put it away to say I'm in the room for a reason. They are going to hear, even those who don't want to hear me.' (Gladys, Black, 38)

In using psychological capital to assume a 'tough' persona and prove themselves, potentially to their own detriment,

women's resilience strategies reflect an approach that potentially entrenches discriminatory practices (Witmer, 2019). The inability to address forms of gender discrimination head-on, but rather internalise the problem and reframe their thinking and behaviour, confirms this may appear the most viable option for women (Chance, 2022). However, women's coping strategies also applied psychological attributes to actively build a community of support at work through teams they led or individual male allies, rather than female mentors or networks as proposed by literature (Bridges et al., 2023). This adds insight into the generative dimension of Miller-Graff's (2022) model of resilience and the nature of women's ecological support systems in resilience development (Gayatri & Irwaty, 2022) where more obvious support networks are inaccessible. Miller-Graff's (2022) manifested resilience and associated studies on growth mindsets (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) are reflected in the strategies women recounted of developing their authentic leadership style and leading with a sense of purpose, claiming inherent belonging and dignity in line with a feminist framing of resilience (MacLeavy et al., 2021; Wakefield & Zimmerman, 2020).

Resilience as a transformative praxis

Some participants spoke about the counterintuitive practice of using feminine qualities, such as being vulnerable, soft and kind, as their resilience strategy. Women developed nurturing characteristics of humility, respect and trust in the pursuit of supportive relationships to counter the effects of discrimination:

> 'So I think resilience in terms of gender issues has been a lot around accepting that it's rubbish, actually this is rubbish, they shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be treating me that way. And then showing them they're wrong, in a nice way, being a soft and open person. So not like this dragon-woman, because that's not going to help.' (Fikile, Black, 40)

In applying a developmental mindset and authentic leadership, women spoke about agency, which had developed over time to address forms of gender harassment directly and assertively:

> 'I understand myself a lot more and I can go to a leader and say, "Please can you stop raising your voice because I don't like to be spoken to like that. I will speak to you when you have calmed down." Once you get older, you can say things like that and you are not nervous you are going to get fired.' (Cheryl, Indian, 46)

Women's collective mindset for resilience was raised in wanting to be role models for younger women in the industry, while one participant spoke of deliberately creating spaces for conversations about adversity as a form of shared resilience building:

> 'I've been validated, but I've felt a more pressing need to be involved in how I make things better … not just for women but making work an inclusive place for anyone. I always try to actively be part of conversations that speak to that so that I can tell people about the issues I have experienced and what other women have experienced.' (Gloria, Black, 52)

While examples of resilience being personally and generatively transformative were illuminating, corollary experiences were also enlightening. Women reflected on their disempowerment and lack of agency in addressing sexual harassment, taking the burden of responsibility for lack of systemic change upon themselves:

> 'Actually I disappointed myself, I should have reported him to the Vice President of HR in the global business – and I didn't. Because I have no doubt that he has continued to behave in that way and many other women have become victim to his predatory behaviour. It would have been an appropriate thing to do, but I was young and stupid and didn't think that that was something I ought to have.' (Lucy, White, 56)

Others spoke about the impact of discrimination on their mental health with detrimental effects on well-being and engagement at work:

> 'Personally, I don't think I dealt with it, and hence me reaching a tipping point. I think that constant feeling of … of not being accepted, you know, I didn't deal with it. I didn't realise that over the years it made me start to self-doubt, you know … There are times where I'm in a situation where I feel like I'm being deliberately ignored, and I promise you it's not my imagination … It has been difficult because if it happens often, then I withdraw.' (Fikile, Black, 40)

It was noteworthy that none of the participants mentioned organisational support as a resource to help them build their resilience. Formal HR grievance procedures and independent counselling services offered as part of organisations' employee health and wellness programmes were regarded as ineffective when it came to dealing with the effects of gender discrimination. Instead, they referenced workplace resilience-building efforts as synonymous with productivity and performance:

> 'The organisation teaches us to be resilient in practice, doing the job, but it doesn't teach us to be resilient in leadership. How does an organisation teach me to be resilient? It teaches me to be resilient in my job, to perform my job better. But it doesn't teach me to be resilient as a person. That's something you have to figure out on your own.' (Tracy, Coloured, 53)

These contrasting accounts paint a picture of resilience strategies that have some potential for individual and systemic transformation within the context of male-dominated cultures, albeit constrained. Miller-Graff's (2022) properties of manifested resilience are evident in their positive adaptation to adversity and sense of purpose, as is generative resilience in a developmental mindset and actions that benefit others facing adversity. The findings support the feminist observations that resilience over time nurtures a sense of belonging and self-respect even under conditions women have not chosen (MacLeavy et al. 2021; Wakefield & Zimmerman 2020).

However, these encouraging constructions of resilience by women leaders who have succeeded in the industry are not the complete picture. They must not obscure the disempowering effects of gender discrimination experiences, leading to feelings of self-doubt and self-blame (Perez

Gomez, 2022). The psychological trauma of these experiences remains largely hidden behind notions of resilience, at times a displaced term for survival (Bridges et al. 2023; Gómez-González et al., 2023). The limited reference to psychological well-being strategies among participants questions the sustainability of their resilience, considering the construct as not just the absence of psychological distress, but the active pursuit of a positive mental state (Miller-Graff, 2022).

In proposing their resilience gender inclusive model, Bridges et al. (2023) provide a holistic framework for transforming approaches to resilience systemically at an organisational and individual level. While this can support efforts by HR practitioners and organisational leaders to change DEI approaches, in practice, women navigating careers in male-dominated work cultures continue to draw from their own resources, rather than organisational forms of support (Ramos et al., 2022). Empirical data from this study provide evidence that women may not necessarily be thriving, as there is severe distress associated with gender discrimination (Perez Gomez, 2022), but they are developing their own forms of resilience in the face of these experiences. At the same time, many women's strategies remain adaptive and survivalist in the face of deeply entrenched systems of power and organisational cultures that consciously or unconsciously support forms of discrimination (Witmer, 2019).

Study's limitations

Any qualitative study where the researcher is a member of the population is open to bias. However, recognised techniques of transparent disclosure of the researcher's positionality, critical reflexivity (Ademolu, 2024, Secules, 2022) and rigorous methods of data collection and analysis (Alase, 2017) were used to mitigate these risks.

Although the lived experiences timeline (Chance, 2022) was used to prompt comfort and depth of disclosure, some participants may have been reluctant to share their discrimination experiences fully because of the sensitivity of the topic.

Recommendations for future research

Given that discrimination is levelled at all marginalised groups, this research study could be extended to look at intersecting effects of race and gender in South African manufacturing organisations and the development of resilience strategies across these identities.

Further and more in-depth analysis of women's ecology of support as a resilience strategy could be an area for future research. Understanding the role of informal and formal networks of support and the roles of male and female mentors and allies warranted further investigation.

Another extension of this study could include Bridges et al.'s (2023) RGI model to analyse gendered notions of resilience further at both an organisational and individual level. This line of inquiry could further interrogate the relationship between employee resilience and organisational inclusion strategies.

Implications of this study

The findings have implications for women leaders, organisational leaders in general and HR practitioners.

For women navigating careers in male-dominated environments, resilience strategies must tap into informal and formal power by building supportive work communities through authentic relationships with teams they lead and with male colleagues. Women leaders should address discrimination directly where possible and create spaces for other women to do so; however, they cannot carry full responsibility for transforming these systems, particularly to the detriment of their own well-being.

Organisations need to address gender discrimination systemically at both individual and organisational levels through transformation of cultural practices and engagement with male advocates and female leaders for collective action.

Human resource and organisational development practitioners need to review organisational support for female victims of gender discrimination. Overhauling these processes need to start with the creation of safe spaces for women to share their experiences, which is an important gender-sensitive, resilience building exercise.

Conclusion

This study confirmed the prevalence of gender discrimination in South African manufacturing workplaces, perpetuated by normalised masculine cultures which fail to acknowledge the effects of gender bias, gender harassment and sexual harassment (Bridges et al., 2023; Witmer, 2019). With limited organisational support, women in leadership positions in these organisations have developed personal resilience strategies that reflect both a survivalist approach and a more contextual, process-oriented form of manifested and generative resilience (Miller-Graff, 2022). The latter approach has helped women transform their agency in addressing gender discrimination personally and in considering its effects on other women (MacLeavy et al., 2021); however, the sustainability and systemic impact of these efforts cannot rest with individual women alone and require urgent organisational responses (Gómez-González et al., 2023). Knowledge building on resilience of women in male-dominated environments at both individual and organisation levels is an ongoing project to contribute to the pervasive problem of gender inequalities in the workplace.

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Authors' contributions

D.M. designed the research approach and interpreted the findings for her MBA studies. L.K. supervised the MBA study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, L.K., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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