

# **GENDER DIVERSITY: BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN AT WORK**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since 1994, several structural and political changes took place in South Africa. Before 1994, South Africa was governed by a system of apartheid. White males occupied the predominantly managerial positions and black males were found on the factory floor and in low-level position. Black females were almost non-existing at formal places of work. The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 aimed to eliminate any form of unfair discrimination and promote equitable representation of all race groups throughout all levels of organisations.

This article aims to establish if perceptions regarding African women have changed since the democratisation process led to societal change in South Africa. The study that is reported on in this article presents the results of a survey done amongst 300 (mostly women) employees at a clothing factory in rural KwaZulu-Natal. These employees were asked questions regarding their perceptions of their own levels of empowerment. From the results important recommendations regarding the current status of empowerment will be made.

## **2. BLACK WOMEN AT WORK**

Apartheid saw black women suffer a double oppression. As blacks, they had to contend with restrictive and repressive apartheid legislation, which ensured alien control over all facets of their lives. In addition, as women they had to contend with the fact that they were negated to a position of dependency and inferiority to men, as such, they were even further discriminated against (Nuttall & Van Der Merwe, 2004:90).

In the traditional African culture, patriarchy was at the core of family life. Men generally were unquestioned heads of the family, providers or breadwinners, as well as disciplinarians (Mogosetsi & Ryke, 2005:16). In the traditional African family and community, women played maternal roles. Women's responsibilities were mainly around the home: child rearing, cooking, household chores and socialisation involving training and education of children in line with family and community expectations (Mungazi, 1996:32). Women were expected to be submissive.

Black men perceive black women's rights as problematic. They feel that women have lost respect for men and thereby disregard men's human rights. These men feel women have lost their traditional/cultural feminine roles, which are socially accepted in the African culture (Mogosetsi & Ryke, 2005:12).

Unfortunately, the above cultural views can hold women back, especially at work. Although many changes have taken place to promote the role of women in a traditional black culture, living conditions and traditional ways of living in rural areas, continues to contribute to the oppression of black women.

With the Employment Equity Act greater emphasis is placed on equal appointment of black women, but barriers appear to be still in place (Nuttall & Van Der Merwe, 2004:90).

Gender issues such as outlined above refer to all aspects that affect males or females in their day-to-day functions at the work place. Litheko & Delport (2002:21) assert that South African women in the workplace still experience various forms of discrimination and abuse. For example, discrimination in salary paid to women while doing the same jobs as men, being subjected to unwelcome sexual advances and reaching a glass ceiling (stuck in middle management positions while males hold senior positions) are some of the forms of workplace-based discrimination noted.

The rationale for research regarding the discrimination and equality issues of women would be to establish the extent to which the above inequalities still prevail in society. In order to realistically investigate the status of women in society a research project was conducted specifically in a rural area to determine the extent of discrimination against women in the workplace. A rural workplace was selected since it was argued that discrimination would be most visible in this context due to the characteristics of rural living conditions and cultural perspectives as outlined above.

The study's main focus was to develop a scale that can measure employee empowerment in an organisation, as well as a set of indicators that will reflect the level of employee empowerment in an organisation. "Empowerment is recognising and releasing into the organisation the power that people already have in their wealth of useful knowledge and internal motivation" (Randolph, 2000:20).

### 3. **METHODOLOGY**

The study comprised of a cross-sectional survey amongst approximately 300 employees of a clothing factory in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The area in which the factory is situated is known for its traditional lifestyle. A questionnaire that was translated into Zulu was utilised to collect data on women's perceptions regarding their own levels of empowerment in the workplace. It is interesting to note that the factory mostly employs women as general labourers whilst men are mostly in managerial positions. The study did not explore their perceptions of empowerment and traditional lifestyles at home, but rather conditions at the workplace. Such comprehensive survey was beyond the scope of the current study.

The data was analysed by means of the SPSS version 13 software package and the main findings are presented below.

The analysis followed recognised methodology in that a factor analysis was conducted that identified three underlying dimensions of measurement. These three dimensions are:

- Support
- Responsibility
- Employee empowerment

This was followed by a section of descriptive statistics and comparisons between different groups regarding perceptions of empowerment.

#### 4. **DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE**

For the purpose of this article, the focus of analysis will only be on the results that indicate gender diversity, at the factory. Although the intention of the factory was not to differentiate between male and female employees significant differences regarding levels of empowerment were observed.

The factory consists of a total of 1,331 employees. The majority of employees are female, Zulu-speaking employees. The majority of employees have a Grade 10 or lower, indicating that most respondents are semi-schooled or unschooled employees.

90.5% of the sample consisted of female respondents whilst 9.5% were male. This indicates that the majority of respondents were female and that the study clearly reflects female opinions. Other characteristics of the sample are:

- 91.6% of the sample was primarily Zulu-speaking. Thus it can be safely assumed that the majority of respondents lived in traditional rural circumstances.
- On average, most of the respondents were 41.4 years of age. Thus respondents tend to be in the middle stage of life and had spent most of their lives living in rural and traditional living conditions.
- The majority of respondents were single, divorced, separated or widowed. This indicates that they are likely to be depending on their current employment for survival purposes.
- The majority (41.9%) of respondents only have a Grade 7 educational qualification. It is thus likely that this sample is more likely to have been subjected to less empowered living conditions.

- The majority of respondents have been employed by the factory between 6 – 14 years.

The following section describes the issues of gender diversity at the factory.

## 5. **GENDER DIVERSITY AT THE FACTORY**

Specific differences between male and female regarding empowerment issues were observed providing a strong notion of gender diversity.

- Female employees at the factory received considerably less feedback than male employees on their work performance.

Organisations these days are challenged with the reality of a diverse workforce entering the workplace, but these employees are also assertive and want to gain respect and support from their colleagues, bosses and the organisation (Loden & Rosener, 1991:5).

Literature shows that employees need respect. At the factory, this respect can be showed to give female employees feedback on their work performance. The employees, mostly male employees who did receive feedback, felt more support from the factory and they felt more empowered because of this feedback. By changing feedback systems, the factory can improve empowerment with black female employees, that will in turn benefit the organisation.

- At the factory, female employees' ideas are less implemented than male employees

Mabaso (1998:16) points that managers (the same can be said of supervisors) had to adopt a diverse management style for their diverse workforce.

Supervisors at the factory can be made aware that ideas of female respondents were less implemented than male employees. This can be changed when the factory is made aware of this practice. The employees whose ideas have been implemented felt more empowered and supported by the factory. Although it is unrealistic that all employees' ideas can be implemented, all employees can be listened to. Seeing that employees work on the floor, they can have practical ideas. By implementing a system where employees can voice their ideas, the factory can enable (in this case) the female black employees, to be empowered. At the same time, they will feel more support from the factory. This will benefit the organisation.

- Female employees at the factory tend to receive verbal job descriptions and male employees tend to receive written job descriptions.

Erasmus & Sadler (1999) found that one of the job barriers experienced by woman at work was the lack of recognition. This can negatively affect a person's internal motivation.

By giving female employees written job descriptions can make them feel recognised at work and even contribute to their motivational levels. Employees with written job descriptions felt more supported by the factory and they were more empowered than employees without written job descriptions. By giving employees and again in this case mostly female black employees written job descriptions, the factory can enhance employee empowerment levels. This is also to benefit the organisation.

- Female employees at the factory are less involved in the decision making process than male employees.

People work for different reasons and the work environment influences the individual's personality and present him/her with the opportunity of self-fulfilment (Litheko & Delport, 2002:16).

Seeing that a person's work environment influence them so much, it seems viable that they are integrated in the decision making process. It must be noted that this involvement in the decision making process should only pertain to decisions relating to their own job and the environment they are working in. Those employees at the factory who were involved in the decision making process were employees at middle and top management. The employees that work in the factory were the employees not involved in the decision making process. These employees are mostly the black Zulu-speaking female employees. These female employees are the people doing the actual work in the factory. By listening to them, the factory can make them feel more part of the process that will assist the factory in having a more empowered workforce.

- Female employees at the factory tend to get paid weekly and male employees monthly. Employees view this monthly payment as a better status in the factory.

Black employees tend to be more unsatisfied with their pay than compared to white employees. This might be a result of unrealistic job expectations (Nuttall & Van Der Merwe, 2004:95).

A suggestion will be that the factory look at their payment structures. Changing payment structures of female employees can have a positive impact on their morale.

The employees, being the black male employees, being paid monthly felt more empowered, supported by the factory and more responsible than the other employees, in this case, the black female employees.

- All male employees have a compulsory medical scheme and pension scheme.

South Africa desperately needs to make use of all its human resources, making the need for black women's integration into the workplace urgent. These employees can only reach their full potential when the organisation fully acknowledges and utilises them. (Nuttall & Van Der Merwe, 2004:88).

Although above was not part of the empowerment results, it is a practice at the factory. This practice is another emphasis in the manner black Zulu males and black Zulu females, are treated differently in rural areas. The reasons, can be debated. The males used to be the breadwinner, they had a role of status traditionally. With all the changes in family structures, females had to go out and work due to single parenting and men without jobs. This changed the workforce but the traditional thinking about these women seems to be the same.

## 6. **CONCLUSION**

From the above results, it can be seen, that black male and female employees are treated different at work. It can be due to the fact that it is in a rural area with mainly traditional families with traditional values. The factory has been established in 1939. The factory might not be practicing above on purpose or for any malicious reasons, but more because of habit and not being aware of above. All of above practices can be changed but the biggest barrier is to change traditional views. Those gender diversity practices are not easy to change.

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