

The role of personal factors and skills development in women's career advancement



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Dates:

Received: 11 Apr. 2023
 Accepted: 30 Aug. 2023
 Published: 04 Dec. 2023

How to cite this article:

Fitong Ketchiwou, G. & Van der Walt, F., 2023, 'The role of personal factors and skills development in women's career advancement', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 26(1), a5120. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v26i1.5120>

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Background: Women have been climbing the organisational ladder at a slower pace than men. Several reasons have been cited for women's slow progress to senior positions, but little attention has been given to the role of personal responsibility in women's career progress. Yet personal factors are vital for skills development and career advancement.

Aim: The aim of the study is to determine whether skills development influences women's career advancement, and to establish whether selected personal factors influence women's skills development and their career advancement.

Setting: The study focused on women working in the service sector in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Method: The study was quantitative in nature, and a survey strategy was used. The final sample consisted of 412 women.

Results: The results reveal that personal responsibility is essential for the skills development and career advancement of women. Also, skills development is vital for women's career advancement.

Conclusion: Women need to take the lead in planning their careers, and they should intentionally engage in developmental activities that influence their career outcomes.

Contribution: Previous research has given little attention to the role women play in their own skills development and career advancement. Also, insufficient consideration has been given to skills development to achieve career advancement. The study fills this gap in knowledge regarding women's career advancement.

Keywords: women; workplace; personal factors; skills development; career advancement; South Africa.

Introduction

Gender fairness has become a national priority in South Africa (Pienaar Naidoo & Malope 2018; Moleko 2019). This emphasis on gender equality is in response to the plethora of societal challenges women are facing in South Africa, such as gender-based violence, the feminisation of poverty, and the re-emergence of xenophobia (Roy et al. 2022; Shozi n.d.). Despite these societal challenges, women's participation in the workforce has increased rapidly, and it is estimated that 49.64% of the South African labour force are women (Galal 2022). Jansen van Rensburg (2021) states that in this country fewer women than men occupy influential positions, and that only 32% of women occupy a managerial position. In the past, research on barriers to women's promotion have focused on organisational factors that hinder career progression, such as organisational culture (Fitong Ketchiwou et al. 2022; Moalusi & Jones 2019), gender and labour laws, sexual harassment (Pienaar et al. 2018; Oosthuizen, Tonelli & Mayer 2019), gender and equality (Coetzee 2017; Naudé 2017), the evolution of the gender struggle (Barclay 2018; Gouws 2019; Lewis 2019), strategies to increase women's representation in certain fields (Mathur-Helm 2018; Matotoka & Odeku 2021), and women-specific experiences impacting their careers (Chetty & Naidoo 2017; Fitong Ketchiwou & Dzansi 2023). In women's studies factors outside the workplace that impede women's skills development and career advancement have also been considered, such as social roles (Ahmad & Khan 2020; Taşdelen-Karçkay & Bakalim 2017), family responsibilities (Kobayashi & Kondo 2019; Kumara 2018), and pregnancy, marriage and motherhood (Moalusi & Jones 2019; Rath, Mohanty & Pradhan 2019). Although these studies touch on gender issues in and outside the workplace, little attention is given to role women play in their own skills development and career advancement. Also, insufficient consideration is given to skills development as a means to achieve career advancement. As such, the purpose of this study is to determine whether skills development

influences women's career advancement, and to establish whether selected personal factors influence women's skills development and their career advancement.

In the following sections, the objective of this research is presented, followed by the rationale for the study. After that, a literature review is provided that focuses on the theoretical framework, key concepts included in the study, as well as an explanation of how the hypotheses were developed. Thereafter, the methodology is outlined, the results of the study are presented, and the managerial implications of the findings are stated. Finally, the limitations of the study are explained, and recommendations for future research are provided.

Research objectives

The first research objective of the study was to establish whether skills development positively influences the career advancement of women. The second research objective was to determine whether selected personal factors, namely effort, responsibility, confidence, optimism, and expression of career ambitions influence the skills development of women. The third research objective was to establish whether there is a positive relationship between the selected personal factors and women's career advancement.

Research rationale

The rationale for this research is that despite national government's commitment to promote women in the workplace (Moleko 2019; Republic of South Africa 2013a, 2013b), the upward movement of women, especially to managerial positions (Matotoka & Odeku 2021; Statistics South Africa 2022), in South African workplaces is slow (Bosch 2017; Coetzee 2017; Oosthuizen et al. 2019), hence the need to continue investigations in this regard.

The study focused on women working in the service sector in Johannesburg, South Africa. The rationale for this focus is that the service sector has positioned itself as one of the best-performing sectors, both locally and internationally, resulting in employment in this sector growing fast, and the prospect of further growth (Medupe 2021). In addition, the service sector in South Africa has mostly women employees (Galal 2022). This sector promotes inclusive growth, through the employment of women and young people, and it also holds opportunities for employees to increase their skills, earnings and growth (Butler & Rogerson 2016).

Literature review

This section presents the theoretical background and conceptual context for this study.

Theoretical background

This study anchors on three career theories and the human capital theory. The first career theory considered is the theory of work adjustment which asserts that vocational choice is

maximised when there is congruence between an individual's characteristics and their work environment (Strauser et al. 2021). Employees adopt certain behaviours to increase compatibility between their skills and abilities and their job requirements (Armitage & Nassor Amar 2021; Van Ruyseveldt, Van Wigggen-Valkenburg & Van Dam 2021). This means that women who desire career progression and its associated benefits will strive to exhibit personal attributes that are in line with their expected outcomes (e.g., they will work hard, engage in skills development, and seek opportunities). Secondly, the career motivation theory posits that career choices and career development are motivated by internal or external factors (Richardson & Watt 2018). This implies that women can drive their career development and make appropriate career choices if they are motivated internally. Career motivations for women could be, for example, positive perceptions of working women, low interest in childcare and home chores, family-related motives, the need to meet financial needs, the need for achievement, the pursuit of job satisfaction, and the desire to comply with social demands (Kim 2020). Motivators fuel career recognition and advancement and regulate the degree to which women invest in, are committed to, and take responsibility for their careers. Thirdly, the social cognitive career theory focuses on career interests, career choices, performance, career self-management, career success and well-being (Brown & Lent 2019; Byars-Winston & Rogers 2019). This theory emphasises the role women play in managing their careers, and is used to explain the prerequisites to career growth and the implications of women's actions for their career advancement. Thus, the social cognitive career theory emphasises that if women actively pursue senior roles, by being optimistic and confident, taking responsibility, putting in effort, and expressing their aspirations, this will lead to career advancement.

The human capital theory postulates that expenditure on skills development is an investment that yields returns, and that (it is a collective) between employees and the organisation become mutually beneficial exchanges (Alnachef & Alhajjar 2017). This implies that companies invest in employees when they perceive returns for their investment, for example higher employee performance (Hideg et al. 2018). Similarly, women are more likely to invest personal effort in their skills development when they perceive returns such as career progression or financial rewards; hence the role of personal responsibility in the career progression of women.

Conceptual context

Key concepts considered in this study are discussed below. These include career advancement, skills development and personal factors.

Career advancement

Career advancement is the progression of employees to higher positions with increased authority and responsibilities (Prossack 2018). This advancement is often associated with a

new job title, a higher salary, enhanced status, more accountability, and greater expectations (Heathfield 2019). Career advancement usually happens through career development, which is the sum of planned efforts, activities and processes along one's career path (Afande 2015). To progress in one's career, skills development, good relationships, and leadership development are required (Veloso et al. 2018). Brown and Lent (2019) assert that individuals manage their career successfully when they actively navigate it.

Skills development

Skills development is the sum of processes or activities geared towards enhancing human knowledge, expertise, interpersonal relationships, and production (Nwaeke & Onyebuchi 2017). The focus is thus on performance improvement as well as personal growth and development (Achanya & Cinjel 2022; Cormier et al. 2020). Skills development contributes towards the human capital development of an organisation, and it could propel women's careers (Khalid et al. 2017; Rath et al. 2019). Yet, women often lack the required skills for senior positions, or are less skilled than their male counterparts (Jáuregui & Olivos 2018). Unlike men, women are frequently not suitably groomed for leadership roles, and are usually isolated from developmental assignments (Ensour, Al Maaitah & Kharabsheh 2017; Lewis & Beauregard 2018). Also, women have to exhibit leadership ability before they can be promoted leadership (Lewis & Beauregard 2018). As a result, many women remain at the bottom of the organisational ladder, with little influence (Kumara 2018; Wang & Shirmohammadi 2016).

Personal factors

Personal factors considered were selected from the most common personal factors impacting women's career advancement and skills development identified in an extensive literature review. The personal factors considered in this study are effort (Jáuregui & Olivos 2018), responsibility (Rapuano 2020), confidence (Mathur-Helm 2018), optimism (Moalusi & Jones 2019) and expression of career ambitions (Zenger & Folkman 2019).

Effort: Effort is necessary for women to advance at work (Ames, Coplen & Malloy 2019), by applying for senior positions (Islam et al. 2018), seeking mentors (Kobayashi & Kondo 2019), leveraging networking opportunities (Gipson et al. 2017; Prossack 2018), and investing in personal development (Afande 2015; Rath et al. 2019). The pursuit of qualifications and skills development, which are vital for progress, demands effort, time and money, which many women may not have due to marital and family responsibilities (Jáuregui & Olivos 2018). However, women who are determined, consistently work hard to achieve their professional objectives, so as to succeed in their careers (Khalid et al. 2017). It is therefore expected that women who exert more effort, will progress faster in the workplace and develop more skills than those who put in less effort.

Responsibility: Taking responsibility is essential for personal career advancement (Howson, Coate & De St Croix 2018; Islam et al. 2018; Padilla 2020). However, research shows that structural inequalities, professionalised identities, and family situations may limit the extent to which women can influence their career progress (Howson et al. 2018). Perceptions about women's professional abilities are often clouded by gender norms and stereotypes (Islam et al. 2018; Padilla 2020), which limit women's ability to influence their career outcomes. Also, factors beyond women's control, such as childbirth and related career breaks, often interrupt their careers (Chetty & Naidoo 2017; Kobayashi & Kondo 2019) or make them quit the workforce altogether (Bosch 2017), thus limiting their ability to take desired career actions during those periods. Despite these limiting factors, women could achieve career growth if they take ownership of their career progression and make personal sacrifices to achieve career goals (Faniko et al. 2017; Khalid et al. 2017). It is postulated that failing to take personal responsibility limits women's career growth (Rapuano 2020). Against this background it is expected that responsibility will positively influence career advancement and skills development.

Confidence: Women often lack the confidence required to overcome the numerous obstacles to their career advancement (Mathur-Helm 2018). As such, they often doubt their ability (Ensour et al. 2017; Zenger & Folkman 2019) and at times feel underqualified for senior positions (Athanasopoulou et al. 2017) and intimidated when competing for positions with men (Lewis & Beauregard 2018). Gender stereotypes that undermine women's leadership abilities (Howson et al. 2018; Islam et al. 2018) negatively affect their self-confidence and sense of self-worth (Oosthuizen et al. 2019). This often blocks women's progress to senior or influential roles. However, the display of self-confidence is vital to be considered for appointment to top positions (Hurst, Leberman & Edwards 2018). Self-confident women easily progress in the workplace (Ames et al. 2019), despite masculine organisational cultures that undermine women's contributions and dampen their ego (Moalusi & Jones 2019). Conversely, women who lack confidence feel discouraged to compete for advancement (Komalasari et al. 2017) and hesitate to take the necessary professional risks to move their careers forward (Islam et al. 2018), resulting in them lagging behind in their careers. It is therefore evident that confidence will positively influence women's career advancement and skills development.

Optimism: Optimism is one of the essential success factors for women to move up the organisational ladder (Ames et al. 2019). Optimism is required for development (Van der Walt 2018), and willingness to improve is a significant element in the development and growth process (Vnoučková, Urbancová & Smolová 2015). The ability to perceive a better career future and career success is likely to prompt commensurate career action. When women are aware of career advancement opportunities, they are motivated to invest in their careers (Chetty & Naidoo 2017), resulting in career advancement. Yet many women fail to see a bright future in their careers, as promotion practices are often not transparent, making

women uncertain about what hinders their career progression, as well as which actions they need to take to advance to senior positions (Moalusi & Jones 2019). Even women with career plans feel confused and frustrated about progression prospects when growth is not evident (Howson et al. 2018). When employees do not have clear information about the requirements for promotion, they can become dissatisfied and demotivated (Setiawan & Julaha 2020), thereby diminishing their optimism to advance in their careers. Against this background, it is anticipated that optimism will have a positive impact on career advancement and skills development.

Expression of career aspirations: It is postulated that women need to share their career aspirations with their managers to progress at work (Prossack 2018). When there is open communication, employees are more likely to express themselves and freely communicate their career goals (Wang & Shirmohammadi 2016). Also, career planning helps women to set goals and map their career trajectory (Ames et al. 2019), which makes it easier for them to communicate these aspirations to their managers (Afande 2015; Howson et al. 2018; Prossack 2018). However, expressing career aspirations may not always yield the desired results, because of gender prejudice. Women are often assumed to be professionally incompetent for senior positions (Ames et al. 2019; Lewis & Beauregard 2018; Padilla 2020). Also, the underperformance of underqualified women appointed to meet gender quotas contributes to distrust in women's professional competencies (Birindelli, Chiappini & Savioli 2020; Fauzi, Basyith & Ho 2017). Voicing career aspirations, eliminates prejudice that suggests that women have low career aspirations (Naudé 2017; Zenger & Folkman 2019), and it can expose issues that cause organisations to hesitate to promote women (Oosthuizen et al. 2019). If women express their desire to progress to senior positions, and meet the job requirements to do so, organisations should have no reason to deprive them of career advancement. This is true even in organisations that are mostly masculine and deprive women of promotion opportunities (Bosch 2017; Moalusi & Jones 2019).

Hypothesis development

Based on the preceding discussions on the theoretical and conceptual contexts considered in this research, three hypotheses were formulated, as presented below.

Women's slow career advancement has been attributed to the fact that they have limited skills (Ensour et al. 2017; Jáuregui & Olivos 2018; Lewis & Beauregard 2018). More so, there is evidence that skills development could boost women's career advancement (Khalid et al. 2017; Rath et al. 2019). Awareness of career advancement opportunities motivates women to invest in the development of their careers (Chetty & Naidoo 2017; Moalusi & Jones 2019). This implies that women's skills development is related to their career progression. This led to the development of the first hypothesis:

H1: Skills development positively influences women's career advancement.

Skills development requires investment in personal development (Afande 2015; Rath et al. 2019) in the form of time, effort and money (Ames et al. 2019; Jáuregui & Olivos 2018). Taking professional risks is also necessary for women's careers (Islam et al. 2018), including investment in skills development. Women may prepare for senior roles by committing to their development, thereby increasing their chances of excelling when they get promoted (Birindelli et al. 2020; Fauzi et al. 2017). Therefore, the second hypothesis was formulated:

H2: Selected personal factors positively influence women's skills development.

Personal responsibility is vital for women to progress at work (Ames et al. 2019; Howson et al. 2018; Islam et al. 2018; Padilla 2020) and failing to take personal responsibility restricts women's career progress (Rapuano 2020). Taking action, leveraging on opportunities (Islam et al. 2018; Gipson et al. 2017; Kobayashi & Kondo 2019; Prossack 2018) and building confidence (Mathur-Helm 2018; Zenger & Folkman 2019) could help women move their careers forward. Hence the development of the third hypothesis:

H3: Selected personal factors positively influence women's career advancement.

Methods

This section discusses the research design, the population and sampling approach, as well as the data collection and data analysis techniques applied.

Research design

This research was quantitative in nature, and a positivist approach was adopted to test the three hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Descriptive, correlative and predictive approaches were used to gather information and test empirical relationships (Bryman 2016) between the constructs (i.e. skills development, career progression and personal factors). Due to time and financial constraints, the study employed a cross-sectional survey design, as a large amount of data were collected at a single point in time (Johnson & Christensen 2014) from the population group described below.

Population and sample

The target population of the study was women working in the service sector in Johannesburg. Since the size of the population could not be established, the guideline proposed by Bartlett, Kotrlík and Higgins (2001) was followed. These scholars suggest a sample size of approximately 209 for a target population of 10000 or larger. Women who were accessible and willing were contacted to participate in the study. Hence, a convenience sampling method (Bryman 2016) was used to select the final sample, which consisted of 412 women who met the inclusion criteria.

Data collection

A self-constructed questionnaire of 21 questions was used for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of seven demographic questions and 14 closed-ended questions measuring the constructs of career advancement, skills development and personal attitude (see Table 2 for the items measuring each construct). A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the level of agreement or disagreement with each item (1 represented 'strongly disagree', and 5 represented 'strongly agree'). Before the final questionnaire was distributed, a pilot study was conducted with 40 respondents who did not form part of the final sample. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. In Section A, demographic details were collected, which were used to describe the sample. This section consisted of seven questions, which solicited information about the participants' age, marital status, race, job level, qualification level, number of employees in their company, and company category. Section B gathered data on the women's engagement in skills development activities, and consisted of four questions. Section C collected information about the women's career advancement, and comprised five questions. Section D captured the women's attitude towards their career, and was made up of five questions.

During the pilot study, initial reliability was measured (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The measuring instrument was also distributed to three subject experts for purposes of verifying the appropriateness of the questions posed in the questionnaire and identifying items that needed to be refined, that is, construct validity was considered (Johnson & Christensen 2014). The participants were ensured that data would be treated confidentially and that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained. An electronically self-administered questionnaire (Creswell & Creswell 2018) was issued for completion using Google Forms.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was provided by the Research and Innovation Committee of the Faculty of Management Sciences of the Central University of Technology, Free State. Ethical requirements, such as respect for participants, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and free participation, were observed. Feedback was provided to interested participants. To maintain confidentiality of the data, only persons directly involved in the study had access to the findings. The data are kept safe by the principal researcher.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Amos version 27 was used to interpret the data (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Descriptive and inferential data analyses were done. The study sought to analyse the structural relationship between variables and latent constructs. As such, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which combines factor analysis and multiple regressions, was employed (Ramlall 2017). The factor loadings were calculated, which

revealed the correlation coefficients and the variance explained by the variables on the respective factors measured. Standardised regression analysis was performed to establish statistical relationships between the variables.

Results

In this section is discussed the demographic information of respondents, central tendency measures, reliability and validity findings of the study, and standardised regression results.

Demographic information of participants

Participants in the sample were women from the following company categories: accounting or consulting ($n = 174$, 42.3%), education ($n = 64$, 15.6%), healthcare ($n = 48$, 11.7%), hospitality ($n = 23$, 5.6%), retail ($n = 21$, 5.1%), banking ($n = 17$, 4.1%), marketing or sales ($n = 15$, 3.6%), transport ($n = 12$, 2.9%), law ($n = 7$, 1.7%), information technology ($n = 7$, 1.7%), social work ($n = 7$, 1.7%), media and communications ($n = 5$, 1.2%), insurance ($n = 4$, 1%), recreation ($n = 2$, 0.5%), and other categories ($n = 5$, 1.2%). One respondent did not answer the question ($n = 1$, 0.2%). The demographic variables of the sample are depicted in Table 1.

The final sample consisted of mostly Black African women working in the accounting sector, who were below the age of 45 and unmarried, had at least a first degree, and occupied a junior-level position, which means that they have potential for growth.

Measures of central tendency

In Table 4 the measures of central tendency are depicted.

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the means measured are above the Likert scale midpoint (2.5), which implies that career advancement, skills development and personal factors are perceived positively by the sample.

TABLE 1: Demographic variables of participants.

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency ($n = 412$)	%
Age (years)	< 21	1	0.2
	21–45	393	95.4
	46–60	18	4.4
Marital status	Single or divorced or widowed	246	59.7
	Married or cohabiting	166	40.3
Race	Black African people	347	84.2
	Coloured people	41	10
	Indian or Asian people	6	1.5
	White people	17	4.1
	Other	1	0.2
Job level	Semi-skilled worker	91	22.1
	Skilled worker or junior manager	213	51.7
	Manager	98	23.8
	Executive	10	2.4
Qualification level	Lower than Grade 12	4	1
	Grade 12	53	12.9
	Certificate or diploma	120	29.1
	At least a degree	235	57

The standard deviation values are between 1.258 and 1.561, which indicates a narrow spread of values around the mean.

Reliability and validity

To measure reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used. The cut-off value used to indicate acceptable reliability was 0.7, as suggested by Malhotra, Nunan and Birks (2017). Discriminant validity was also measured, by comparing correlations between pairs of constructs with the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) from each construct (Malhotra et al. 2017). Average variance extracted values should be above the inter-construct correlation coefficients and correlation values above the square root of the AVE to reveal poor discriminant validity between the constructs. Ideally, the square root of the AVE should be above the inter-construct correlation coefficients.

The Cronbach's alpha values in Table 2 range from 0.963 (for career advancement) to 0.986 (for skills development), which

indicates an acceptable internal consistency among the constructs. This is supported by CR coefficients that range from 0.963 (for career advancement) to 0.986 (for skills development).

The results in Table 3 indicate that there is no discriminant validity concern between the constructs, as all the AVE square roots exceed their own inter-construct correlation values. After confirming the different types of validity and reliability, standardised regression analysis was performed.

Standardised regression analysis

To perform a standardised regression analysis, p values and beta (β) values were used. The p values assess the significance of predictive effects, while the β values indicate the strength and the direction of relationships (Pallant 2010). Significance was considered as less than 0.05, at a 95% confidence interval. The standardised regression weights are depicted in Table 5.

TABLE 2: Reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Item	Factor loading	p	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Career advancement	-	-	-	0.963	0.963	0.840
	I got promoted to a higher position within my organisation.	0.935	†	-	-	-
	My responsibilities at work have increased over time.	0.944	†	-	-	-
	My authority in my company has increased over time.	0.93	†	-	-	-
	I am satisfied with my career progress at work.	0.938	†	-	-	-
	My job title has changed favourably over time.	0.832	†	-	-	-
Skills development	-	-	-	0.986	0.986	0.945
	At work, I engage in programmes and projects that develop my skills.	0.972	†	-	-	-
	The skills development opportunities offered by my company are aligned with my career plans and needs.	0.978	†	-	-	-
	My skills have progressively improved over time.	0.969	†	-	-	-
	I continually learn new things in my work.	0.97	†	-	-	-
Personal factors	-	-	-	0.983	0.983	0.922
	I put in the required effort to succeed in my career.	0.89	†	-	-	-
	I am confident about my professional abilities.	0.965	†	-	-	-
	I take full responsibility for my career growth.	0.977	†	-	-	-
	I am optimistic about the future of my career.	0.983	†	-	-	-
	I talk about my career plans and aspirations with my manager.	0.984	†	-	-	-

†, Indicates significance of the factor at a 99% confidence interval.

TABLE 3: Correlation matrix to assess the discriminant validity.

Construct	Career progress	Personal attributes	Skills development
Career progress	0.917	-	-
Personal attributes	0.911	0.96	-
Skills development	0.914	0.957	0.972

TABLE 4: Measures of central tendency.

Construct	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Career advancement	2.92	2.80	1.258
Skills development	2.90	2.25	1.536
Personal factors	2.87	2.20	1.561

TABLE 5: Standardised regression weights.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	β	p	Conclusion
H1: Skills development positively influences women's career advancement.				
Career advancement of women ←	Skills development of women	0.334	0.000	H1 is accepted.
H2: Selected personal factors positively influence women's skills development.				
Skills development of women ←	Personal attributes (non-workplace)	0.687	0.000	H2 is accepted.
H3: Selected personal factors positively influence women's career advancement.				
Career progression of women ←	Personal attributes (non-workplace)	0.336	0.000	H3 is accepted.

←, Refers to the direction of the relationship from the independent variables onto the dependent variables.

From the findings presented in Table 5 it is evident that the p values for the tested relationships were all significant ($p \leq 0.001$). Thus, the relationship between the constructs of skills development and career advancement was statistically significant. Also, the construct of personal factors was statistically significantly related to the constructs of career advancement and skills development. This implies that H1, H2 and H3 are all accepted.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test three hypotheses, namely that skills development positively influences women's career advancement (H1), that selected personal factors positively influence women's skills development (H2), and that selected personal factors positively influence women's career advancement (H3). The construct 'skills development' was statistically and significantly related to the construct 'career advancement' ($\beta = 0.334$, $p = 0.000$). The findings indicate that when skills development improves by one standard deviation, there is a 99% probability that career advancement will increase by 33.4% of its own standard deviation. Therefore, H1 is supported. These findings are consistent with previous research, which revealed that training, development and education enhance women's career advancement (Afande 2015; Rath et al. 2019). While Jáuregui and Olivos (2018) and Fitong Ketchiwou et al. (2022) attest that women's career advancement is linked to their skills development, Lewis and Beauregard (2018) and Rath et al. (2019) add that skills development could boost women's careers and move them forward. Moalusi and Jones (2019) also affirm that when women perceive opportunities for career advancement, they are more likely to engage in developmental activities (Fitong Ketchiwou & Dzansi 2023). These scholars recommend that organisations invest in women's skills development to facilitate their career progression. The implication of this finding is that when women's skills are developed, their chances of being promoted will increase. Also, skills development equips women with the skills and confidence needed for them to occupy senior roles. Therefore, women who want to progress need to engage in developmental activities that give them access to higher job levels. This will require them to take responsibility for their careers and put in the required effort to develop themselves in view of growth opportunities.

The construct 'personal factors' was statistically and significantly related to the construct 'skills development' ($\beta = 0.687$, $p = 0.000$). This finding means that when personal factors improve by one standard deviation, there is a 99% chance that skills development will increase by 68.7% of its own standard deviation. The high β value indicates the strength of the association, thus indicating a strong relationship between the selected personal factors and skills development. Therefore H2 is supported. These results are congruent with previous research which suggests that women have a significant role to play in their skills development (Van der Walt 2018; Vnoučková et al. 2015). Skills development requires time, effort and finances

(Ames et al. 2019; Jáuregui & Olivos 2018), and only women who are committed to their skills development can bear the cost of skills development (Rath et al. 2019). This also highlights the role of personal responsibility in women's development (Birindelli et al. 2020; Bosch 2017). The development of skills requires personal engagement in developmental activities. From the findings, one may conclude that women who are willing and ready to put in effort and take responsibility for their development will most likely seize developmental opportunities that come their way to increase their skills level.

The relationship between the constructs 'personal factors' and 'career advancement' was also statistically significant ($\beta = 0.336$, $p = 0.000$). This finding reveals that when personal factors improve by one standard deviation, there is a 99% probability that career advancement will increase by 33.6% of its own standard deviation. Thus, H3 is supported. These results are consistent with previous research, which found that women's career advancement is dependent on their personal attitudes towards their careers (Ames et al. 2019; Howson et al. 2018; Rapuano 2020). Padilla (2020) and Islam et al. (2018) affirm that personal responsibility is key to women making progress at work. Previous scholars agree that women may demonstrate their commitment to their career by leveraging on career opportunities (Kobayashi & Kondo 2019; Prossack 2018) and building the confidence required for senior positions (Mathur-Helm 2018; Zenger & Folkman 2019). Birindelli et al. (2020) also confirm that engaging in skills development is a way women prepare for senior roles, while Rapuano (2020) reiterate that failing to take personal responsibility impedes women's career progress. This finding emphasises the importance of women being committed to their career advancement. Career progress requires deliberate planning and effort that can only happen through personal engagement. This also implies that women who take charge of their career development by being optimistic, self-confident, and committed to their career ambitions are likely to progress to senior roles.

Practical and managerial implications

This article has demonstrated the role of personal responsibility in women's skills development and their career advancement. Practically, this means that for women to progress in their careers, it is required that they take responsibility and do what it takes to develop themselves and move forward. This will require resources, effort, sacrifice, confidence, optimism and boldness to voice their career ambitions. The above notwithstanding, the role of organisations, human resource practitioners and managers should not be underestimated.

Organisations may assist women to progress in their careers by offering opportunities for personal growth, during which issues such as confidence, responsibility and optimism should be addressed. To facilitate personal growth in women,

organisations should support mentorship programmes and encourage women to make use of executive or life coaches who may help them hone and develop innate leadership qualities that will enable them to rise through the ranks. Access to mentors and experiences outside their current role may also stimulate aspiring women to attain senior roles. Further, firms need to offer women career management assistance, that is, support them in planning their careers, and help them to align their careers with initiatives and processes relevant for their growth. In particular, exposing women to leadership development, developmental assignments and skills development opportunities are vital ways to build confidence, develop their career optimism, and help them develop career boldness. Sponsors may help skilled women to progress faster, thereby maximising benefits to the company. In addition, given that leadership is highly patriarchal in societies, it is difficult for women to rise above certain roles. Therefore, companies should focus on bridging the gender gap in leadership by recognising competencies as vital for women's career advancement, identifying individual competencies for further development, helping women to rise above the patriarchal mindset, and having clear policies against patriarchy. Overall, companies need to provide favourable work environments for women to develop their skills and progress. Women who are willing to develop themselves and grow their careers may face financial constraints and limited time to acquire skills. Companies could assist them by financing their development and allowing them to attend classes during office hours, when needed.

Over and above organisational initiatives, managers and human resources practitioners need to prioritise two-way communication systems through which women can freely express themselves. This should be coupled with feedback and motivation aimed at boosting women's confidence and encouraging them to put in the required career effort. It is important that women receive continual career support for their personal efforts to bear fruit.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study included 412 women in the service industry in Johannesburg, which was a broad sample spread. Also, the non-probability sampling method of convenience sampling was used. As such, the sample is not representative. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population, and they should be interpreted with caution. It is therefore recommended that sector-specific research (e.g. research in accounting or banking, etc.) should continue and a more robust sampling method can be used to generate findings. Furthermore, even though the reliability and validity values of the questionnaire used were acceptable, the questionnaire needs to be tested in another setting, so as to confirm the psychometric properties of the measuring instrument in diverse settings. Lastly, the study focused on women, as guided by the research objectives. It would be interesting to

conduct research with other genders and marginalised groups, so that the findings can be compared.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether skills development influences women's career advancement, and to establish whether selected personal factors influence women's skills development and their career advancement. The findings reveal that the career advancement of women is linked to their skills development. Likewise, personal factors impact women's skills development, as well as their career advancement. This means that women have an active role to play in their own career development and advancement. Women who want to progress are required to take responsibility and put in the effort required for their career advancement. In this regard, personal career planning becomes of vital importance for women. This calls for periodic career evaluation to identify challenges and areas that need improvement and women to take steps to proactively deal with obstacles to their careers. Despite the prominent role that women play in their career advancement, organisations need to support women and help them to take charge of their careers. This can be done by offering women opportunities for personal growth through formal and informal training and development initiatives, encouraging women to develop their careers, developing their self-confidence, and providing work experience relevant to their career development. Should both women and organisations not take dual responsibility to help women to progress, the unequal representation of women in senior positions will remain concerning in years to come.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organisations: Mr Anthony Sparg, for language editing of the article, and the National Research Foundation, for their financial assistance.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

G.F.K. and F.v.d.W. both contributed equally to this article.

Funding information

The National Research Foundation provided financial assistance.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available for inspection from the corresponding author, F.v.d.W., on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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