

# **Gordon Institute of Business Science**

University of Pretoria

## **The role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African real estate industry**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objectives of this study are multifaceted. Firstly, it seeks to ascertain the presence and extent of unconscious gender bias impacting women's leadership opportunities in the South African real estate industry. Additionally, it aims to determine if such bias influences women's career advancement within this sector. Employing qualitative methods, interviews with industry professionals shed light on the intricate dynamics of unconscious bias. The research seeks to correlate lived experiences with existing literature, presenting insights into the challenges women face in ascending to leadership roles. Results highlight that societal norms, organisational cultures, and individual attitudes converge, with unconscious bias serving as a notable factor influencing women's opportunities.

The study does not merely stop at highlighting the mechanisms of unconscious bias. It also proposes actionable strategies and interventions to mitigate its impact on women's advancement to leadership roles. These insights prove invaluable for organisations and policymakers in the South African real estate industry, offering a blueprint for promoting a more equitable and inclusive work environment. Overall, the study's conclusions and recommendations stand to make a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality in leadership across the real estate sector and beyond, presenting pragmatic solutions rooted in thorough research.

## **KEY WORDS**

Unconscious bias, women's leadership, career advancement, South African real estate industry.

## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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Pangidzai Gazi

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Date

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AI – Artificial intelligence

D&I – Diversity & inclusion

HR – Human resources

IoT – Internet of things

NED – Non-executive director

PM – Project manager

REI – Real estate industry

REIT – Real estate investment trust

STEMM – Science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine

WPN – Women's Property Network



# **1 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

In the ever-evolving landscape of societal progress, the pursuit of diversity and inclusion stands as an unshakeable pillar (International Labour Organization, 2022). Yet, despite the winds of change, formidable barriers continue to cast shadows on the path to women's advancement, particularly within the echelons of leadership across industries (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). In the South African real estate industry (REI), these disparities show a complex tapestry woven by threads of uncertainty. Unconscious and selection bias, disparity in power motivation, and the perpetual challenge of conformity to stereotypical leadership images, all play their parts in this enigmatic narrative (Braun et al., 2017). This research therefore focuses on the role of unconscious bias as a potential explanation for this enduring challenge. A comprehensive examination delves into the complex dynamic, with the objective of elucidating the nuances of women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

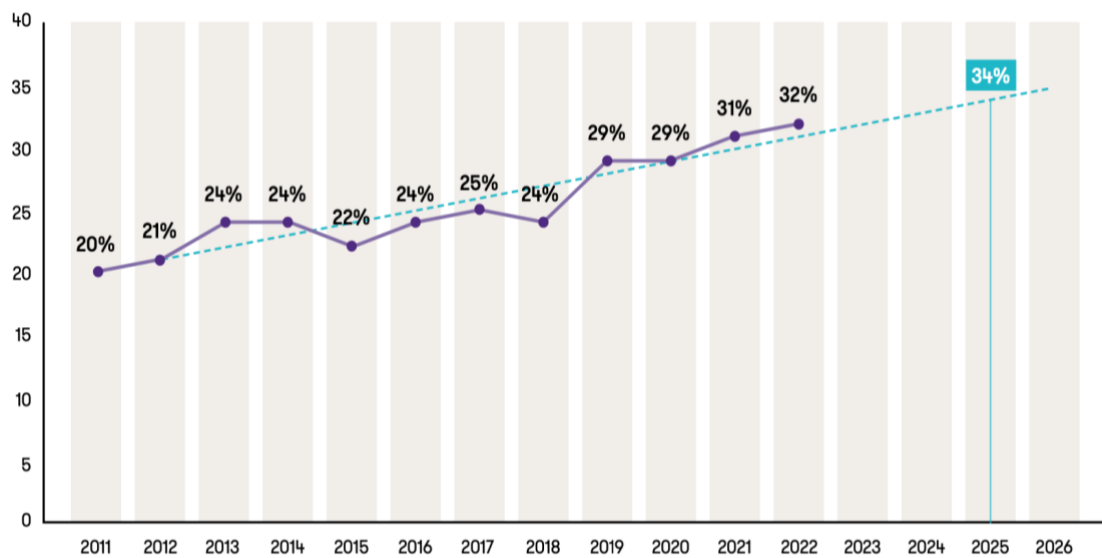
## **1.1 PURPOSE**

In the context of the South African REI, this research is designed to achieve several key objectives. Firstly, it aims to ascertain the presence and extent of unconscious bias in the industry, shedding light on its potential sources. Furthermore, it seeks to comprehend the role of unconscious bias on women's leadership opportunities. Finally, in the event that unconscious bias is identified as a significant factor, this study will explore practical strategies and interventions to mitigate its influence and pave a more equitable path to leadership within the South African REI.

## **1.2 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Globally, there is a persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions compared to men. The proportion of women in senior management roles globally has shown gradual progress over the years, but significant gender disparities persist, and no country has achieved full gender equality in terms of economic participation, opportunities, and political empowerment (Griffiths et al., 2019). Figure 1 below illustrates the overall increase in the representation of women in senior management positions globally, albeit at a slow pace.

**Figure 1: Percentage of female senior managers**



Source: SNG Grant Thornton (2022). *Opening the door to diverse talent. Women in Business 2022 report* (p. 4).

In 2011, women accounted for approximately 20% of senior management roles globally. Over the years, there has been a gradual upward trend, with the proportion of women reaching around 30% in 2022. While this indicates some improvement, it also highlights the persistent gender gap in senior leadership positions.

The progress in women's representation varies across regions. Some countries have made notable advancements in promoting gender diversity in senior management, while others continue to lag. The representation of women in senior management remains lower in traditionally male-dominated sectors and industries such as the South African REI, where it has been a persistent challenge, despite advancements in gender equality and increased participation of women in the workforce (Halim et al., 2023). To gain an understanding of this phenomenon within the South African REI, it is necessary to firstly understand the South African REI through an overview thereof. Thereafter, investigate whether systemic barriers that hinder women's progress into leadership roles exist, and if one such barrier is unconscious bias.

## **1.2.1 UNDERSTANDING THE SOUTH AFRICAN REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY**

### **1.2.1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY**

The REI encompasses a wide range of components, such as finance, development, valuation, marketing, leasing, selling, and property management. With such a diverse array of specialities, multiple stakeholders are involved, including real estate agents, property owners, tenants, brokers, property developers, investors, and financial institutions. In the institutional analysis of the REI, Table 1 below presents a three-level hierarchy. At the highest level, the industry operates within an institutional framework. The middle level positions the REI as an institution with specific characteristics that shape its structure, scope, and functions. Finally, the bottom level focuses on the organisations operating in the market, considering their structure and adaptability (Mooya, 2010).

**Table 1: The institutional structure of the real estate industry**

<b>The institutional environment</b>
Political institutions
Social institutions
Economic institutions
Legal institutions
<b>The property industry as an institution</b>
Market (and non-market aspects)
Decentralised and informal
Legal and conventional aspects of property rights
Legal and conventional aspects of land use and development
<b>Property industry organisations</b>
Users
Investors
Developers
Property service providers
Financial service providers
Professional bodies
Government and non-government agencies

*Adapted from: Mooya (2010). The South African property industry: Overview and issues for research.*

The South African REI exhibits a combination of characteristics, as depicted in Table 1. It is a unique industry that showcases both first-world attributes, resembling highly sophisticated and Westernised sectors, as well as characteristics found in other African and developing countries (Mooya, 2010). This positioning classifies South Africa as an emerging economy, experiencing increased investment and output across all sectors, including real estate.

However, despite its first-world characteristics and experiencing considerable progress since achieving democratic governance in 1994, South Africa still grapples with the aftermath of apartheid's legacy. This is particularly evident in the REI, where White males predominantly maintain control, thereby perpetuating the exclusion of minority groups from meaningful engagement within the REI (Mooya, 2010).

#### **1.2.1.2 GENDER COMPOSITION AND REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS.**

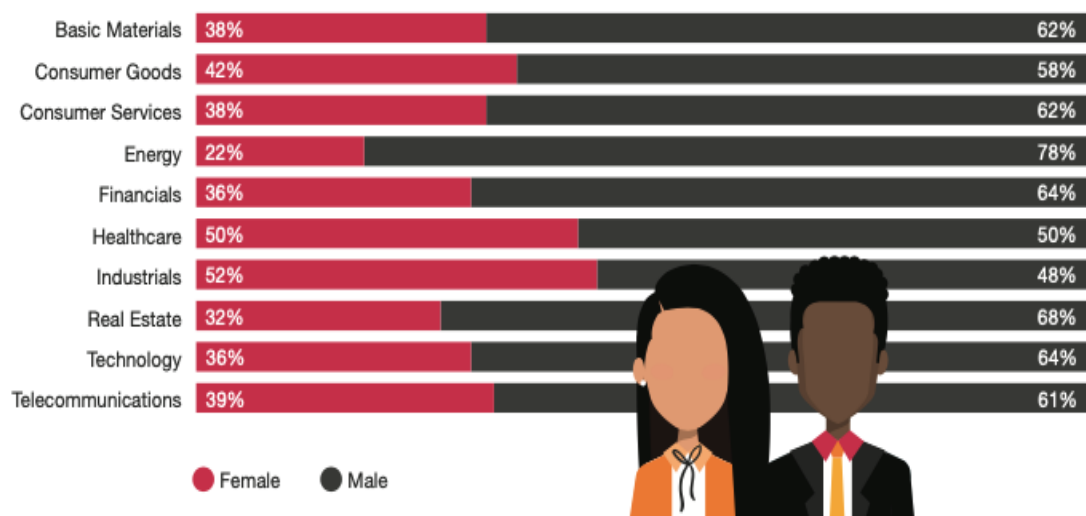
In recent times, the academic arena has witnessed a notable surge in the number of women attaining degrees in the hallowed realms of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM). On the surface, it appears as progress – a beacon of hope illuminating the path toward gender equality. Yet, delving deeper, a sobering reality emerges, women continue to occupy the shadows of underrepresentation. This imbalance extends its reach across disciplines, creating disparities in fields where women's presence remains underwhelming, and even in those where they achieve parity or numerical advantage, the senior ranks remain conspicuously bereft of their influence (National Academies of Sciences, 2020). On a global scale, the proportion of women in science and engineering professions stands at a mere 19.9%. This significant underrepresentation is exacerbated by work environments that are predominantly male-centric, inflexible, and exclusionary, thereby diminishing the appeal of these fields for women and other marginalised groups (United Nations, 2022).

Research also indicates that this underrepresentation in STEMM may not be solely attributed to conscious choices but is heavily influenced by pervasive unconscious biases and stereotypes. For instance, long-standing stereotypes associating men with mathematics and science have dissuaded young women from pursuing STEMM degrees, while educators have been less inclined to encourage minority groups, that

is, Black, Latino, and female students, in STEMM subjects due to internalised biases suggesting that White male students are better suited for such domains (Nien-hê et al., 2020).

The REI, which falls within the realm of STEMM, encompasses a wide range of components, which span the entire property life cycle, as previously mentioned. Considerable efforts are being dedicated to motivating female students at the undergraduate level to pursue property studies, leading to a gradual influx of women entering the sector. Therefore, while some divisions within the industry, such as property practitioners, are undergoing positive transformations, other areas, particularly property development, have been slower to change, resulting in an inadequate representation of women at the senior level. This is illustrated in PwC's, (2023) report as depicted in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Gender representation by industry**



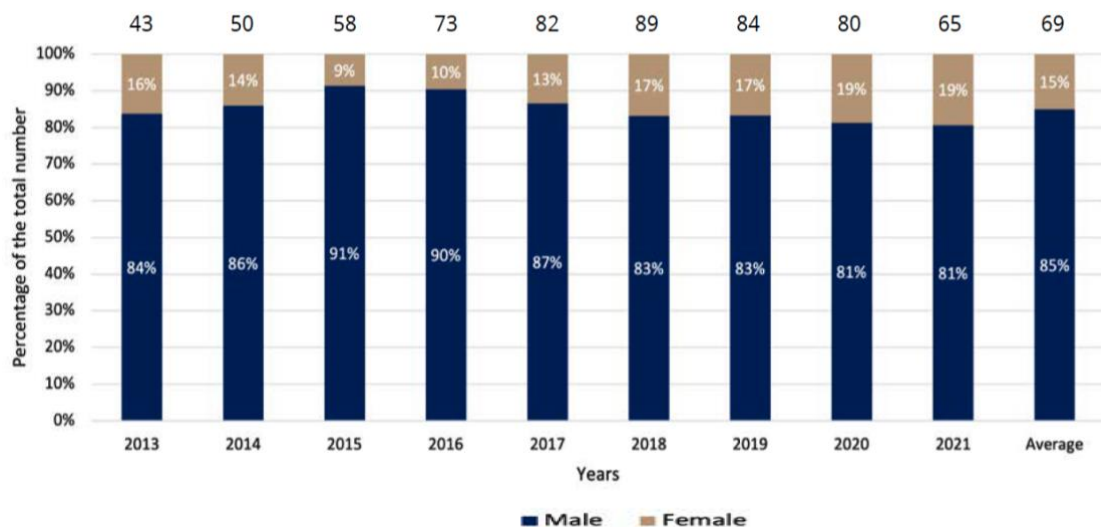
Source: PwC (2023). *Non-executive directors: Practices and fees trends report* (p. 28).

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the gender dynamics within the South African REI concerning the composition of non-executive director (NED) positions. It is notable that the REI, in conjunction with the energy sector, exhibits the lowest levels of female representation in these crucial leadership roles. This observation underscores a significant gender disparity in NED directorships within the REI, a phenomenon that warrants a closer examination. The data portrayed in Figure 2 not

only highlights the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles but also emphasises the need to investigate the underlying factors contributing to this disparity and their potential consequences.

The underrepresentation of women in the industry is further highlighted by the Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT) sector which is a component of the South African REI. Out of approximately 30 REIT companies, only one is headed by a woman, while most senior executives are male (Property Professional, 2019). This is depicted in Figure 3, whereby the percentage of female executive directors in the REIT sector has only experienced a marginal increase of three percent since 2013. In contrast, male executives maintain a significant representation of 81% among the total number of REIT executive directors in 2021. The average female representation has remained stagnant at 15%, showing no notable change compared to the estimates from 2020 (The Women's Property Network, 2022).

**Figure 3: Gender distribution of executive directors**

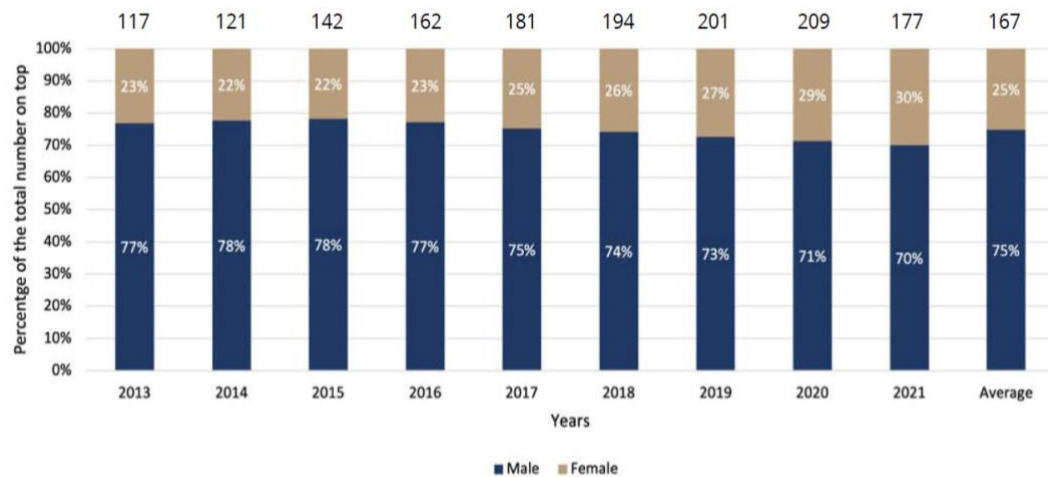


*From: The Women's Property Network, 2022. State of Gender Diversification in the Listed Real Estate Sector report (p. 23).*

In contrast, the percentage of female non-executive board members in the REIT sector witnessed a noteworthy growth of seven percent from 2013 to 2021, which is more than twice the growth observed for female executive directors. This led to women comprising 30% of the total number of NED in 2021. Despite these advancements in female representation, men still maintain a dominant position with

a 70% representation in 2021, as depicted in Figure 4 below (The Women's Property Network, 2022).

**Figure 4: Gender comparison of non-executive directors**



*From: The Women's Property Network, 2022. State of Gender Diversification in the Listed Real Estate Sector report (p. 26).*

The statistics above illustrate that achieving gender parity in the REI remains an ongoing journey. Nonetheless, over the past decade, there have been notable advancements witnessing the visible integration of women into various roles across different segments of the sector (Property Professional, 2019).

### 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the South African REI raises concerns about potential unconscious biases contributing to this disparity. Despite the legal and societal strides towards gender equality in South Africa, the REI continues to reflect a substantial gap in its leadership composition. The question therefore arises, why are women consistently underrepresented in positions of leadership within this industry, and to what extent do unconscious biases play a role in perpetuating this inequality?

The key aspects of the research problem are therefore threefold. Firstly, the underrepresentation of women, whereby despite the increasing number of women entering the South African REI, their ascent to leadership positions remains stunted.

This underrepresentation extends across various facets of leadership, including senior management, executive roles, and board memberships (The Women's Property Network, 2022).

Secondly, unconscious biases which are often subtle, ingrained prejudices that operate beneath the surface of conscious awareness and can influence decision-making processes, including those related to hiring, promotions and leadership appointments (Powell & Butterfield, 1994). It is therefore assumed that unconscious biases may be a significant contributing factor to the gender disparity in leadership roles within the South African REI.

Lastly, the implications for the industry, whereby the lack of gender diversity in leadership roles not only limits career opportunities available to women in the industry but also may impede innovation and hinder the industry's ability to address the evolving needs of a diverse clientele.

Hence, the primary aim of this study is to investigate whether unconscious bias can be identified as a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the South African REI, as well as its role in perpetuating this imbalance. Given the limited existing literature on this specific topic, the pressing need for this research is underscored.

#### **1.4 ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This research holds significant implications for both academia and business, particularly in the South African REI. By providing a comprehensive analysis of unconscious bias where it exists and its impact on women's leadership opportunities, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gender inequality and organisational behaviour. The findings will inform policymakers, industry leaders, and practitioners about the importance of addressing unconscious biases and implementing measures to promote gender equality within the REI.

Despite women entering the workforce faster than men (Harris, 2019) and the various efforts to increase gender diversity and inclusion, fewer females hold leadership positions in most industries (Lin et al., 2023) compared to their male counterparts. This phenomenon is more evident in leadership, whereby in the 2022 reporting



period, of the total executive group from the 100 companies listed on the JSE, only 15% are female, including seven female CEOs and 19 CFOs. On the other hand, of the non-executive population, 30% are female (PwC, 2022). A concerning trend that indicates shifting dynamics can be observed in the percentage of women hired for vacant executive or senior roles compared to male appointments. Research conducted by PwC (2022) revealed that out of the 208 new executive roles filled across the JSE between January 2020 and June 2022, only 53 were women. Within the Top 100 of the JSE, 77 new executive roles were filled during the same period, with 21 (26%) being women. Similarly, in the Top 40 of the JSE, 33 executive roles were newly assigned, with 10 (30%) being women. These statistics shed light on the gender disparities in executive appointments, emphasising the underrepresentation of women in senior positions.

This research is therefore relevant for organisations within the South African REI. The insights gained from this study can guide human resource practices, talent management strategies, and diversity initiatives aimed at creating inclusive environments that empower women to overcome barriers and advance into leadership positions.

## 1.5 DELIMITATIONS

The following delimitations define the boundaries of this research and clarify what aspects of the problem are being addressed:

1. **Geographic focus:** this study specifically focuses on the South African REI. While it is acknowledged that gender disparities exist in other regions and industries, the research is delimited to the context of South Africa due to its unique socio-cultural and economic factors.
2. **Gender bias:** the study primarily addresses unconscious bias related to gender as a factor contributing to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles. Other potential sources of bias while important, are beyond the scope of this research.
3. **Industry-specific focus:** the research delimits itself to the REI in South Africa, recognising that different industries may have distinct characteristics and challenges related to gender inequality. The findings may not be directly applicable to other industries.

4. **Limited organisational scope:** the study will not delve into an exhaustive examination of every organisation within the South African REI. Instead, it will select a representative sample of individuals within various organisations.
5. **Time constraint:** the study was conducted within a specific timeframe, and as such, it may not fully capture longer-term trends or changes that could occur in the South African REI over an extended period. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the timeframe in which the research was conducted, recognising that industry dynamics and gender-related issues may evolve over time.

## 1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

In pursuit of clarity and precision, this section offers concise definitions of key terms central to this research on unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI.

Unconscious bias, as elucidated by The Women's Property Network (2022), constitutes deeply ingrained and automatic stereotypes exerting a profound influence on individuals' behaviour.

Within the context of this study, leadership opportunities encompass the prospects for individuals, particularly women, to assume roles of authority, influence, and responsibility within the South African REI.

Gender disparity pertains to the unequal representation of men and women in various roles, positions, or fields (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). This research is specifically concerned with the imbalanced presence of women compared to men in leadership positions within the South African REI.

Stereotypical image of a leader refers to preconceived notions and expectations about the characteristics, behaviours, and appearance of an effective leader (Nekhili et al., 2018). The study explores whether women face challenges in leadership roles due to not conforming to these stereotypical expectations.

Power motivation reflects an individual's desire for influence, control and authority within an organisation or context (Sturm et al., 2021). It can therefore be examined as a potential factor contributing to gender disparities in leadership positions.

Strategies and interventions encompass deliberate actions, policies or initiatives aimed at addressing and mitigating gender disparities and unconscious bias within the South African REI. These efforts seek to promote greater gender diversity and inclusion in leadership roles.

## **1.7 ASSUMPTIONS**

There are five key assumptions that serve as the foundational premise upon which this research is based. The first assumption is that unconscious bias exists within the South African REI and that it plays a key role in limiting women's leadership opportunities. This assumption serves as the foundational premise for the study's investigation.

The second assumption is that a gender disparity exists in leadership positions within the South African REI, with fewer women holding senior management, executive and board positions compared to men. Thirdly, an assumption of industry relevance has been made, whereby the research assumes that the South African REI is a critical sector for economic growth and development in the country (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Therefore, addressing gender disparities within this industry is of broader societal and economic significance. In addition, the study also assumes that sufficient data related to the representation of women in leadership positions, as well as potential unconscious bias factors, is available for analysis within the South African REI. Finally, the fifth assumption of the study is that of generalisability. While the study focuses on the South African REI, it assumes that the findings and insights derived from this research may have relevance and applicability to other industries and regions facing similar challenges related to gender diversity and leadership.

## **1.8 CONCLUSION**

In the evolving societal context, the quest for diversity and inclusion remains paramount, yet women's leadership roles, especially in sectors like the South African REI are overshadowed by persistent barriers. These challenges, ranging from unconscious bias to power dynamics and stereotypical leadership perceptions, form

a complex narrative that this research aims to unravel. Specifically, the study delves into the role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this chapter is to provide a systematic exploration of pertinent literature, dissecting the multifaceted dimensions that underlie women's leadership challenges within the South African REI. Firstly, the chapter analyses the various factors that can influence gender disparity in the REI, including biases. Thereafter, the concept of unconscious bias is explored, meticulously defining it, scrutinising its origins, and appraising strategies employed to mitigate its impact. Thereafter, the theoretical landscape is examined in terms of pivotal theories such as the Glass Ceiling Theory, Stereotype Threat Theory, Social Role Theory, and finally, the Ecological Theory of Career Development.

This chapter therefore serves as a compass, guiding the readers through a realm of knowledge, and beckons readers to unearth valuable insights that may ultimately pave the way toward greater equity in leadership roles within the South African REI.

### **2.2 THE ROLE OF OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING GENDER DISPARITY**

Gender disparity refers to the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, and benefits between individuals of different genders (Shang, 2022). In the context of career advancement in the REI, gender disparity encompasses the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and the obstacles they face in progressing within the field.

Several factors contribute to gender disparity in the REI, spanning individual, interpersonal, community, organisational and policy levels (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). At the individual level, stereotypes and biases persistently affect women's career choices and advancement (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Across the literature, these biases have been cited as reasons why women are overlooked for leadership roles, despite having the qualifications and skills necessary for success.

In a study conducted over three decades ago, Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) revealed that women often encounter difficulties in forming connections with male colleagues, potentially limiting access to valuable guidance and opportunities.

Unfortunately, recent authors still maintain this notion, whereby the current literature reveals that not only do women struggle to form connections with male colleagues, but that women still struggle with networking and mentorship opportunities overall; opportunities that are essential for career advancement (Shen & Joseph, 2021). These challenges faced by women with regards to networking and mentorship fall within the realm of interpersonal factors, and therefore can also play a pivotal role for women advancing into leadership positions (Shen & Joseph, 2021).

Community-level factors include societal expectations and cultural norms, whereby the REI, like many others, has traditionally been male dominated with certain roles and leadership traits associated with men (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; He et al., 2019). These gendered expectations can dissuade women from pursuing leadership positions and hinder their advancement (Baran, 2012).

At the organisational level, policies and practices can either perpetuate or mitigate gender disparity, which is no wonder why organisations that lack diversity and inclusion initiatives may inadvertently create barriers to women's advancement (American Association of University Women, 2016). This is further corroborated by Harris (2019) who notes that negative perceptions from colleagues, limited understanding of the additional challenges women face and the stereotypes about their ability to balance career and family all contribute to gender bias in the workplace.

Policy-level factors encompass governmental regulations and industry standards, whereby policies that promote gender diversity and equity can have a significant impact on reducing gender disparity in the REI (Carranza et al., 2023). For example, mandated gender quotas for corporate boards or policies supporting work-life balance can create a more inclusive environment (Terjesen et al., 2015).

Therefore, gender disparity in career advancement within the REI can be influenced by a complex interplay of factors at various levels as demonstrated by the various authors. Recognising and addressing these factors is essential for achieving greater gender equity and ensuring that women have equal opportunities to advance their careers in the field. By implementing inclusive policies, promoting mentorship and

networking opportunities, and challenging stereotypes and biases, the REI can become more welcoming and supportive of women's career progression.

## **2.3 CONCEPTUALISATION OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

### **2.3.1 DEFINITION OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

Unconscious bias, also known as implicit bias, "refers to a set of attitudes and stereotypes—whether positive or negative—that we are unaware of" (Hoffman & Winter, 2022, p.3). These attitudes and stereotypes are believed to impede women's career progression and stem from cultural beliefs about gender and workplace structures that inadvertently favour men (International Monetary Fund, 2022). One example of this bias is the perception that men are better leaders because women are seen as emotional (Ellemers, 2018). Despite individuals consciously rejecting such stereotypes, they unconsciously evaluate others based on them.

What is evident throughout the literature is that gender bias continues to negatively impact women in the workplace. Successful female leaders have had to overcome significant obstacles to reach their positions (Harris, 2019).

### **2.3.2 CAUSES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

Understanding the causes of unconscious bias is crucial in the context of this research, as it will enable an analysis of its potential role in limiting women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI.

One of the primary causes of unconscious bias is cultural and societal conditioning. Throughout their lives, individuals are exposed to a multitude of cultural messages, media portrayals, and societal norms that shape their perceptions of various groups, including gender (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Stereotypes and biases can be ingrained from a young age, as individuals absorb societal attitudes and expectations regarding gender roles and capabilities. These biases can become deeply embedded in one's subconscious, influencing judgments and decisions even when an individual consciously opposes such stereotypes (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

Implicit association is another prominent cause of unconscious bias, whereby this psychological phenomenon occurs when individual unconsciously link certain traits or qualities with specific social groups (Yen et al., 2018). For instance, associating

leadership qualities more readily with men than women. These implicit associations can be formed through repeated exposure to cultural narratives and may lead to biased judgments without individuals realising their influence (Ellemers, 2018).

Confirmation bias is yet another factor contributing to unconscious bias. In this instance, people often gravitate towards and assign greater importance to information that aligns with their existing beliefs and biases (Ruzzier & Woo, 2023). In the context of leadership, this means that individuals may unintentionally discount evidence of women's leadership abilities or overemphasise instances that confirm pre-existing biases against female leaders (Liu et al., 2023).

In-group favouritism plays a significant role in unconscious bias as well, whereby individuals tend to favour those they perceive as part of their "in-group" or those who share similar characteristics or backgrounds (Bilancini et al., 2020). This inclination can lead to biases against those perceived as outsiders, including women in male-dominated industries such as real estate.

The above possible causes of unconscious bias illustrate that it is a complex phenomenon rooted in cultural, psychological, and societal factors. Recognising and understanding these causes are essential steps in addressing and mitigating the impact of unconscious bias on decision-making processes, particularly in the context of promoting gender diversity and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. Some of these mitigating strategies will be discussed in section 2.3.4 below.

### **2.3.3 THE ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON WOMEN'S CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

Unconscious bias was previously defined as a set of either positive or negative unconscious attitudes and stereotypes (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Several authors acknowledge these unconscious attitudes, and affirm that such biases can shape perceptions, decisions and behaviours in ways that are not consciously controlled, leading to unintended discrimination or favouritism (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). In the context of women's career advancement, unconscious bias can therefore play a significant and often detrimental role (Heilman & Caleo, 2018).



Numerous studies support Heilman and Caleo's stance and have highlighted the pervasive impact of unconscious bias on women's careers. For instance, research has shown that unconscious bias can influence hiring decisions, with women being evaluated less favourably than men for the same positions (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). This bias can extend into performance evaluations, where women may receive lower ratings or fewer advancement opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These biases can create a cumulative effect hindering women's progression up the corporate ladder.

Moreover, unconscious bias can manifest in more subtle ways. It can influence how women are perceived as leaders, affecting their access to leadership roles. For example, women may be seen as less assertive or less competent, even when their qualifications and skills match those of their male peers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These biases can discourage women from pursuing leadership positions or make it harder for them to be recognised as leaders, thus impeding their career advancement (Ellemers, 2018).

Unconscious bias also affects career opportunities beyond promotion, whereby women may face challenges in networking and mentorship, as male colleagues may be more likely to form connections with individuals who remind them of themselves – often other men. This is an example of Hogg's (2009) Social Identity Theory that posits that individuals classify themselves and others into in-groups and outgroups, leading to social behaviours driven by group memberships. Where men come together and create in-groups, this can limit women's access to valuable guidance and opportunities (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Additionally, when women do eventually reach leadership roles, unconscious bias can persist in how they are perceived and evaluated, affecting their ability to implement their visions and succeed as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Unconscious bias therefore exerts a pervasive and insidious influence on women's career advancement. It operates in hiring decisions, performance evaluations, leadership perceptions and networking opportunities. Recognising and addressing these biases is crucial for promoting gender equality in the workplace and ensuring that women have equal access to career advancement opportunities.

### **2.3.4 STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS.**

Addressing unconscious bias is a critical endeavour for organisations and industries seeking to foster diversity and inclusion, particularly in contexts where gender disparities persist, such as the South African REI. To effectively mitigate unconscious bias, a range of strategies and interventions can be implemented and refined over time.

The literature highlighted how successful strategies for women's leadership advancement in the REI involve mentorship and sponsorship programmes, D&I initiatives, flexible work arrangements, leadership development programmes and clear promotion criteria. By adopting these practices and fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace culture, the REI could promote greater gender diversity and enhance women's opportunities for leadership advancement.

#### **2.3.4.1 BEING DELIBERATE IN CREATING EQUITY**

Creating an equitable and inclusive workplace transcends the boundaries of gender diversity alone; it encompasses a broader spectrum, embracing individuals of diverse genders, races, sexual orientations, and faiths (Holvino, 2010). In this pursuit, organisations must embark on a journey characterised by essential foundational steps aimed at addressing unconscious bias, which includes cultivating awareness, prompting individuals to confront and acknowledge the existence of unconscious bias (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). This awareness serves as a catalyst, propelling individuals toward a more motivated stance to actively counteract these biases.

While many organisations proudly tout their commitment to diverse hiring practices and inclusive policies, translating these declarations into tangible actions remains a challenge (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). It becomes evident that there is a pressing need for organisations to be held accountable for the practical applications of these ideals, especially in the context of diverse hiring practices and inclusive policies. This accountability journey commences from the upper echelons of leadership, as leaders play an instrumental role in shaping the culture and norms within organisations. To equip leaders with the tools to enact this change, providing them with comprehensive training on diversity and inclusion would prove invaluable (Groysberg et al., 2018). Such training would empower leaders to recognise and address bias within their

teams, positioning them as champions who set the tone for inclusive behaviour and actively advocate for diversity.

Authors such as Cox and Blake (1991) agree with the importance of being deliberate in D&I initiatives and emphasise that organisations that prioritise D&I often see greater gender diversity in leadership roles. Their research further indicates that inclusive workplace cultures encourage women to aspire to leadership positions. Companies such as Cushman and Wakefield have implemented D&I initiatives that have led to increased representation of women in leadership roles (Cushman & Wakefield, 2019).

As part of being deliberate in creating equity, leadership development programmes tailored to women's needs can also be effective in preparing them for leadership roles. This could be particularly useful in the South African REI, where the pipeline of leaders is largely restricted to men because the sentiment is that women belong in more administrative roles. Fitzsimmons and Callan's (2020) research emphasises the importance of leadership development initiatives. IBM, for instance, has invested in leadership development programmes that have contributed to greater gender diversity in leadership positions (IBM Blogs, 2023).

Finally, establishing clear promotion criteria and holding leadership accountable for D&I goals are crucial strategies. This was demonstrated by McKinsey and Company's (2020) research, which indicated that companies with clear diversity metrics and accountability mechanisms outperform others. Organisations like JLL have set clear diversity goals and hold leaders responsible for achieving them (JLL, 2022).

#### **2.3.4.2 STEREOTYPE NEGATION AND REPLACEMENT**

Section 2.3.4.1 was specific to awareness by leaders within organisations, but at an individual level, stereotype negation and replacement is another approach for reducing biases. Unconscious bias consists of attitudes and stereotypes, with stereotypes being specific traits associated with certain groups. These stereotypes, whether positive or negative, can undermine the individuality of people and can be particularly harmful when they lead to marginalisation or oppression (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

Stereotypes often arise automatically in our thinking, even when they conflict with our conscious values. However, extensive research suggests that stereotypes can be malleable. Individuals can suppress or avoid the activation of learned stereotypes, especially when they interact with members of the target group (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Various tools, such as motivation, strategic efforts to reduce stereotypes, focus of attention, and contextual cues, play pivotal roles in this process (Monteith et al., 1998; Spencer et al., 1998).

However, awareness of stereotypes can be challenging due to their automatic nature and conformity with societal norms. Certain riddles and exercises, like gender-stereotype riddles, have proven effective in revealing hidden stereotypes and making individuals aware of their impact (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Additionally, interventions designed to raise awareness about stereotypes can significantly influence decision-making processes, such as hiring, and decrease reliance on stereotypical traits during evaluations (Atewologun et al., 2018; Heilman & Caleo, 2018).

Counteracting or replacing stereotypes often involves the use of counter-stereotypic images and mental imagery. Counter-stereotypic images, like female scientists in science textbooks, can enhance comprehension and reduce gender-based biases. Mental imagery exercises, where individuals imagine strong individuals breaking gender stereotypes, have also shown promise in reducing stereotypes (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). However, some strategies may have limitations, as attempts to negate stereotypes may sometimes inadvertently strengthen them, and the resilience of stereotypic attitudes can persist even after efforts to counteract them (Gibson, 2022).

#### **2.3.4.3 INCREASING MOTIVATION TO COUNTERACT BIAS**

Another important strategy in reducing unconscious bias is “fostering the motivation to be unbiased” (Hoffman & Winter, 2022, p. 16), whereby the motivation can be internal or external. Internal motivation originates from within the employee and encompasses introjected, identified, and intrinsic motivation (Graves & Sarkis, 2018), while external motivation refers to employees being driven by external factors such as rewards and approval (Graves & Sarkis, 2018; Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Despite the relevance of both forms of motivation, researchers have highlighted the significance of fostering internal motivation to mitigate unconscious bias,

emphasising its effectiveness compared to external motivation. This is because the reduction has been found to be more pronounced in individuals internally motivated to be unbiased, as opposed to those externally motivated, which originates from a desire for approval or rewards (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

Perspective-taking, a de-biasing technique, is a way in which internal motivation can be enhanced to combat bias (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). In this way, men (and others) display empathy and foster perspective-taking, while treating each woman as an individual with unique strengths, abilities, and perspectives, rather than making assumptions based on gender stereotypes (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Men can therefore play a crucial role in mitigating unconscious bias towards women by embracing personalisation as a strategy.

#### **2.3.4.4 CONTACT WITH “OUTGROUP” MEMBERS**

This section focuses on interactions with individuals from different groups, often referred to as "outgroups", which were briefly discussed in relation to the Social Identity Theory. There are four types of interactions: direct contact, vicarious contact, imagined contact, and media exposure.

Direct contact involves engaging with outgroup members personally. Research indicates that this method is effective under specific conditions, such as when individuals of equal status cooperate toward common goals and receive support from societal institutions. Direct contact not only reduces biases toward the immediate outgroup but also extends its positive effects to diminish biases against other outgroups (Hoffman & Winter, 2022). Emotional factors, such as liking, reduced fear of the unknown, and increased empathy, contribute significantly to the effectiveness of intergroup contact, highlighting the importance of emotional engagement beyond mere knowledge of the outgroup (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

Vicarious contact, rooted in the "extended contact hypothesis", suggests that recognising a positive relationship between a member of one's own group and a member of an external group can diminish bias between the groups (Wright et al., 1997). Studies affirm the impact of witnessing ingroup members interacting positively with outgroup members, with this effect found to be comparable to that of direct friendships (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

Imagined contact constitutes a distinct approach, involving participants envisioning positive interactions with outgroup members. This mental exercise leads to improved attitudes and reduces unconscious biases. Imagined contact proves particularly effective when participants envisage concrete, positive interactions (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

Finally, the role of media exposure in bias reduction remains a subject of exploration, with varying outcomes observed. Some studies reveal the positive influence of media portrayals on attitudes towards outgroups. However, the effectiveness of media contact can depend on factors such as the content of media exposure and the context in which it occurs, with face-to-face interactions often regarded as a more potent bias reduction strategy (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

#### **2.3.4.5 NETWORKING, MENTORSHIPS AND SPONSORSHIPS**

Networking provides women with opportunities to build connections, establish relationships, and expand their professional circles (Harris, 2019). By actively engaging in networking activities, women can challenge and change existing biases, stereotypes, and preconceived notions, by demonstrating their skills, expertise, and value to others, while also sharing their perspectives, and contributing to meaningful discussions (Papafilippou et al., 2022). Networking can be in the form of actively participating in professional events, industry conferences, and community gatherings.

In addition to networking, women can engage with coaches and mentors who can offer specific career guidance and assist them in implementing strategies to advance in their careers. Research has shown that partnering women with mentors can be highly beneficial (Harris, 2019). Mentors play a coaching role, providing support and advice, while sponsors, who are often individuals in positions of power, can advocate for those who may not be able to advocate for themselves (Harris, 2019). Unfortunately, the importance of mentorship and sponsorship is often overlooked, despite their crucial role in advancing female talent within organisations (SNG Grant Thornton, 2022).

Therefore, in accordance with the literature, mentorship and sponsorship programmes could be highly effective in the South African REI, whereby more of these programmes could be established, and pair women with experienced mentors or sponsors who provide guidance, support, and opportunities for skill development (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Unfortunately, due to the nature of the industry, women could find themselves paired with male mentors and, or sponsors. In hindsight, this could work to women's advantage as it would open the doors to more networking opportunities in the right circles, therefore create leadership opportunities.

#### **2.3.4.6 DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING**

In the current era of widely available technology, including big data, Internet of Things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) for example, utilising data and metrics can provide objective insights into areas where unconscious bias may be prevalent (International Labour Organization, 2017). Organisations can track diversity metrics at all levels and regularly analyse patterns to identify potential bias in areas such as leadership representation. Data-driven decision-making helps hold organisations accountable for progress in reducing bias (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Amidst this transformation, the realisation dawns that creating opportunities for women necessitates meticulous preparation, active involvement, and sincere appreciation of their contributions. Shedding the shackles of stereotypes becomes paramount, as it is through this process that individuals are recognised for the unique and valuable contributions they bring, irrespective of their gender. Within the REI, a burgeoning awareness emerges – a recognition that women can excel in any property-related role, mirroring their male counterparts' competence and potential.

## **2.4 THEORETICAL MODELS**

### **2.4.1 GLASS CEILING THEORY**

The “glass ceiling” can be aptly defined as a systemic barrier rooted in discriminatory attitudes and actions, which erect multiple impediments hindering the advancement of qualified women into upper-level management positions (Lin et al., 2023). There are three commonly cited phenomena that underpin the existence of the glass ceiling, that is, discriminatory practices, subtle biases, and hidden barriers (Lin et al., 2023).

The visibility of a few women in predominantly male-dominated roles often gives the impression that the gender gap is narrowing, leading to the belief that women are finally making significant progress in shattering the proverbial glass ceiling. Both in popular culture and academia, these female leaders are frequently depicted as pioneers who have paved the way for future aspiring women leaders (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). However, is this belief accurate? Does the mere presence of a female leader genuinely create opportunities for other women? In the REI, which is a male-dominated field, the glass ceiling is believed to hinder women from progressing into leadership roles (Williams, 2013). Therefore, within this context, the concept of career advancement is intrinsically linked and highly relevant to the glass ceiling theory, whereby when examining the definition provided by Lin et al. (2023), it becomes evident that the glass ceiling directly impacts career advancement for women in the industry. It stifles their ability to ascend the organisational hierarchy, hindering their career progression at senior levels, which provides a possible explanation as to why women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within the REI.

In essence, the glass ceiling serves as a metaphorical barrier that obstructs the path to career advancement. Therefore, addressing and dismantling the glass ceiling is essential to creating a conducive environment for career advancement. By breaking down the discriminatory practices, subtle biases and hidden barriers that constitute the glass ceiling (Lin et al., 2023), women can be afforded the opportunity to advance in their careers, shattering this barrier and fostering a more equitable and diverse leadership landscape in the REI.

#### **2.4.2 STEREOTYPE THREAT THEORY**

Stereotype threat is a social-psychological predicament that occurs when individuals belong to a group with negative stereotypes attached to it. This threat arises when people's qualities align with stereotypes, reinforcing the stereotypes in the eyes of others and themselves (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When individuals are in situations where stereotypes about their group are emphasised, they become concerned about being judged based on those stereotypes, leading to performance hindrances (Cullen et al., 2004).



Several authors write in support of the theory, whereby Ellemers (2018) for example, puts forward that these gender stereotypes contribute to reduced interest in hiring women for leadership positions and create obstacles for women in leadership. Women in the REI like in other industries, experience the impact of stereotype threat despite possessing the necessary qualifications and skills. Gendered expectations and biases associate certain tasks and leadership traits with men, while perceiving women's decisions as emotionally driven. Consequently, women may be perceived and perceive themselves as less competent and capable of being leaders, leading to a reluctance to pursue leadership roles or facing challenges in succeeding in such positions (Harris, 2019).

The concept of career mobility is relevant to Stereotype Threat Theory, whereby another approach is taken by those who highlight the potential benefits of gender-stereotypical attributes to improve women's chances of advancement. This perspective is exemplified by research on the "glass cliff effect", where women are chosen for leadership roles based on the belief in their superior social and emotional skills. While this may appear to promote gender equity, studies have shown that it places women in precarious positions where they often lack the essential material resources and interpersonal support needed to succeed (Ellemers, 2018). In the REI, gendered expectations and biases often associate certain leadership roles and traits with men, while perpetuating stereotypes about women's decision-making being emotionally driven (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). This gender bias can limit career mobility for women as they may be overlooked for leadership positions based on stereotypes (Liu et al., 2023). Women may also internalise these stereotypes, affecting their own career mobility by feeling less competent or capable of leadership roles (Harris, 2019). Thus, career mobility becomes a relevant concept as it relates to how stereotype threat can impact women's opportunities for career advancement and leadership roles in the REI, hindering their ability to navigate their careers freely.

### **2.4.3 SOCIAL ROLE THEORY**

Eagly's (1987) social role theory explains that the assignment of different roles to women and men in society leads to differential status, with men occupying higher status positions and women being associated with lower status roles. This division extends to the workplace, where men have more opportunities for advancement and

power compared to women, contributing to the unequal distribution of leadership positions (Eagly, 1987).

The presence of women in traditionally male-dominated leadership positions has sparked interest in exploring gender differences in leadership styles. Female leaders face the challenge of reconciling gender expectations with their leadership role, resulting in unique leadership styles shaped by conflicting stereotypes and expectations (De Paola et al., 2022).

However, these stereotypes and biases against women can hinder their professional success. Negative perceptions from male colleagues, limited understanding of the additional barriers women face, such as managing familial responsibilities, and stereotypes about their ability to balance career and family contribute to gender bias in the workplace. Furthermore, the perception that women do not pursue, or desire leadership positions can overlook the systemic barriers and complexities that women face in their professional journeys (Harris, 2019).

The concept of career attachment is closely linked to Eagly's Social Role Theory, whereby Eagly's theory emphasises that societal roles and expectations based on gender influence individuals' career choices and opportunities (Eagly, 1987). Within this framework, career attachment can be seen as a reflection of how individuals perceive and engage with their career roles considering societal gender norms (Ramos & Lopez, 2018). In contexts where men traditionally occupy higher status positions in the workplace and have more opportunities for career advancement, career attachments may be influenced by the alignment of one's career choices with these gendered expectations. Authors such as Yip et al. (2018) reemphasise this notion by positing that women's career attachment, in such settings, may be shaped by the recognition of the challenges and barriers associated with striving for leadership positions in male-dominated fields, such as the REI. Career attachment, therefore, becomes a lens through which individuals navigate and reconcile their career choices with the social roles and expectations defined by their gender, aligning with the principles of Social Role Theory.

Therefore, to counter the challenges women face when it comes to perceived social roles, organisations could be more deliberate in offering flexible work arrangements,

such as remote work and flexible hours. This can facilitate women's career progression while balancing family responsibility. This is illustrated in (Catalyst, 2020) study, which found that organisations with flexible work options had higher percentages of women leadership roles.

#### **2.4.4 ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Ecological Theory of Career Development (ETCD) posits that an individual's career choices and development are influenced by a complex interplay of environmental factors. These factors include the physical and social environments, as well as the opportunities and constraints they present (Newman & Newman, 2020). The theory underscores the importance of adapting to one's environment and the dynamic nature of career development. In essence, individuals make career decisions based on the resources, support, and opportunities available to them within the specific ecological context (Hirschi & Koen, 2021).

Within the context of women's leadership opportunities in the REI, the ETCD holds relevance, because women often face unique environmental challenges in male-dominated industries like real estate. These challenges as previously mentioned, may include gender bias, limited access to mentorship and sponsorship, and workplace cultures that do not adequately support their career aspirations (Harris, 2019). The theory emphasises that women's career choices and progression are influenced not only by their individual characteristics but also by the environment in which they operate (Newman & Newman, 2020). Therefore, understanding and addressing the environmental factors that hinder or facilitate women's career development is essential for promoting leadership opportunities.

Two concepts that are highly relevant to ETCD in the context of women in the REI are career adaptability and boundaryless career concept. With regards to career adaptability, women navigating male-dominated industries like real estate, often need to adapt to changing circumstances and overcome barriers (Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020). Career adaptability, which involves the capacity to adjust one's career goals, strategies, and behaviours in response to changing environmental conditions, is crucial (Johnston, 2018). In this context, authors like (Shin et al., 2019) suggest that women may need to develop strategies to navigate gender bias, build resilience and

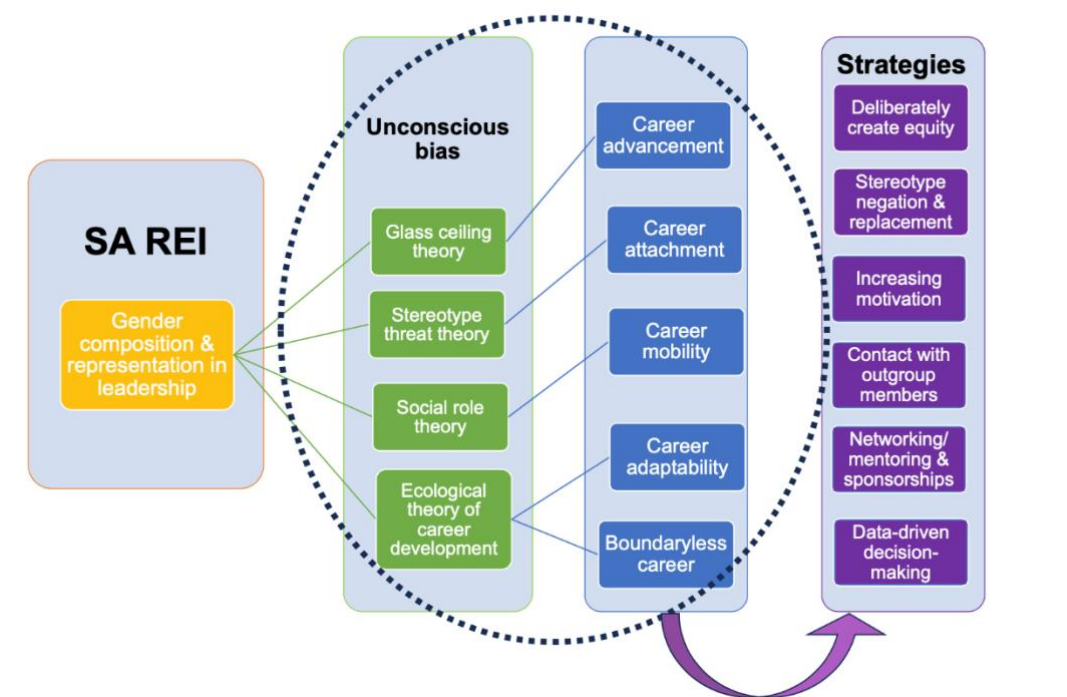
seek out new opportunities to advance their careers within the constraints of the ecological context.

As for the boundaryless career concept, this concept aligns with the idea that individuals need to be flexible and open to career opportunities beyond traditional boundaries (Gander, 2021; Shaffer et al., 2012). By virtue of this concept, women in real estate may find that breaking through gender-based boundaries and pursuing unconventional career paths can be necessary for advancement. Therefore, embracing a boundaryless career perspective can empower women to explore diverse career options, challenge stereotypes and leverage the opportunities outside of the traditional career trajectories within the industry (Gander, 2021).

## **2.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework comprises several interconnected components: the "South African REI," serving as the central focal point of the study, underpinned by the examination of "gender composition and representation in leadership" within the REI. The dimension of unconscious bias then feeds into the gender composition and representation in leadership in the REI, as well as into the theoretical framework which houses various relevant theories, including the Glass Ceiling Theory, Stereotype Threat Theory, Social Role Theory, and the Ecological Theory of Career Development. Within the framework, theoretical concepts such as career advancement, career attachment, career mobility, career adaptability, and boundaryless career, with some concepts being relevant to more than one theoretical framework, are illustrated in Figure 5, collectively serving as the study's theoretical foundation.

**Figure 5: Schematic diagram to illustrate conceptual framework**



The conceptual framework therefore signifies the study's ultimate objective of contributing valuable insights by addressing the complex interplay between gender representation, unconscious bias, and career advancement within the South African REI.

## 2.6 CONCLUSION

The literature review conducted in this study delved into the complexities of the South African REI with a specific focus on gender composition and representation in leadership positions. While prior research has explored various facets of the South African REI and unconscious bias in different contexts, this study aims to contribute by examining the intersection of these two critical elements and offering novel insights.

The South African REI, as outlined in section 1.2.1, is characterised by a unique blend of challenges and opportunities. However, previous research has primarily focused on macroeconomic aspects or market dynamics, often neglecting the nuanced examination of gender disparities in leadership roles within this industry. This research aims to address this disparity by providing an in-depth examination of

gender presence in leadership roles, providing a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by women in advancing their careers within the REI.

Furthermore, the study aims to enhance the conceptualisation of unconscious bias, as elucidated in section 2.3. Existing literature has extensively discussed the definition and causes of unconscious bias, but limited attention has been paid to its manifestation and impact within the South African REI. By exploring unconscious bias in the context of this industry, the research can shed light on its unique dimensions and implications, thereby contributing to the broader literature on bias mitigation strategies in professional settings.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, the study draws on a range of theories. While previous research has applied these theories individually to various contexts, this study endeavours to integrate them within the specific context of the South African REI. By doing so, it aims to offer a comprehensive insight into the elements affecting career advancement, career attachment, career mobility, career adaptability, and boundaryless careers within this industry. This integrative approach aims to uncover new insights into the multifaceted nature of career progression in the REI.

Moreover, insights from prior studies related to unconscious bias, gender disparity, and leadership advancement were provided. While existing research has explored these topics in isolation, this study adopts a comprehensive perspective, examining the role of unconscious bias in hindering women's career advancement in the South African REI, while also considering the influence of other factors at individual, interpersonal, community, organisational, and policy levels. By taking this comprehensive approach, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women in leadership roles within the REI.

In summary, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by addressing the intersection of gender representation and unconscious bias within the South African REI, offering a more holistic perspective on career advancement, and providing insights into strategies for enhancing leadership diversity. The synthesis of these elements in the context of the South African REI makes this research unique and valuable in advancing our understanding of gender disparities in professional settings.

### **3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

To address the problem of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the South African REI, the research seeks to address three distinct research questions, which were formulated from the literature reviewed.

##### **3.1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION 1**

**Does unconscious bias towards women exist in the South African REI, and if so, what are its sources?**

The aim of this research question is to investigate whether unconscious bias exists towards women within the industry and identify the factors that contribute to its occurrence.

##### **3.1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION 2**

**Does unconscious bias play a role in women's career advancement in the South African REI?**

This question aims to investigate the potential influence of unconscious bias on the career progression of women within the industry. By examining the impact of unconscious bias, the research aims to uncover any barriers, challenges, or discriminatory practices that women may face in their career advancement.

##### **3.1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION 3**

**What strategies can be implemented, in the event that unconscious bias exists, to reduce its role in women's advancement to leadership positions in the South African REI?**

The aim of this research question is to identify and propose strategies that can be implemented to mitigate the impact of unconscious bias on women's advancement to leadership positions in the South African REI, in the event that unconscious bias

exists. By examining existing research, best practices, and successful interventions, the study seeks to provide recommendations and actionable steps for organisations and individuals to promote gender equality and create more inclusive environments.



## **4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter delves into the research methodology applied in this study to investigate the role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. A qualitative inductive approach was adopted across various facets, including data sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The primary data collection method involved conducting one-on-one, semi-structured face-to-face and/or online interviews with both male and female professionals in the South African REI. At the end of this chapter, the quality controls and limitations of the study are outlined.

### **4.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

The research followed an interpretive approach because it aimed to derive insights regarding unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. This approach was chosen because understanding social phenomena like this relies on subjective viewpoints from both men and women in the South African REI, given that individuals perceive their social realities differently. This is consistent with Saunders and Lewis (2018a), who characterised interpretivism as the study of social events in their natural environment, with findings rooted in the viewpoints and understandings of the participants.

The primary aim of this study was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of whether unconscious bias plays a role in women's advancement into leadership positions within the South African REI. To achieve this, the study explored participants' understanding of unconscious bias and its role, if any, on women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. Given the fragmented and limited state of research on unconscious bias in the South African REI, an inductive approach was chosen, allowing themes to naturally emerge from the collected data. This choice is consistent with the perspective of Woo et al. (2017), who argue that an inductive approach is best suited for research when there is scant knowledge on the subject or phenomenon under investigation. The study accomplished this by carefully analysing the data from various interviews and identifying recurring patterns and shared themes that collectively address each of the research questions. This analytical process, as outlined by Saunders and Lewis (2018a) sheds light on the

role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

Prior research has primarily focused on the various barriers women face in advancing to leadership opportunities. Literature is scanty on women leadership within the REI, and more specifically in the South African context. In addition, literature pertaining specifically to unconscious bias as a barrier towards women's leadership opportunities is scarce. Therefore, this research study aimed to comprehensively understand whether unconscious bias does exist, and if indeed it does, what role it plays in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

To address this previously unexplored perceived relationship between unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI, and to gain new insights as advocated by Saunders and Lewis (2018a), the study adopted an exploratory and qualitative research approach. This decision was motivated by the desire to investigate the factors that impact the relationship between unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. Furthermore, this research sought to explore the various strategies that can be implemented, if unconscious bias exists, to reduce the role of unconscious bias in women's advancement to leadership positions in the South African REI.

The selection of a qualitative research method was deliberate, as it enabled the researcher to conduct in-depth inquiries, yielding rich and meaningful insights from the perspectives of both leaders and followers. These insights pertained to how they interpreted their experiences in relation to each research question, in accordance with the principles outlined by Bluhm et al. (2011). The ultimate objective of this research was to establish a theoretical understanding of unconscious bias and the role (if any) it plays in women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

This research adopted a cross-sectional design, which involved collecting data from multiple sources at a single point in time, as outlined by Saunders and Lewis (2018b). The choice of a cross-sectional approach was driven by practical considerations aligning with the research objectives.

Data for this study was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted either face-to-face or online via MS Teams. This approach was selected to facilitate personal interaction and the development of rapport between the researcher and the interview participants, which was considered vital because of the potentially delicate topic of the study. In-person interviews were favoured to reduce chances of misunderstanding. The in-depth, semi-structured format of these interviews provided a thorough grasp of the subject being studied and enabled modifications to the interview questions based on participants' feedback. Furthermore, the interview questions were firmly grounded in the existing literature on the subject.

### **4.3 TARGET POPULATION**

The population identified to be relevant for the study was males and females working in the South African REI, specifically focusing on women professionals and their experiences with unconscious bias and leadership opportunities. Therefore, participants held various roles within the industry, such as asset managers, human capital managers and property developers. All the participants provided insights into the dynamics of unconscious bias and its impact on women's leadership advancement.

The suitability of participants to the sample criteria was determined during the interviews using the first interview question. This question asked participants about their professional history, including their tenure in the industry and the positions they have held. Through Questions 3 and 7, participants could then discuss instances where they witnessed or encountered unconscious bias.

### **4.4 SAMPLING METHOD AND SIZE**

The selection of the study's participants was based on their relevance to the research objectives. Specifically, men and women who hold various roles at different levels within the South African REI and could offer valuable insights based on their first-hand experiences, thereby providing pertinent data for analysis.

Given that the total population of women who have faced unconscious bias in their careers, and therefore experienced limited leadership opportunities within the industry, was unknown, a non-probability sampling technique was employed. This

approach aligns with the recommendation of Saunders and Lewis (2018a) who advocate for non-probability sampling when a sampling frame is absent. Initially, purposive non-probability sampling was utilised, where the selection of interviewees was based on the researcher's judgment to identify individuals best suited to contribute insights addressing the research questions, following the guidance of Saunders and Lewis (2018a). The sample was primarily drawn from the researcher's professional networks, with additional referrals based on the sample criteria.

It is important to note that the sample, because of the judgment, may not have equal representation across industries and genders. However, in qualitative research, where the focus is on the interviewee's capacity to offer valuable insights regarding the research topic, the randomness and representativeness of the sample were not the main priorities, as emphasised by Shaheen et al. (2019). The sample ultimately consisted of 14 mid to senior-level managers; the majority being senior and/or executive managers. This homogenous sample was chosen deliberately to align with the study's objectives and enable an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, consistent with the principles outlined by Saunders and Lewis (2018a).

#### **4.5 UNIT OF ANALYSIS**

(Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) define the unit of analysis as the "entity that forms the basis of any sample" (p. 114), whereby for this research, the unit of analysis consisted of individual professionals (men and women) working within the South African REI. These individuals served as the focal point for investigating the presence and role of unconscious bias in women's career advancement and leadership opportunities. By selecting individual women as the unit of analysis, the research aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences, challenges, and potential barriers they faced due to unconscious bias in their industry, contributing valuable insights to the broader discussion on gender diversity and equality in the South African REI.

#### **4.6 DATA COLLECTION TOOL**

While qualitative research often relies on the researcher as the primary measurement instrument, with their competence and effort directly impacting the study's credibility (Suter, 2012), an interview guide (APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE) was employed as a practical tool in this study. The formulation of research

questions in Chapter 3 stemmed from a comprehensive review of the literature, addressing the research problem identified in Chapter 1. To ensure that the reviewed literature and research questions were aligned with the interview queries, each research question was cross-referenced with the interview questions. This rigorous alignment process aimed to enhance the quality of data collected. The questions in the interview guide were strategically designed to facilitate interviews with male and female professionals in the South African REI. Given the exploratory nature of the study, these questions encouraged participants to delve deeply into the topic, potentially revealing novel insights (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Any ambiguities or uncertainties among participants were promptly clarified. By using this interview guide, consistency in data collection was maintained across interviews. The complexity of the questions naturally led to a semi-structured approach, balancing the need to validate existing literature while avoiding leading participants and allowing for the emergence of fresh insights (Appleton, 1995).

To refine the interview technique and assess the relevance and comprehensibility of the questions in the interview guide, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with one REI recruitment specialist and two senior managers. This early phase allowed for adjustments to be made, ensuring the research objectives would be effectively achieved from the data collected (Appleton, 1995). While the pilot interviews confirmed the effectiveness and credibility of the interview guide, they also revealed that the initial research brief was overly broad. Consequently, the researcher revised the research brief to provide greater clarity regarding unconscious bias in the industry, all while remaining sensitive to the nature of the subject matter. As the quality of data collected is significantly influenced by the researcher's interviewing skills, the pilot interviews were invaluable in improving the researcher's proficiency in conducting interviews (Appleton, 1995).

## **4.7 DATA COLLECTION**

The data collection method chosen for this study involved conducting semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected because the research aimed to explore a complex phenomenon, specifically, the role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI, which had not been extensively addressed in the existing literature. As described by Saunders and Lewis (2018b), semi-structured interviews are valuable for gaining new insights into

observed realities. They provided the researcher with a means to guide the conversation using an interview guide (Saunders & Lewis, 2018b), while offering leeway to delve deeper due to the complex nature of the research questions.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted, seven were face-to-face either at the participants' workplace or local coffee shops. Eight were held online via MS Teams, allowing interviewees outside Johannesburg to participate, therefore allowing the researcher to conduct more interviews in the same time horizon and cover a larger geographic area (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Furthermore, interview participants were male and female professionals within the South African REI, holding mid to senior and executive management positions. All participants were asked the same set of questions from the interview guide, except for question 7a, which was not asked to the male participants. The intention behind this approach of including male participants was to capture multiple perspectives and insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and enhancing the quality of findings. Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the primary mode of data collection because they facilitated the development of rapport, fostering an environment conducive to candid and open discussions based on individual experiences, viewpoints, and beliefs. Due to the delicate nature of the subject, building trust was of paramount importance.

Engaging potential participants involved initial contact via email, where the research objectives were clarified (referred to as the research brief), participants' willingness to take part was assessed, and appropriate interview arrangements were made. This was followed by a formal meeting request, whereby participants were then presented with the consent form (APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM) and asked to send the signed form back prior to the interview. On average, each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, the researcher exercised caution to avoid causing offence or discouraging participation and to maintain relationships with those who provided introductions and access to participants. The researcher aimed to reduce participant bias by establishing trust and creating a safe space for participants to openly express their perspectives and experiences. This was accomplished through a relaxed conversational approach, casual conversation, sharing personal

background and conducting interviews at the participants' preferred location. Participants were encouraged to express themselves openly without concern for criticism. The interviews were carried out with respect and without forming any preconceptions.

Each interview began with the researcher providing an overview of the study and the research objectives. Recognising the delicate nature of the research topic, participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The research objectives were shared with participants to ensure a shared understanding. All interviews were audio recorded upon obtaining the participant's permission. Following this, open-ended interview questions prompted participants to share their experiences. The interviews concluded with the researcher inviting participants to add any additional insights related to the topic. Field notes were taken during the interviews to capture key points (Saunders & Lewis, 2018b). To improve the accuracy of the data, the researcher cross-checked their understanding of the answers and asked for further explanations when needed.

After conducting the 14<sup>th</sup> interview, data collection was stopped because only a single new code was identified from the data of the last two interviews, and this code fit into a pre-existing theme. This approach is consistent with Fusch and Ness' (2015) suggestion that data gathering should persist until no new themes surface, indicating data saturation and diminishing the need for additional data collection.

## **4.8 DATA ANALYSIS**

During the interviews, audio recordings and associated field notes were collected and then electronically stored with several backups to safeguard against data loss and maintain its integrity. The data was protected in password-secured folders to ward off unsolicited access. Regardless of being virtual or in-person, all interviews were recorded through MS Teams. In-person interviews had the added measure of being recorded on a cell phone. The transcription of these interviews was carried out using the in-built functionality of MS Teams.

For the analysis, the interview transcriptions and field notes were primarily used. A thematic content analysis method was employed, letting themes naturally surface from the individual perspectives of the participants, as suggested by Adams et al.,

(2014). The data examination process began during the interview stage, driven by the research's main questions. The main goal was to spot themes that could answer these questions. ATLAS.ti software was instrumental in aiding this analysis. Each transcript and related field note were reviewed, from which codes were derived and given apt descriptive names capturing the essence of participant feedback. These codes were then grouped into categories based on mutual meanings and their interconnections (Adams et al., 2014). These categories were subsequently clustered into broader themes, each given a precise description. This thorough method of analysis was uniformly applied to the data from each participant's interview. Categories and themes arising from each interview were then interconnected.

The entire analysis process was iterative, involving multiple readings of the transcriptions, playback of audio files, and a recurrent cycle of coding and categorisation, ensuring data coherence. As the researcher delved deeper and revisited the data, a clearer understanding emerged. The resultant insights were assessed in line with the research's core questions.

#### **4.9 CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Qualitative research inherently involves the active participation of the researcher throughout the research process, a characteristic well-documented in the literature. This close involvement introduces the potential for researcher bias, a concern addressed by Suter (2012). To mitigate this bias and ensure the quality of the collected data, a series of measures were put in place. Pilot interviews were conducted to assess whether the researcher's presence influenced participant responses and to sensitise the researcher to possible leading questions (Appleton, 1995). Throughout the interviews, frequent clarification of participant responses was sought to ensure accurate interpretation. A reflective approach was adopted during both data collection and analysis, fostering an awareness of potential researcher bias and its implications (Saunders & Lewis, 2018b).

To further enhance data quality, several strategies were implemented. First, an interview guide was employed to maintain consistency across interviews, ensuring that the same core topics were addressed with each participant. Additionally, participants' comprehension of interview questions was continually assessed to



confirm their understanding. Audio recordings were transcribed to preserve the integrity of the data.

The reliability of findings was upheld by conducting interviews until data saturation was approached, indicating that no new themes or insights were emerging, as advocated by Fusch and Ness (2015). The suitability of interview participants was carefully considered during the selection process.

A fundamental technique for minimising bias and improving the quality of findings was data triangulation. This approach involved gathering insights from different vantage points to verify and enrich the results (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To achieve this, interviews were conducted with both male and female professionals within the South African REI, who hold various roles within the industry at different levels. The same interview questions, except question 7a from the interview guide, were asked to all participants. By collecting responses from both males and females, in response to identical queries, the study aimed to bolster the validity and trustworthiness of its findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2018b).

#### **4.10 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

Qualitative research by its nature is subjective, therefore it has the risk of being subjected to various biases (Saunders et al., 2007). In addition to these possible biases, the study was subjected to the following limitations:

Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge the limited generalisability of the study's findings. The unique characteristics of the South African REI and the specific cultural context in which it operates necessitate caution when attempting to apply these findings to other industries or regions. The results might not easily extend beyond the unique context of this study.

In addition, practical constraints, and challenges in accessing participants, especially high-ranking executives, or decision-makers in the REI, posed significant challenges. Some individuals were hesitant to participate, possibly due to the sensitive nature of the topic, or had limited availability due to their demanding schedules. Consequently, questions about the representativeness of the sample and the potential for selection bias had to be addressed, by reaching out to a broad spectrum of professionals within

the REI, utilising various channels of communication, and assuring participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Efforts were also made to explain the importance of diverse perspectives to enrich the research findings and conclusions, encouraging participation from a balanced mix of individuals to minimise selection bias.

Another important limitation was related to the sample size and selection of participants. Despite the researcher's best efforts, practical constraints, and challenges in accessing participants led to a sample size that could be considered limited. Consequently, questions about the representativeness of the sample and the potential for selection bias had to be addressed. To address selection bias, a rigorous criterion was established for participant selection to ensure a diverse representation of roles, experiences, and perspectives within the REI.

Moreover, the research utilised data provided by participants themselves, which could potentially lead to a bias towards socially acceptable responses. Participants might have been inclined to provide responses they deemed socially acceptable rather than entirely reflective of their genuine experiences and attitudes.

The accuracy of the data collected on unconscious bias and its role in limiting women's leadership opportunities was influenced by the participants' ability to recall and report incidents accurately. Factors like memory biases and the intricacies of unconscious bias may have affected the reliability of the data.

Establishing a causal relationship between unconscious bias and limited women's leadership opportunities proved to be a complex challenge. Other variables, such as individual qualifications, organisational policies, and market conditions, could have played influential roles in restricting leadership opportunities.

Finally, it was important to acknowledge that the study might not have captured long-term changes or evolving dynamics within the South African REI. Shifts in societal attitudes, economic conditions, or industry practices over time may have altered the role of unconscious bias, which this research may not have fully captured.

These limitations, inherent to the research process, were openly acknowledged and played a vital role in defining the boundaries and potential constraints of the study. They underscored the need for a cautious and context-specific interpretation of the findings.

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study presents the results of the study on unconscious bias in the South African REI. The first objective is to establish whether unconscious bias towards women exists in the South African REI, and to determine its sources. The second research objective is to explore the role of unconscious bias on women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. The third objective is to examine strategies that can be implemented, if unconscious bias exists, to reduce the role of unconscious bias on women's leadership opportunities in the industry. As Creswell (2015) advised, qualitative analysis centres on the exploratory analysis of transcripts from interviews with research participants. The current analysis is based on the responses from 14 interviewees who qualitatively responded to questions in the interview guide. The analysis is performed through text querying, co-concordance, references, co-occurrence, and network analysis of responses using ATLAS.ti.

### 5.2 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Prior to the research findings and interpretation, the participants' demographic information is provided. Respondents were asked about their role or positions. Table 2 presents the characteristics of key informants in the interviews.

**Table 2: Characteristics of key informants to the interviews**

Participant	Gender	Role within the South African REI	Industry Experience (years)	Experience category (years)
1	F	Human capital executive – REIT	14	10-14
2	M	Civil engineer, quantity surveyor, and now property investor	40	+20
3	M	Group CEO and chairman in property investments and developments. Chairman	20	20+

<b>4</b>	F	CEO – transformation of property sector	18	15-19
<b>5</b>	M	Executive director – REI consultant	20	20+
<b>6</b>	M	Qualified chartered accountant – CFO student accommodation development	13	10-14
<b>7</b>	M	Engineer – Head facilities management	15	15-19
<b>8</b>	F	Senior real estate banker	20	20+
<b>9</b>	M	CEO - transient residential property fund	10	10-14
<b>10</b>	M	Property development manager	4	<10
<b>11</b>	F	Consulting. Executive recruitment and coaching	14	10-14
<b>12</b>	F	Managing director – property holding and management	10	10-14
<b>13</b>	M	Executive asset manager	15	15-19
<b>14</b>	F	Managing director – REI recruitment specialist	18	15-19

Table 2 shows that 43% of respondents were female, which is worthwhile noting because the researcher received more interest from males compared to females to participate in the study. Nonetheless, the collection of data from male counterparts was to get a different perspective and understand how men perceive unconscious bias in the industry. The interviews were mainly conducted with mid to senior and executive managers who occupy diverse key positions of professions and are directly

involved in the REI with almost similar work experiences. One participant had less than 10 years of experience, while five of the interviews were conducted with managers who had 10 to 14 years of experience. Four participants had 15-19 years of experience. The remaining four participants had more than 20 years of experience in the industry. This therefore demonstrates how the choice of managers of different levels and experience was to get balanced insights from all participants.

### 5.3 UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Despite women entering the workforce faster than men and the various efforts to increase gender diversity and inclusion, fewer females hold leadership positions in most industries compared to their male counterparts (Harris, 2019; Lin et al., 2023). Understanding the existence of unconscious bias in the South African REI is the primary objective of this study. The study intended to explore and understand whether unconscious bias exists, and if it does, what are instances and manifestations and causes within the South African REI. The following sub-themes will be used to analyse the interview transcripts provided by the interviewees.

#### 5.3.1 UNCONSCIOUS BIAS EXISTENCE / NON-EXISTENCE

Text search querying reveals “4 respondents out of 14 highlighted that unconscious bias exists”. The keywords from some of the respondents are illustrated in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Key words from interviews**

Respondent	Key words
<b>Respondent 1</b>	Unconscious bias existence, self-awareness, impact, physical attributions, women in real estate, South Africa.
<b>Respondent 3</b>	Unconscious bias exists, habits, behaviours, privilege, perception, automatic behaviour, South African real estate industry, sources.
<b>Respondent 4</b>	Affinity, resonated, experience, drinking place, unconscious bias, cultures, South African real estate industry, women.
<b>Respondent 13</b>	Unconscious bias, South African real estate industry, existence, sources, client relationships.

Looking at Table 3, one could easily say that four out of 14 respondents did not say the combination of those keywords in vain. The mention of the words “perception” and “unconscious bias” together with “South African real estate industry” is an indication that professionals within the South African REI perceive there to be a problem of unconscious bias within the industry. It is, therefore, crucial to highlight that the people who acknowledged that it is unconscious bias were mainly women. This recognises the existence of bias, which may affect how women are treated and the opportunities that are available to them in the industry, as well as the fact that women do not think that this prejudice is conscious bias. The first goal is to explore and understand whether unconscious bias exists, and if it does, the role it plays in limiting women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI. To establish whether unconscious bias exists in the South African REI was analogous to determining the instances and manifestation of the problem. Hence the analysis is done on cases where participants point to the existence of it.

Observing the results of the subtheme of whether unconscious bias exists or not, it is crucial to remember that this result only represents the opinions of a third of the respondents, not all research participants. This implies that different people may have different opinions about whether unconscious bias exists, and further studies may be required to get a more comprehensive picture, especially on gender equality instances, manifestation and causes of unconscious bias, rather than relying on text search query alone. Although some responders have acknowledged the existence of bias, more analysis was necessary to pinpoint the precise causes and instances of this bias. Next, the analysis touches on unconscious bias instances and manifestations as one of the main themes, while concurrently coming up with subthemes.

### **5.3.2 UNCONSCIOUS BIAS INSTANCES, MANIFESTATIONS AND CAUSES**

An essential component of achieving gender equality in the sector is the recognition of unconscious prejudice, especially about women. This is supported by Harris (2019) who suggested that by utilising the varied skills of all people, addressing these preconceptions can enhance industrial performance and foster innovation in addition to making the workplace more egalitarian.

Table 4 illustrates grounded, density and an example of a quotation from a participant, on unconscious bias instances, manifestations and causes.

**Table 4: Unconscious bias instances and their causes**

	Grounded	Density	Participant	Quote
<b>Career progression</b>	5	0	P4, P11, P12	[P11] Yes. So, for example, who will hire a CEO, or all the C-Suite is hired by the board? You've seen hardly any females in many of those boards where there's a public sector...
<b>Less trust for women</b>	3	4	P1, P11, P13	[P11] So, if I remember, you spoke about a woman being too excited or emotional.
<b>Micro and macro aggression</b>	3	2	P5, P10	[P5] It's the micro aggression of being discredited. Now you're not involved in decision-making, etcetera. You know, it's macro aggression...
<b>Physical attribution</b>	1	2	P1	[P1] Physical attributions – women can't lift something on site.
<b>Segregation</b>	1	1	P3	[P3] We tend to segregate and say this one is not for you.
<b>Social positions</b>	1	6	P1	[P1] Women's position in society...
<b>Social role</b>	1	5	P1	[P1] It is difficult to detach from social roles; it trickles into the workplace– how men speak to and about them. Example: in external



				<i>meeting – 4 partners – asked for water ... “thank you darling” to a woman.</i>
<b>Stereotype</b>	2	2	<i>P4</i>	<i>[P4] I've also experienced the line that women are emotional. You know further that women can't make sound business decisions.</i>
<b>Traditions</b>	1	3	<i>P1</i>	<i>[P1] Tradition tribalism – can contribute to the behaviour/attitude, for example, an uncle towards a female.</i>
<b>Underrepresented</b>	1	1	<i>P11</i>	<i>[P11] Yeah, because being in the industry for some time now, it's always just puzzled me why we are underrepresented as women... And I didn't want to make it about race, but more so, black females are underrepresented.</i>
<b>Relegation</b>	4	1	<i>P11, P1, P5</i>	<i>[P1] Women occupy admin-heavy roles – PM, research, presence behind a screen - across all ages.</i>

The results show that eight out of 14 participants [P1, P3, P4, P5, P10, P11, P12, P13], using various subthemes directly and indirectly acknowledge the existence of unconscious bias in the South African REI. Like the unconscious bias existence subtheme, the results show that respondents' acknowledgement of the presence of unconscious bias in the South African REI emphasises the necessity of additional

research into the causes of this prejudice and its effects on gender equality in the industry. The results also show that unconscious bias is most prevalent in career progression and relegation to lower management and leadership positions.

The results also show that unconscious bias contributes to the lack of career progression for women in the industry. The participants revealed that the lack of diversity in executive positions, such as CEOs and C-suite members, is often due to the limited number of qualified women in the pool of candidates.

[P11]: *"Yeah, because being in the industry for some time now, it's always just puzzled me why we are underrepresented as women".*

This imbalance can be attributed to historical gender biases, unequal opportunities, and limited access to leadership roles for women. As a result, men who had early chances and were deemed suitable for these positions dominated the ratio of qualified candidates. This correlates to privilege, which also emerged as an instance and manifestation of unconscious bias. Privilege emerges over time as individuals develop habits and behaviours that shape their perception of personal and others' space. This leads to unconscious biases.

In the theme of unconscious bias, participants talked about the subtheme of trust and how it relates to a woman's excitement or emotional state.

[P11]: *"So, if I remember, you spoke about a woman being too excited or emotional".*

There was a statement made demonstrating that the lack of trust was about believing that a woman could not be a plumber compared to a male, for example.

The results further show that one of the instances and manifestations of unconscious bias emanates from micro aggression. One of the participants feels discredited and excluded from decision-making, which they perceive as both micro and macro aggression.

[P5]: *"It's the micro aggression of being discredited. Now you're not involved in decision-making, etcetera. You know, it's macro aggression..."*

They believe that their responses are influenced by their gender and race, as they see gender issues stemming from race issues. These micro and macro aggressions can also lead to segregation, whereby one of the participants believes that often women are only excluded using the notion that something is not meant for them.

[P3]: *"We tend to segregate and say this one is not for you".*

Further to this, relegations emerge as another instance and manifestation of unconscious bias. In this instance, participants share that women often occupy administrative roles such as project management and research, particularly in the tech industry.

[P1]: *"Women occupy admin-heavy roles – PM, research, presence behind a screen - across all ages".*

They note that while there is some training and increasing female representation in the industry, there is still a lack of women in leadership positions. One of the participants believes that people may be hiding behind unconscious biases and that true female empowerment means having women in decision-making roles, not just token leadership positions.

Another instance and manifestation of unconscious bias emanates from physical attributions. The physical attribution, for example, entails that women cannot lift something on-site is false. Women are just as capable as men when it comes to physical tasks and can lift heavy objects if they have the necessary strength and technique. However, gender should not be a determining factor in assessing someone's ability to perform physical tasks.

The results further show that another instance and manifestation of unconscious bias emanates from social roles.

[P1]: *"It is difficult to detach from social roles; it trickles into the workplace– how men speak to and about them".*

The respondents believe that women's position in society refers to their standing or status in relation to men and the roles they are expected to fulfil. Historically, women have faced various forms of discrimination and subjugation, such as limited access to education, employment opportunities, and political power. However, over time, there have been significant advancements in women's rights and empowerment. Women have made strides in areas such as education, healthcare, business, politics, and gender equality. Despite progress, challenges such as gender-based violence, disparities in earnings, and underrepresentation in leadership roles persist, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the need for further societal change.

Like social roles, stereotypes demonstrate manifestation of unconscious bias. One of the participants has noticed that women are often perceived as emotional and unable to make sound business decisions. She experienced being told women are too emotional and was offered compromises instead of promotions because women are not seen as potential leaders. Furthermore, tradition came up as another instance and manifestation of unconscious bias, whereby one participant revealed that tradition can influence one's behaviour and attitude towards women, such as an “uncle's” behaviour towards a “young female”.

Finally, the results also show that one of the instances and manifestation of unconscious bias emanates from underrepresentation. One participant expressed confusion as to why women are underrepresented in their industry, and specifically black women are even less represented.

From the above findings, the relationship between the instances, manifestations and the causes of unconscious bias are presented in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Network analysis**

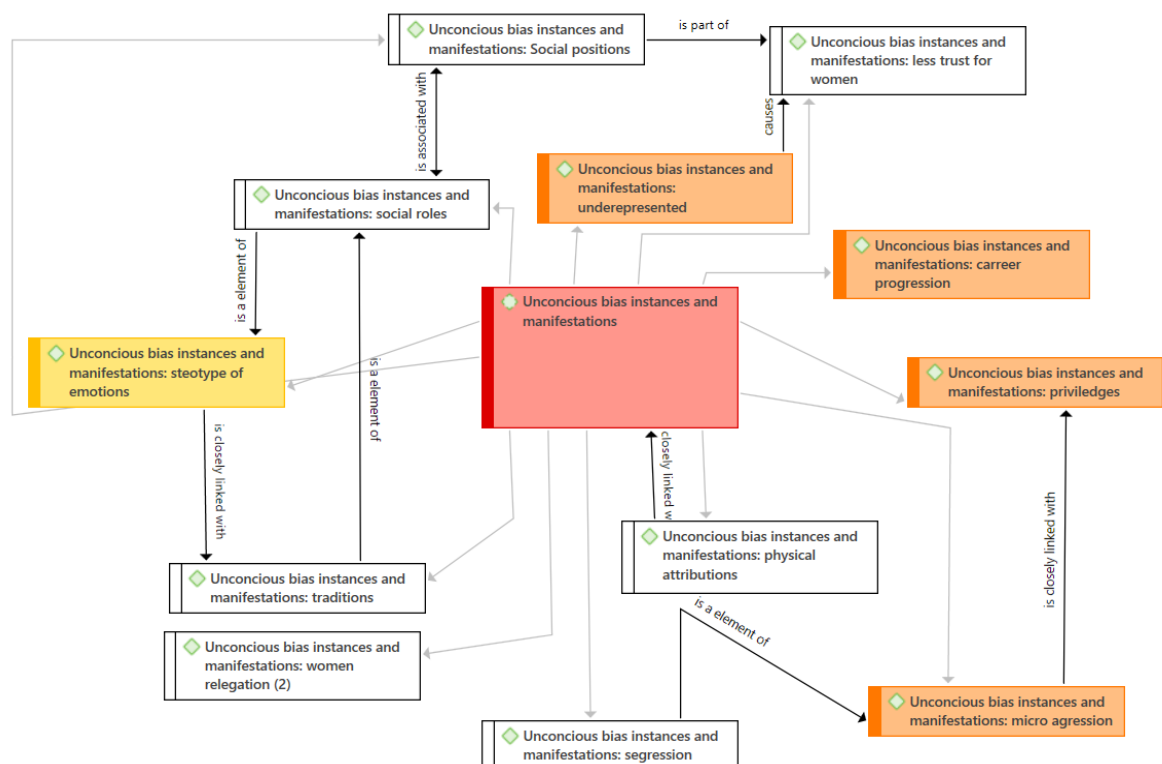


Figure 6 in support of what has been presented and found in Table 3, shows that women are often in administrative and support roles, but few are in leadership

positions in industries. This reveals that there is possibly unconscious bias and societal expectations that contribute to this imbalance. Women face challenges with physical tasks and may be spoken to disrespectfully in the workplace. Women's position in society and the lack of trust also hinders their career progression. Privilege and unconscious biases contribute to the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles. In addition, lack of opportunities and a smaller pool of qualified women contribute to the gender imbalance in leadership, which can be further exacerbated by micro and macro aggression, which can discredit women and undermine their involvement in decision-making. What is important to be cognisant about however, which emerged in the findings, is that gender issues can intersect with race issues, particularly with the underrepresentation of Black females.

#### 5.4 UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: GENDER EQUALITY

Part of the first objective was to explore and understand whether unconscious bias exists and its causes. It is rational to conclude that to establish whether unconscious bias exists in the South African REI was analogous in determining the current state of gender equality itself. Hence the analysis is done on factors that reveal the existence of gender inequality. Next, the analysis touches on gender equality as one of the main themes while concurrently coming up with subthemes.

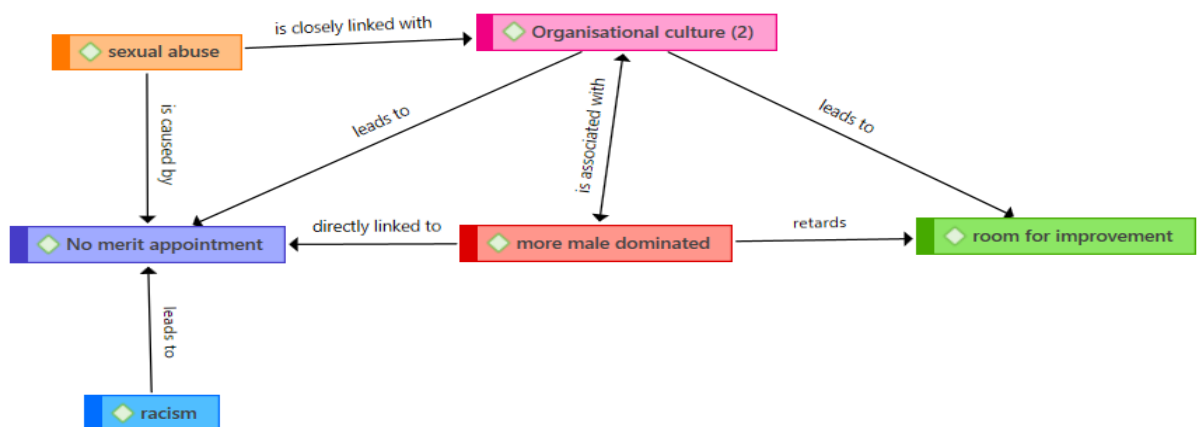
**Table 5: Gender equality**

Subtheme	Narrative instances / grounded	Density
More male dominated	5	1
No merit appointment	4	3
Fairly male dominated	3	0
Racism	3	1
Room for improvement	3	1
Organisational culture	2	5
Sexual abuse	1	1

## Theme 2: Gender equality

Table 5 shows that most participants would say that the current state shows the existence of gender inequality as mainly witnessed by the narrative that reveals instances of male dominations and no merit appointment especially on women. Gender inequality would equally be shown in instances where there is fair male domination, racism and where there is still room for improvement. Though to a lesser extent, gender inequality would also be shown by organisational culture and sexual abuse instances. However, the table shows the relationship between codes exist on all these instances of gender inequality, except on fair male domination. Figure 7 is a network that shows existing relationships of gender equality codes.

**Figure 7: Relationships of gender equality codes**



The network in Figure 7 shows that there are significant interplays and relationships between subthemes on the current state of gender equality. Figure 7 also shows that male domination retards any room for improvement on unconscious bias and the state of gender inequality. Male domination is also directly linked to all the subthemes, that is, organisational culture, no appointment based on merit and sexual abuse as well as Black women racism.

## Theme 3: Role of unconscious bias

The proportion of women in senior management roles globally has shown gradual progress over the years, but significant gender disparities persist, and no country has achieved full gender equality in terms of economic participation, opportunities, and political empowerment (Griffiths et al., 2019). Understanding the role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI was the

main objective of this study. The use of thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti software facilitated the interpretation and comprehension of the collected data. The present study yielded a set of main sub-themes that emerged on the impact of certain instance of unconscious bias. The present study yielded many noticeable sub-themes as presented with their respective grounded and gravity (in parenthesis):

1. Influence of gender roles (based on unconscious bias) on rapport [4,6]
2. Role of unconscious bias on networking [2,2]
3. Role of unconscious bias on women's leadership opportunities [5,1]
4. Role of unconscious bias on stereotype development and segregation [3,0]
5. Role of unconscious bias on career progression and its cascading to other variables [7,3]

These subthemes are presented and explored in the following sections.

#### **5.4.1.1 ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON CAREER PROGRESSION**

This subtheme examines the role of unconscious bias towards women's desire to progress in their careers in the South African REI, and its cascading to other variables. The participants' responses are as follows:

Participant [P4] said:

*"...consequently, he will get a promotion than the women".*

Relatedly participant [P8] concludes that:

*"... it takes longer for women to get into leadership positions".*

Additionally participant [P3] said that:

*"I mean, recently, the industry has opened up quite a bit. So, if you look at all of the opportunities to network nowadays, you look at the WhatsApp groups and the social media side of things; it is very open. And I think that you know, the opportunity for women to integrate networks, be part of those networks that will open up opportunities, has improved significantly".*

Moreover, participant [P5] noted that:

*“Unconscious bias affects women's advancement within the South African real estate industry”.*

Moreover participant [P9] noted that:

*“I suppose, to an extent, it's not granting the appropriate opportunity or waiting for women to have the ability to advance their careers, or to follow a particular position. I suppose it comes around the expectation of who people would naturally assume would full a position. And it's, I guess, based on the premise of what women's roles have previously been in business. And I think in corporate, setups and corporate South Africa, UMM, we are starting to see that creep through now where you get more and more women who want to have careers”.*

Moreover participant [P13] highlighted that:

*“I've been saying HR always has to be a woman. I'm not saying I would feel more comfortable with the woman when I needed help in a natural perspective, but I know men can't similarly also be like, sit down, OK and talk you through those emotions”.*

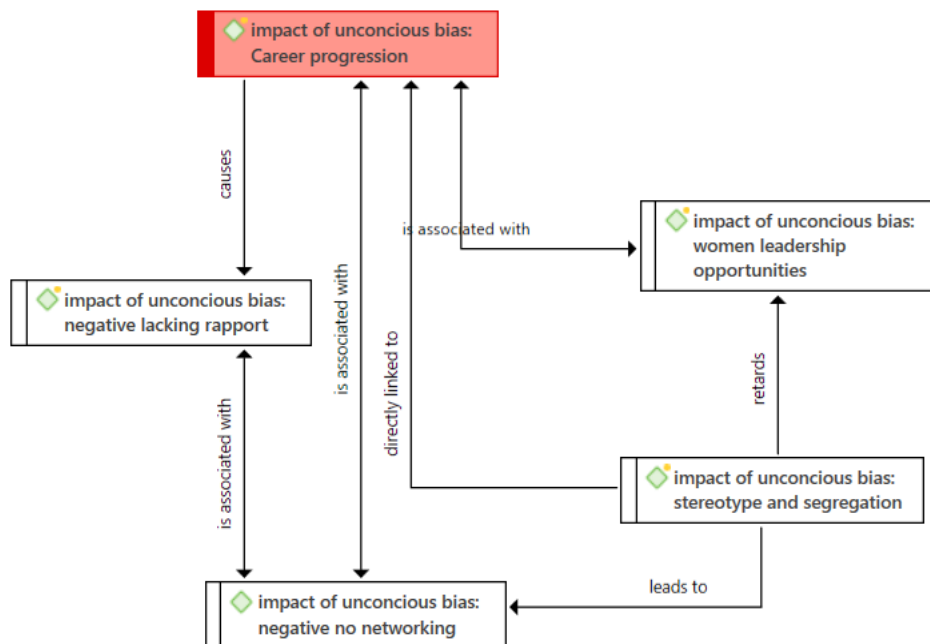
Considering all the views expressed by participants, it is evident that some women prefer to promote the women themselves. As such, the person will receive a promotion from women, suggesting that women may play a role in determining the promotions of other women. However, the statement also suggests that women may face longer wait times to reach leadership positions in the REI. Despite the existence of networking, unconscious bias still affects women's career progression in the industry. Women may not be given the appropriate opportunities or have their potential for career progression recognised due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles. There is a growing trend of more women wanting to have careers and make advancements in REI corporates in South Africa. While some believe that HR roles should be filled by women, it is important to recognise that men can also provide support and guidance in navigating emotions and personal challenges.

The result shows that career progression is one of the key variables affected by unconscious bias as highlighted by 6 of the 14 respondents in their verbatim statements. This shows that almost half of the people interviewed acknowledged the prevalence of unconscious bias that has an impact on the careers of women working in the REI in South Africa.



The fact that almost half of the proportion of respondents acknowledged the impact of unconscious bias on the professional success of women confirms that unconscious bias does indeed play a role, because career progressions are directly associated with most of the other effects, especially the leadership opportunities. This is shown by a network of analysis in Figure 8 below.

**Figure 8: Network of analysis**



#### **5.4.2 ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES**

Closely related to the career progression subtheme, this subtheme examines the role of unconscious bias towards women who desire to occupy leadership positions in the South African REI. The notable participants' responses are given as follows:

Participant [P3] said that:

*"I believe it is ingrained... Privilege exists amongst human beings concerning what they see as their space and what they see as space belonging to other people, and I think it happens over time in the sense that we learn certain habits and behaviours. We then behave automatically in specific environments, creating those unconscious biases".*

The sentiment from the participant proves that the concept of privilege is deeply ingrained in human behaviour and can lead to unconscious biases. This means that people over time develop habits and behaviours that determine how they perceive personal space and the space of others. This can result in a sense of entitlement or ownership over certain spaces, which creates unconscious biases that directly or indirectly affect women harnessing leadership opportunities.

Related to bias instances that affect women's leadership opportunities, this is what respondents had to say:

Participant [P1] said that:

*"Women occupy admin-heavy roles – PM, research, presence behind a screen - across all ages".*

Participant [P3] said that:

*"...but it was pretty clear that there was a lot of training and several women who had training or were becoming part of the industry, though fewer women were in leadership positions".*

Moreso, participant [P3] highlighted that:

*"I think people are hiding behind this unconscious bias, and it's like saying, well, you know, I'm not racist, but I tend to gravitate towards White people, and I don't buy that. Not in the democracy, we are in this country, not where women's empowerment is so important".*

Emotionally participant [P8] said that:

*"I don't only want to talk about token leadership; when I say token leadership, I speak about operational roles...We want females in actual decision-making capabilities in decision-making roles".*

The participant points out that women often occupy administrative roles such as project management and research, particularly in the "tech" industry. They note that while there is some training and increasing female representation in the industry, there is still a lack of women in leadership positions. The participant believes that people may be hiding behind unconscious biases and that true female empowerment means having women in decision-making roles, not just token leadership positions.

### **5.4.3 ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON NETWORKING**

The narrative instances show that the REI in South Africa has become more open in terms of networking opportunities, such as WhatsApp groups and social media. This has improved the chances for women to integrate into these networks and access more career opportunities.

Expressively, participant [P1] said that:

*“Women don’t go out to play golf where networking happens; what you do outside the environment”.*

Emotionally participant [P8] said that:

*“We cannot keep saying there’s this unconscious bias when we’ve been speaking about it for so long and even had what you call it, forums, and you know, there’s a Women’s Property Network”.*

The results clearly show because of unconscious behaviour, women will end up not participating in networking events in environments like golf where business connections are made. The Women’s Property Network, aimed at promoting gender equality in networking and business opportunities was therefore mentioned as a remedy to poor networking opportunities caused by unconscious bias towards women.

#### **5.4.3.1 INFLUENCE OF GENDER ROLE BASED UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON RAPPORT**

This subtheme examines the role of unconscious bias towards women, brought about by the gender role set by patriarchal society in the South African REI. The participants’ responses are as follows:

Participant [P1] noted:

*“Man and woman at the same level with experience: woman married with kids, etc. vs. male – he has more time to get rapport with executives”.*

Participant [P5] said:

*“My understanding is it is a perception. Gender roles are socially constructed and founded...”*

Moreover participant [P10] noted that:

*"I believe it's representation, leadership... Men can show up, and it's good enough".*

Considering the views of the above participants, it can be noted that there is a perception that when a man and a woman are at the same level of experience in a professional setting, the man may have an advantage in building affinity with executives. This perception assumes that the man has more time available due to factors like not being accountable for family and household responsibilities, which allows him to dedicate more time to networking and relationship-building with higher-level executives. The result based on these sentiments is that gender role is partly and an instance of unconscious bias as it plays a role in the positions held in organisations. In a scenario where a man and a woman have equal experience, the man may have an advantage due to having more time to build rapport with executives. This is because society values his presence more, which can benefit him in terms of representation and leadership.

#### **5.4.4 ROLE OF STEREOTYPE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON STEREOTYPE DEVELOPMENT AND SEGREGATION**

The narrative instances show that the REI in South Africa has become more open in terms of networking opportunities, such as WhatsApp groups and social media. This has improved the chances for women to integrate into these networks and access more career opportunities.

Emotionally, participant [P8] said that:

*"Stereotype associates certain functions, roles, and leadership positions with males, and as we do that, I think it feeds into the work environment where we operate".*

Ardently, participant [P4] said that:

*"The affinity bias resonated with me, what I had experienced... I don't think it was a deliberate bias. I think it was an unconscious bias. As cultures, we often migrate or feel more comfortable with our culture".*

The verbatim statements show that stereotypes as manifestations and instances of unconscious biases often lead to gendered associations with specific roles and positions in the workplace. This obviously creates a work environment that reinforces these biases. The respondents therefore believe that this bias is ingrained in cultures

and leads people to gravitate towards those who share their cultural background. The results also show that stereotypes as an instance of unconscious behaviour perpetuate gender inequality as seen in regression approaches that limit opportunities for women, as they may face biases in attaining leadership positions or roles traditionally seen as male-dominated. It is therefore crucial to challenge these stereotypes and promote inclusivity in the workplace.

#### **Theme 4: Strategies and interventions to mitigate unconscious bias.**

This theme emerges from the perspectives of individuals who believe that unconscious bias is a prevalent issue within organisations, and that there are viable strategies to mitigate its effects. Some participants highlighted that some companies currently had strategies in place, especially those listed companies.

Participant [P3] said:

*“But if you look at the real estate industry, the listed real estate sector, you will see that included in the corporate governance and the annual reports, there is a move and a determined and intentional move by boards to become a lot more equal”.*

Participant [P3] went on further to say:

*“You look at boards of other uh listed entities, you will see that there is a conscious move initiated by the initial transformation steps that were taken in the industry to make sure that across the board at that level there is change. And then if you go senior and middle management, you can see that the steps that are taken for interviews, the steps that are taken in selecting candidates, there is a conscious and very intentional criteria which aims or seeks to include more women in the mix...”*

In scenarios where unintentional bias is evident, the focus shifts to identifying effective measures to counteract its impact on women's advancement to leadership roles within the South African REI. Given that the study aims to uncover and propose solutions grounded in both participant insights and existing literature, the findings reveal a commendable approach to addressing the pervasive issue of unconscious bias. This is aimed at diminishing its impact on women's ascension to senior leadership positions within the South African REI. The presentation of these findings is organised by their grounded nature, density, and is exemplified through selected quotations, illustrating the proposed strategies in their order of groundedness.

- Mentorship [4,1]
- Network [4,1]
- Gender mainstreaming [3,1]
- Engagement initiatives [2,5]
- Clearer mechanism for performance appraisals [1,3]
- Women's Property Network [1, 2]
- Young women's opportunities [1,2]
- Bottom-up performance review [1,1]
- Equality charter [1,1]
- Functions and celebrations [1,1]
- Publicity [1,1]
- Transformational agenda [1,1]
- Transparency on board composition [1,1]

The network of relationship is shown in Figure 9 below.

**Figure 9: Strategies and practice to mitigate unconscious bias**

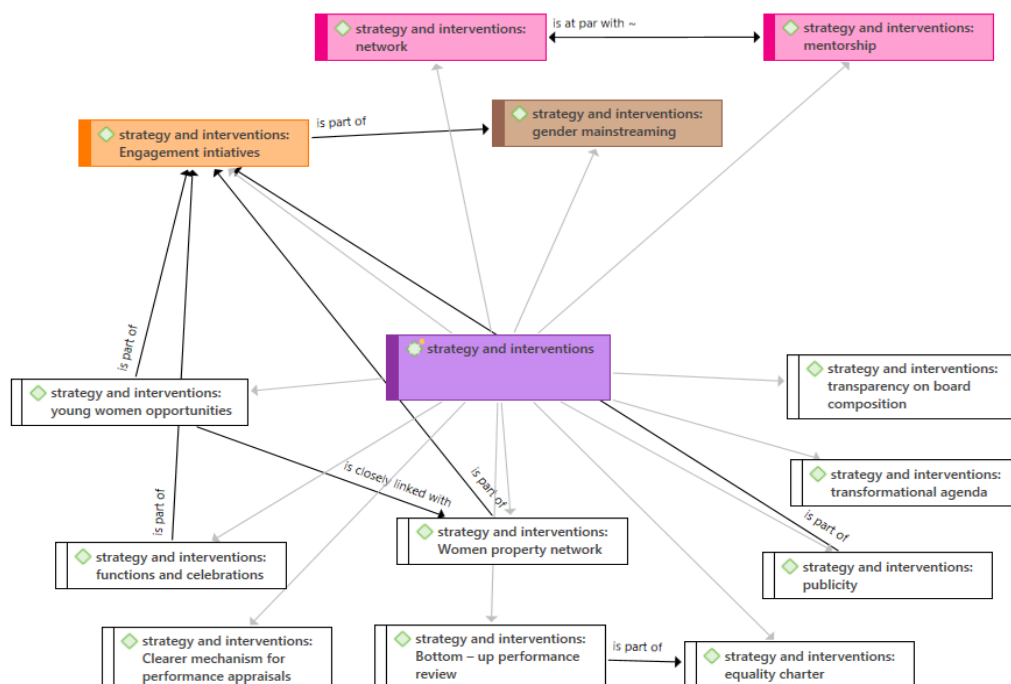


Figure 9 highlights the most prioritised strategies in the REI. The results further show the most highlighted practices are mentorship and network practices, whereby participant [P11] had the following to say about mentorship and sponsorship:

*“Well, the sponsorship thing really, that model you know... So, I talked to all the people like a coach. I tell them you need to have three people in your life as a professional when you're going up...”*

The mentorship strategy was justified as participants pointed out that women who have better access to mentorship, are more emotionally intelligent, and are more likely to support and mentor other women to create opportunities for success. The networking was equally recommended as participants highlighted that the lack of women in senior management positions means they often lack the power to make decisions related to affiliations, promotions, and networking. Networking was recommended as participants noted that it is more complicated for women, as it differs from how men network. This makes it difficult for women to fit in and get invited to informal networks where important decisions are made.

The industry also utilises gender mainstreaming policies to curb unconscious bias. To promote women's advancement into leadership roles within the industry, apart from letting time play it out and diversifying leadership, specific strategies and interventions were recommended by participants. These may include mentorship and sponsorship programmes by establishing programmes where senior leaders mentor and sponsor women employees, providing guidance, support, and opportunities for career advancement. Leadership development programmes through offering training and development initiatives specifically tailored for women, focusing on skills needed for leadership positions. Creating a supportive and inclusive work environment by implementing policies and practices that promote gender diversity, equal opportunities, and work-life balance, thus encouraging the professional growth of women and ensuring transparent and unbiased promotion processes by reviewing and revising promotion criteria to eliminate potential biases and ensure fair consideration of women candidates.

In terms of policies and practices, participants emphasised the need for deliberateness and effective implementation, because the strategies are currently in place, but unfortunately are not being effected. This was addressed by participants [P1], [P5] and [P6].

Participant [P1] said:

*“Mechanisms exist; there needs to be effective implementation...”*

While participant [P5] said:

*“I think the policies are there, like I said, as a framework, but it requires people to actually stretch themselves strictly thinking, depress them and use them. I think it requires bold, courageous, and hard conversations”.*

And participant [P6] said:

*“Companies almost need to be deliberate with their policies and actually act on them and not just have it on paper and just park it for a year”.*

In addition to existing policies and practices, the industry utilises engagement initiatives which are associated with celebrations and providing publicity, whereby the Women’s Property Network (WPN) has been instrumental in that space.

With regards to the work of WPN, participant [P4] said:

*“OK, I think WPN is definitely trying to do that and I think they have really successfully promoted women in the industry. And I think the organisation is trying to empower, recognise and do some of the things we spoke about”.*

In line with the above, participant [P4] said:

*“Increasing recognition of women in the industry... I think as women, we have an opportunity, I have an opportunity, to recognise power and celebrate one another...”*

Initiatives such as events, can help address problems, but it is important to have platforms for communication and bring issues to management and HR. Changing the culture and beliefs within organisations is crucial, and strong leadership support for gender equality can influence the rest of the employees.

Importantly, the industry must utilise clearer mechanisms for performance appraisals. A performance appraisal is an official process that assesses an individual’s work performance and offers insights into their strengths and weaknesses. It helps managers assess employee contributions, set goals, and make decisions related to promotions, training, and compensation.



The industry could equally use the WPN with the aim of promoting gender equality and empowering women in terms of property ownership. By providing resources, support, and networking opportunities, these initiatives help women navigate the challenges and barriers they may face in the REI. Overall, they strive to create a more inclusive and equitable society where women have equal access to property ownership and financial independence.

The other initiatives that were quoted only once by the respondents include the bottom-up performance review [1,1], equality charter [1,1], functions and celebrations [1,1], publicity [1,1], transformational agenda [1,1] and transparency on board composition [1,1]. Despite being quoted once these strategies were found to be important by participants.

Regarding the bottom-up performance review, the REI uses it as an evaluation process that involves feedback from employees and peers, rather than just being top-down or manager-driven. It allows individuals to have a voice in the evaluation process and encourages a more inclusive and comprehensive assessment of performance.

The industry also uses the gender equality charter with the Property Sector Charter Council dedicated to promoting gender equality in the field. One participant pointed out that through some educational institutions, organisations are working towards creating a more gender-balanced environment and attracting interns who will contribute to this goal.

The industry also uses the functions and celebration strategy to relieve unconscious bias. Respondents pointed out the need for the corporate environment, to celebrate and acknowledge each other's achievements. Participants pointed out the need to celebrate as sometimes, there is a tendency to focus solely on climbing the corporate ladder, but it is worthwhile to reflect on the impact a local leader can have. Relatedly, the industry can also use publicity to prompt action. Respondents find publicity necessary to increase awareness by publicising the issue and consistently publishing information about unconscious bias.

Finally, to make the industry more inclusive, it was found to be important to have a transformation agenda that broke down barriers and provided opportunities for people of colour and women to participate. Participants highlighted that in integrated

reporting publications, the REI organisations affirm commitment to achieving a balanced board composition in terms of demographics, age, and gender.

## **5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The research findings reveal a consensus among participants regarding the persistent gender and cultural representation gaps in the South African REI. Historically, the industry has been marred by underrepresentation and biases towards specific skill sets and qualifications, inadvertently contributing to the diversity deficit. Although strides have been made towards gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, a situation exacerbated by unconscious biases and societal stereotypes.

The participants underscored the pivotal role of White males in the conversation, given their predominant influence and power in the industry. The entrenched nature of unconscious biases, often rooted in long-standing societal norms and stereotypes, continues to impede women's career progression. These biases manifest in various forms, including the lack of female representation in decision-making roles and boards, microaggressions, and physical attributions that undermine women's capabilities.

The findings highlighted the existence of initiatives like the Property Charter and Sector Codes aimed at addressing these biases. However, their effectiveness is limited, with women often still relegated to administrative roles. The participants expressed the need for a transformation that transcends policy to include intentional efforts to dismantle barriers for women and people of colour.

In the context of corporate culture, the study emphasised the need for bottom-up performance reviews, inclusive events, and transparency in company philosophies. Initiatives like the Women's Property Network are instrumental but need to be complemented by more targeted actions, including regulatory measures to ensure gender diversity and equality.

The participants advocated for women's mentorship and networking as essential elements for career advancement. However, they acknowledged the challenges women face in networking, often exacerbated by the different networking dynamics between men and women. The need for men's accountability and the active

implementation of policies, not just their existence on paper, was underscored as crucial for fostering an inclusive environment.

Unconscious bias, influenced by cultural backgrounds and societal norms, remains a significant impediment to gender equality in the REI. The participants' insights underscore the need for a multifaceted approach, including policy implementation, societal transformation, and individual accountability, to bridge the representation gap and foster an inclusive and equitable industry.

## **6 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter serves as a critical segment in this study, offering a detailed examination and interpretation of the empirical findings outlined in Chapter 5. This analysis is conducted within the context of the comprehensive literature and theoretical frameworks presented in earlier chapters. The objective is to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

The data and insights obtained through the process, as described in Chapter 4, are analysed in conjunction with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the research questions posed in Chapter 3. Each piece of data is considered in relation to the overarching research problem introduced in Chapter 1, ensuring a cohesive and integrated discussion that contributes to the academic and practical understanding of the issue at hand.

Participants in the study, comprising professionals from various sectors within the South African REI, offered valuable perspectives that both corroborate and challenge existing literature. Their contributions are instrumental in shedding light on the pervasive influence of unconscious bias and its implications for women's leadership within the industry.

In this chapter, the discussion is structured to provide a thorough analysis that bridges the gap between empirical findings and theoretical underpinnings. The influence of unconscious bias is dissected and interpreted, drawing on the real-world experiences of participants to offer a well-rounded view that is specifically tailored to the context of the South African REI.

The ensuing sections of this chapter are dedicated to a systematic exploration, where empirical findings are not only presented but are also critically analysed against the backdrop of existing theories and literature. The aim is to foster a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play, offering readers a balanced and insightful perspective on the challenges and nuances associated with unconscious bias and women's leadership in the South African REI.

In essence, this chapter is designed to be a substantive contribution to the ongoing dialogue on gender disparities in leadership, particularly within the South African REI. The discussion is anchored in rigorous analysis, ensuring each insight and interpretation is both academically robust and contextually relevant, thereby enriching the existing body of knowledge on this pivotal issue.

## **6.2 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 1**

### **Research Question 1: Does unconscious bias towards women exist in the South African real estate industry, and if so, what are its sources?**

In addressing this question, the discussion is rooted in the empirical data collected and analysed in the preceding chapter. The participants' narratives, enriched by their diverse experiences within the South African REI, unveil a complex interplay of factors that underscore the existence and persistence of unconscious bias.

The findings reveal that unconscious bias is not an isolated or abstract concept but is intricately woven into the fabric of organisational culture, leadership dynamics, and interpersonal relationships within the South African REI. The participants' insights, particularly those highlighting instances of gender inequality and the dominance of male leadership, serve as tangible indicators of the pervasive nature of unconscious bias.

This section meticulously examines these insights, drawing correlations with the theoretical frameworks and existing literature outlined in earlier chapters. The objective is to offer a comprehensive analysis that not only confirms the existence of unconscious bias but also unravels its multifaceted sources and manifestations within the specific context of the South African REI. Each insight is critically evaluated to contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how unconscious bias shapes and constrains women's leadership opportunities in this industry.

#### **6.2.1 THE EXTENT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN REI**

The slow pace of growth in women's representation, as highlighted in the literature, is mirrored in the findings, which reveal a persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership within the South African REI, echoing the sentiments of Manzi and

Heilman (2021) and Braun et al. (2017). The unconscious bias is evident, subtle yet profoundly impactful, and continues to be a significant impediment, aligning with Powell and Butterfield's (1994) assertions.

#### **6.2.1.1 EXISTENCE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

The acknowledgment of unconscious bias within the South African REI, as revealed in the study, is a significant step towards addressing the challenges associated with gender diversity and inclusion. Four out of 14 respondents, predominantly females, admitted to the existence of these biases, shedding light on a pervasive issue that often operates beneath the surface of organisational culture and interpersonal interactions.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that unconscious biases are deeply embedded psychological tendencies that influence human judgments and decisions. These biases, though unintentional, have profound implications for interpersonal and professional interactions, often leading to discrimination and inequality.

The study's findings further resonate with the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 1, whereby the qualitative approach, characterised by in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, facilitated the uncovering of nuanced insights into the existence and manifestations of unconscious bias within the South African REI. The respondents' acknowledgment is not just a statistical data point but a revelation that underscores the need for introspection, awareness, and change within the industry.

The implications of this acknowledgment are far-reaching. As previously discussed, unconscious bias affects recruitment, promotion, and leadership development, often to the detriment of female professionals. The male respondents' acknowledgment is a mirror reflecting the gender dynamics within the South African REI, a reflection that calls for critical examination and transformation.

Considering the literature review and the findings, the acknowledgment of unconscious bias underscores the need for targeted interventions. These should include educational programmes, policy reforms, and organisational practices that foster awareness, equity, and inclusion. The insights derived from the study's findings serve as a foundation upon which strategies to mitigate unconscious bias can be

developed and implemented, driving systemic change within the South African REI and beyond.

#### **6.2.1.2 INTERSECTIONALITY OF BIAS**

The study adopts a comprehensive perspective, examining unconscious bias in conjunction with gender disparity and leadership advancement. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of bias and its nuanced manifestations within the professional context of the South African REI.

Intersectionality of bias is a critical aspect that emerges from the study, highlighting the complex interplay between unconscious bias, gender disparity, and leadership advancement. The research reveals that unconscious bias is not limited to gender but extends to other factors, including sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. This intersectionality exacerbates the challenges women face in ascending to leadership roles within the South African REI.

The study indicates that unconscious bias significantly affects women's career progression. This bias is not an isolated issue but a pervasive factor influencing decisions about hiring, promotions, and project assignments to women. The research supports the findings of Harris (2019), who suggested that the pattern of male-dominated leadership might persist if most of today's leaders are men.

Participants in the study acknowledged the impact of unconscious bias on women's career progression, citing examples like the lack of female representation on boards that hire CEOs and other C-suite positions. Microaggressions that discredit women and physical attributions, such as the belief that women cannot perform certain tasks, contribute to this bias. The study underscores the need to address and challenge these biases to empower women and enhance organisational success.

The intersectionality of bias is further illuminated by the participants' insights into privilege and learned habits and behaviours over time. Societal expectations and traditional gender roles as illustrated in Eagly's (1987) Social Role Theory, influence bias in the business world, with unconscious bias persisting despite efforts to address it through various forums and networks.

The study's comprehensive approach to examining unconscious bias, gender disparity, and leadership advancement is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework. Drawing on a range of theories and engaging with prior studies, the research offers a holistic understanding of the factors influencing career progression in the South African REI. It sheds light on bias mitigation strategies in professional settings, contributing to the broader literature on this subject.

### **6.2.1.3 INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC INSIGHTS**

The Women's Property Network (2022) defines unconscious bias as deeply ingrained stereotypes that significantly influence individuals' behaviours. The research, grounded in the assumption of the existence of unconscious bias, unveils its role in shaping women's leadership trajectories within the South African REI.

The study is specifically focused on the REI in South Africa, recognising that different industries may have distinct characteristics and challenges related to gender inequality. The research is conducted within a specific timeframe and may not fully capture longer-term trends or changes that could occur in the South African REI.

The research aims to enhance the conceptualisation of unconscious bias within the specific context of the South African REI. Existing literature has extensively discussed the definition and causes of unconscious bias, but limited attention has been paid to its manifestation and impact within this industry. The study seeks to bridge this gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of gender representation in leadership positions, providing a deeper understanding of the specific challenges faced by women in advancing their careers within the REI.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, the study draws on a range of theories highlighted in the literature review. The empirical literature review engages with prior studies related to unconscious bias, gender disparity, and leadership advancement. The study endeavours to integrate these theories within the specific context of the South African REI, aiming to uncover new insights into the multifaceted nature of career progression in the REI.

Participants in the study discuss the existence of unconscious biases and barriers within the REI, particularly regarding gender and race. They believe that these



barriers have been addressed through initiatives like the Property Charter and Sector Codes. However, they also note that women are often still relegated to administrative roles and are not seen as suitable for leadership positions.

The participants believe that there is room for improvement in terms of gender and cultural representation in the South African REI. They mention that historically, the industry has not been fairly representative. They also note that there seems to be a bias towards certain skill sets and qualifications, which may contribute to the lack of diversity.

### **6.2.2 CONCLUSION**

In relation to Research Question 1, the extent of unconscious bias in the South African REI is unveiled as a complex and pervasive issue. The insights from each chapter contribute to a comprehensive narrative that not only highlights the existence and manifestations of bias but also offers informed strategies for its mitigation. The findings underscore the need for concerted efforts to address unconscious bias, paving the way for enhanced gender diversity and inclusion within the South African REI. Each insight and interpretation adds a layer of depth to the understanding of unconscious bias, offering a foundation for informed interventions to foster an equitable professional landscape.

## **6.3 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 2**

### **Research Question 2: Does unconscious bias play a role in women's career advancement in the South African real estate industry?**

Research Question 2 probes into the intricate dynamics of "Does unconscious bias play a role in women's career advancement in the South African real estate industry?". The findings from Chapter 5, when juxtaposed with the theoretical insights from the literature review, unveil a complex narrative.

The empirical data underscores a tangible influence of unconscious bias on women's career trajectories within the South African REI. It is revealed that unconscious bias, deeply embedded within organisational structures and interpersonal dynamics, acts as a significant impediment to women's professional ascension. This is corroborated

by the literature, including insights from Manzi and Heilman (2021) and Braun et al. (2017), which delineates the multifaceted manifestations of unconscious bias and its detrimental impact on women's career progression and leadership opportunities.

The findings emphasise that unconscious bias is not only prevalent but also influential in shaping women's career paths within the REI. It is manifested in hiring decisions, promotions, and project assignments, as previously mentioned, often relegating women to positions of lesser authority and influence. This aligns with the theoretical insights from Chapter 2, where unconscious bias is identified as a pervasive element, deeply rooted in societal norms and organisational cultures, influencing perceptions and decisions related to women's capabilities and potential for leadership roles.

Therefore, the discussion for Research Question 2 is enriched by a meticulous analysis of empirical findings and theoretical insights. It underscores the pervasive and intricate nature of unconscious bias within the South African REI. The insights offer a comprehensive perspective, illuminating the pathways through which unconscious bias shapes and constrains women's leadership opportunities within this specific industrial context.

### **6.3.1 THE ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES**

The study unveils a stark gender disparity, with the REI reflecting an average 85% male dominance in executive director roles since 2013 (The Women's Property Network, 2022). Each chapter of the study therefore provides insights that collectively paint a comprehensive picture of this complex issue.

#### **6.3.1.1 CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL CONDITIONING**

Unconscious bias is deeply rooted in cultural and societal conditioning, a phenomenon extensively documented in the literature (Ellemers, 2018). This bias is often instilled from a young age, as individuals are inundated with cultural messages and societal norms that shape their perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles. The International Monetary Fund (2022) affirms that stereotypes and biases can be ingrained early in life, influencing judgments and decisions subconsciously. Hoffman and Winter (2022) further elaborate that individuals can unconsciously associate

specific traits or qualities with certain social groups, such as associating leadership qualities more readily with men than women.

Expanding on this, the study's findings reveal that participants in the South African REI are not immune to the effects of cultural and societal conditioning. They acknowledge the influence of stereotypes in shaping behaviours and attitudes within the professional environment. These biases, often unacknowledged, perpetuate gender inequality and limit opportunities for women in leadership roles, echoing the sentiments expressed in the literature review.

The participants' narratives provide a vivid illustration of the pervasive nature of these biases. One participant highlighted the role of cultural affinity in unconscious bias, noting a tendency for individuals to gravitate towards those of their own culture. This inclination is not limited to cultural alignment but extends to gender, where stereotypes associate certain functions, roles, and leadership positions predominantly with males. Such gendered associations are not isolated incidents but are ingrained elements of the workplace environment, reinforcing gender biases systematically.

Furthermore, the study underscores the multifaceted origins of unconscious bias, linking it to societal norms and media portrayals that individuals are exposed to from a young age. These exposures contribute to the formation of implicit associations, where specific traits or qualities are unconsciously linked to particular social groups (Yen et al., 2018). For instance, leadership qualities are often more readily associated with men than women, a bias formed through repeated exposure to cultural narratives (Ellemers, 2018).

In the context of the South African REI, these biases manifest in various ways, including gendered associations with specific roles and positions. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the industry is a glaring manifestation of these ingrained biases. Tradition and societal expectations continue to influence behaviour and attitudes towards women, perpetuating their marginalisation and underrepresentation in leadership roles.

### **6.3.1.2 MANIFESTATIONS IN CAREER PROGRESSION**

Women in the South African REI often confront unconscious bias in their career progression. Biases influence hiring decisions and performance evaluations, leading to a cumulative effect that hinders women's advancement (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Caleo, 2018; Manzi & Heilman, 2021). The limited diversity in executive positions is attributed to historical gender biases and unequal opportunities.

The study's findings are corroborated by the literature, which highlights the systemic nature of these biases. For instance, Heilman and Caleo (2018) emphasise the role of gender stereotypes in shaping evaluative judgments about individuals' competencies and suitability for leadership roles. In the South African REI, this manifests as a glass ceiling effect, where women encounter invisible barriers that limit their upward mobility within the organisational hierarchy (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

The narratives of female professionals in the South African REI provide a nuanced understanding of these manifestations. They recount experiences of being overlooked for promotions and leadership opportunities, despite possessing the requisite skills and competencies. This aligns with the observations of Manzi and Heilman (2021), who note the persistence of gender biases in evaluative processes, leading to the undervaluation of women's contributions and capabilities.

Furthermore, the study reveals a pattern of systemic exclusion, where women are often side-lined in decision-making processes and strategic initiatives. This exclusion is not overt but is subtly embedded in organisational cultures and practices, reflecting the insidious nature of unconscious bias. The literature underscores this observation, highlighting the role of organisational structures and cultures in perpetuating gender biases (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

To address these manifestations, there is a pressing need for systemic interventions that target the root causes of unconscious bias. The literature and the findings from the South African REI converge on the imperative for organisational change that transcends tokenistic measures. It calls for a comprehensive re-evaluation of organisational cultures, practices, and policies to dismantle the entrenched structures that perpetuate gender biases and limit women's career progression.

### **6.3.1.3 NETWORKING AND MENTORSHIP CHALLENGES**

The networking and mentorship challenges faced by women in the South African REI are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of the industry. The existing literature and the narratives of participants in the study converge to highlight the systemic barriers that women encounter in their professional journeys.

Women in the REI are often excluded from informal networks where significant decisions are made, a phenomenon corroborated by the findings of the study. This exclusion is not incidental but is rooted in the deeply ingrained unconscious biases that permeate the industry. The patriarchal nature of the REI is not just a contemporary challenge but is anchored in historical and cultural contexts that have consistently marginalised women, limiting their access to opportunities for professional growth and leadership roles.

Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) highlighted the difficulties women often encounter in forming connections with male colleagues, potentially limiting access to valuable guidance and leadership opportunities. This is echoed in the study's findings, where the narratives of female participants in the South African REI underscore the tangible impacts of these biases. Women are not just fighting against contemporary biases but are also contending with the historical marginalisation embedded in the industry's culture and practices.

The study reveals an interesting dynamic where women, despite being more emotionally intelligent and having better access to mentorship, still face significant barriers in networking. This paradox is a testament to the pervasive nature of unconscious bias, where even the inherent strengths and capabilities of women are often overshadowed by systemic prejudices.

The cascading effect of unconscious bias on various aspects of women's professional growth within the business sector is not just a theoretical construct but a tangible barrier that women in the South African REI navigate daily. The exclusion from networking events like golf days, as highlighted in the study, is not just about the events themselves but is indicative of the systemic exclusion from power centres and decision-making tables.

### **6.3.2 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the intersection of the existing literature and the findings of the study paints a compelling picture of the systemic, deeply rooted challenges that women face in the South African REI. The unconscious biases, both historical and contemporary, are not just barriers to be navigated but are indicative of the systemic overhaul needed to foster an inclusive, equitable, and just professional environment where women are not just seen but are heard, valued, and afforded equal opportunities to ascend to leadership roles. The journey towards this ideal is not linear but is a complex, multifaceted endeavour that requires the dismantling of systemic barriers and the intentional, deliberate fostering of an environment where the full spectrum of diversity is celebrated, nurtured, and leveraged for the collective good of the industry and society at large.

## **6.4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FOR RESEARCH QUESTION 3**

**Research Question 3: What strategies can be implemented, in the event that unconscious bias exists, to reduce its role in women's advancement to leadership positions in the South African real estate industry?**

Research Question 3 is centred on identifying strategies to mitigate the impact of unconscious bias on women's advancement to leadership positions within the South African REI. The findings from Chapter 5, in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2, offer a comprehensive perspective on this critical issue.

In Chapter 2, the literature underscores the importance of targeted interventions, including bias training, inclusive leadership development, and organisational culture transformation, to address unconscious bias. Theoretical frameworks, such as those proposed by Ramos and Lopez (2018), emphasise the role of attachment security and career adaptability in fostering an environment that supports women's leadership advancement.

The discussion for Research Question 3 is enriched by integrating these empirical and theoretical insights. It underscores the need for a holistic approach that addresses unconscious bias at individual, organisational, and societal levels. The

findings emphasise the role of awareness, education, and systemic change in mitigating the impact of unconscious bias and fostering an inclusive, diverse, and equitable South African REI. The insights offer actionable strategies for stakeholders, including industry leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, to address unconscious bias and enhance women's leadership opportunities within this specific context.

#### **6.4.1 STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

The mitigation of unconscious bias, especially in the context of the South African REI, requires a multifaceted approach that is both comprehensive and adaptive, and integrates organisational and individual strategies. Hoffman and Winter (2022) emphasise the role of imagined contact, where individuals envision positive interactions with members of different genders, in reducing stereotypes. However, Gibson (2022) warns that some strategies might inadvertently strengthen stereotypes, underscoring the need for careful implementation and evaluation.

The strategies outlined in this section are derived from the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 and are contextualised within the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2. However, it is worthwhile noting that practical strategies and interventions are yet to take a stronghold in addressing the unconscious bias within the REI.

##### **6.4.1.1 RECOGNISING AND UNDERSTANDING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

Recognising and understanding unconscious bias is a pivotal initial step in mitigating its effects. This bias is deeply rooted in cultural, psychological, and societal factors. The complexity of unconscious bias is underscored by its multifaceted origins, making the recognition and comprehension of these biases essential in addressing their impact on decision-making processes, especially in the context of promoting gender diversity and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI.

The literature underscores the importance of awareness in mitigating unconscious bias. Hoffman and Winter (2022) emphasise the malleability of stereotypes, which are specific traits associated with certain groups. These stereotypes can undermine the individuality of people and can be particularly harmful when leading to marginalisation or oppression. However, individuals can suppress or avoid the activation of learned stereotypes, especially when interacting with members of the

target group. Various tools, such as motivation, strategic efforts to reduce stereotypes, focus of attention, and contextual cues, play pivotal roles in this process (Monteith et al., 1998; Spencer et al., 1998).

In the context of the South African REI, the study's findings reveal a consensus on the existence of unconscious bias within organisations. The participants believe that this bias is ingrained in cultures and leads people to gravitate towards those who share their cultural background. The results show that stereotypes, as instances of unconscious behaviour, perpetuate gender inequality and limit opportunities for women in roles traditionally seen as male-dominated. It is therefore crucial to challenge these stereotypes and promote inclusivity in the workplace.

The study also discusses the concept of privilege and unconscious bias, suggesting that these biases are ingrained over time through learned habits and behaviours. The participants express frustration with the idea of unconscious bias still existing despite efforts to address it through forums and networks. They acknowledge the need for diversity in various industries but question whether unconscious bias prevents the hiring and advancement of women.

#### **6.4.1.2 BEING DELIBERATE IN CREATING EQUITY**

Being deliberate in creating equity is a fundamental aspect of addressing and mitigating unconscious bias. In the context of the South African REI, this involves a concerted effort to implement and refine strategies that foster diversity and inclusion. The findings indicate that the industry is characterised by persistent gender disparities, necessitating proactive measures to bridge the gap and promote an equitable professional environment.

The literature review in Chapter 2 provides insights into various strategies that have proven effective in other contexts. For instance, Hoffman and Winter (2022) emphasise the role of organisational policies in creating an environment that supports diversity and inclusion. They argue that policies aimed at promoting gender equity should be comprehensive, addressing not only recruitment and hiring practices but also career development and progression, workplace culture, and leadership representation.



In the context of the study's findings, participants expressed the need for a more inclusive approach to leadership and decision-making processes within the REI. They highlighted the importance of diversity in perspectives and experiences, which contributes to enhanced innovation, creativity, and problem-solving. This aligns with the insights from Chapter 5, where the analysis of organisational structures and cultures revealed existing barriers to women's advancement and the need for transformative change.

Moreover, the study underscores the role of education and training in raising awareness of unconscious bias and its implications. Participants advocated for ongoing learning opportunities to equip industry professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and address bias in its various forms. This is corroborated by the literature, which suggests that education and training are instrumental in changing attitudes and behaviours, fostering a culture of respect, and promoting equity.

Furthermore, the study's findings align with the insights from Chapter 3, where the research questions explored the underlying factors contributing to gender disparities in the South African REI. The participants' narratives revealed the pervasive nature of unconscious bias and the need for deliberate actions to counteract its effects. This involves not only policy reforms but also a shift in organisational culture, leadership commitment, and individual accountability.

#### **6.4.1.3 STEREOTYPE NEGATION AND REPLACEMENT**

Stereotype negation and replacement is a pivotal approach for reducing biases at the individual level. The findings emphasise that unconscious bias consists of attitudes and stereotypes that can be particularly harmful, leading to the marginalisation or oppression of certain groups. However, these stereotypes are not fixed; they are malleable and can be changed through conscious effort and targeted interventions.

In the literature review in Chapter 2, several authors have discussed the dynamics of stereotypes and their impact on social interactions and professional relationships. For instance, the role of cognitive processes in stereotype formation and maintenance is highlighted, whereby, stereotypes, though often automatic, can be

mitigated through conscious efforts to negate and replace them with more accurate, individualised perceptions.

The study's findings in Chapter 5 provide insights into the lived experiences of professionals in the South African REI, revealing the pervasive nature of stereotypes and their impact on women's career progression. Participants shared narratives of being subjected to stereotypes related to gender, race, and other social categorisations, underscoring the need for individual and collective efforts to negate and replace these stereotypes.

Stereotype negation involves conscious efforts to reject stereotypical beliefs and attitudes, while stereotype replacement entails the adoption of more accurate, individualised perceptions that recognise the uniqueness and individuality of each person (Monteith et al., 1998). In the context of the South African REI, this approach is instrumental in promoting diversity and inclusion, as it challenges the entrenched beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate gender disparities and other forms of inequality.

The findings further elaborate on the role of individual agency in addressing unconscious bias. Participants expressed a sense of responsibility to challenge stereotypes and foster a culture of respect and inclusion within their respective organisations. This aligns with the insights from the literature, which suggest that individual efforts to negate and replace stereotypes are integral to organisational change and the promotion of equity and inclusion (Spencer et al., 1998).

#### **6.4.1.4 INCREASING MOTIVATION TO COUNTERACT BIAS**

The industry also employs gender mainstreaming policies to curb unconscious bias. This strategy is supported by the works of Graves and Sarkis (2018), who discussed the role of internal and external motivation in fostering the motivation to be unbiased. Internal motivation encompasses introjected, identified, and intrinsic motivation, while external motivation refers to the drive induced by rewards and approval.

In the literature review, the dynamics of motivation in counteracting bias are explored, whereby the role of intrinsic motivation in fostering an unbiased attitude is emphasised. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage in self-regulation and reflection, actively seeking to identify and mitigate their biases.

This internal drive is crucial in promoting genuine change and fostering a culture of equity and inclusion.

The findings provide further insights into the role of motivation in the South African REI. Participants highlighted the importance of fostering a culture where individuals are motivated to challenge their biases and stereotypes. They emphasised the role of leadership in creating an environment that encourages self-reflection, learning, and growth, aligning with organisational culture and leadership.

External motivation is also pivotal. The study reveals that organisational policies, rewards, and recognition systems play a significant role in motivating individuals to counteract bias. The implementation of policies that reward fairness and penalise biased behaviours can significantly enhance the motivation to be unbiased.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of ongoing education and training in enhancing both internal and external motivation. By equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to identify and address their biases, organisations can foster a sense of responsibility and accountability, driving the motivation to promote equity and inclusion.

#### **6.4.1.5 NETWORKING AND MENTORSHIPS**

Networking and mentorships are highlighted as pivotal strategies in mitigating unconscious bias. Networking enables women to build connections, establish relationships, and expand their professional circles. This expansion not only provides professional growth opportunities but also serves as a platform to challenge and change existing biases and stereotypes.

In the literature review, the importance of networking is underscored, emphasising that networking facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and opportunities, fostering a diverse and inclusive professional environment. In addition, networking can counteract the effects of unconscious bias by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and experiences, thereby challenging stereotypes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of others.

The study's findings reveal that women in the South African REI often face barriers to networking due to existing biases and stereotypes. However, the participants also highlighted successful stories where networking had led to professional growth and opportunities, underscoring its importance. This aligns with the insights from the literature, where the role of networking in career progression and leadership development was explored.

Mentorship is also a prioritised strategy in the REI. The study indicates that women who have access to mentorship are not only more likely to succeed but are also more inclined to support and mentor other women, creating a positive cycle of opportunity and success. This finding is corroborated by the literature. Authors like Hoffman and Winter (2022) emphasise the role of mentorship in professional development, highlighting that mentors provide guidance, support, and opportunities that can mitigate the effects of unconscious bias.

Furthermore, the study underscores the role of organisational policies in promoting networking and mentorship. Organisations that foster a culture of mentorship and networking create environments where biases are challenged, and diversity is celebrated.

#### **6.4.1.6 ADDRESSING CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL STEREOTYPES**

Addressing cultural and societal stereotypes is a critical aspect of mitigating unconscious bias. These stereotypes, deeply embedded within societal norms and practices, often serve as the foundation upon which unconscious biases are built and perpetuated. They influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards gender, often to the detriment of women's professional advancement.

In the literature review, the pervasive nature of cultural and societal stereotypes is extensively discussed. Authors like Ellemers (2018) delve into the psychological and social underpinnings of these stereotypes, highlighting their role in shaping gender dynamics in the workplace. They emphasise the need for a multifaceted approach to address these ingrained beliefs, combining education, awareness, policy reform, and societal change.

The study's findings provide a nuanced view of the impact of cultural and societal stereotypes within the South African REI. Participants shared experiences and insights that underscore the pervasive nature of these stereotypes and their role in shaping professional interactions, opportunities, and outcomes.

Furthermore, the role of leadership in addressing cultural and societal stereotypes is emphasised. Leaders within the South African REI are positioned as change agents, with the responsibility to foster a culture of inclusivity, equity, and respect. This perspective is supported by the insights from the findings, where the role of leadership in shaping organisational culture, policies, and practices was examined.

#### **6.4.1.7 ADDRESSING PRIVILEGE AND LEARNED BEHAVIOURS**

The issue of privilege and learned behaviours is intricately linked to unconscious bias. These learned behaviours, often rooted in societal norms and cultural conditioning, contribute to the perpetuation of biases that adversely affect women's empowerment and organisational success.

The concept of privilege emerged from the findings, highlighting how it is often invisible to those who possess it. It therefore underscores the need for individuals, particularly those in positions of power and influence, to recognise and acknowledge their privilege and its impact on others.

The findings in Chapter 5 provide a detailed account of the manifestation of privilege and learned behaviours within the South African REI. Participants shared insights into how these behaviours are often normalised, leading to an environment where biases are unchallenged, and equity is undermined.

Addressing and challenging these biases requires a multifaceted approach. The study highlights the importance of education and awareness in changing learned behaviours. Initiatives that foster self-reflection, encourage the examination of privilege, and promote the unlearning of biased behaviours are pivotal. This is supported by the insights from Chapter 1, where the foundational concepts of unconscious bias and privilege are introduced and explored.

Furthermore, organisational policies and practices play a crucial role in addressing privilege and learned behaviours. The study underscores the need for policies that promote equity, inclusivity, and diversity. Leaders within the South African REI are tasked with the responsibility of implementing and enforcing these policies, fostering a culture where biases are acknowledged, challenged, and mitigated.

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the results presents a nuanced understanding of unconscious biases, gender disparities, and women's leadership opportunities in the South African REI. Each factor with its distinct influence, contributes to a comprehensive narrative that offers valuable insights.

Unconscious biases are not isolated or static; they are dynamic and pervasive, weaving through the organisational structures, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes within the South African REI. These biases, often subtle and unspoken, are deeply rooted in cultural, psychological, and societal norms, casting long shadows that influence perceptions, attitudes, and actions.

Gender disparities, influenced by historical, societal, and institutional norms, are evident in the unequal representation and limited opportunities available to women in the South African REI. These disparities highlight not only numerical imbalances but also represent the systemic and structural impediments that curtail women's full participation and leadership ascension.

Women's leadership opportunities within the REI are characterised by their experiences, aspirations, and challenges. Each opportunity, or the denial of it, adds a layer of complexity, illuminating the multifaceted challenges and prospects that define women's leadership journeys.

Each finding in the discussion of results is not merely a quantitative statistic or a qualitative observation. It is a narrative, a story imbued with the voices, experiences, and insights of the participants. These narratives echo the sentiments of the literature reviewed, offering a resonant dialogue that is rich, multifaceted, and illuminating. They respond to the research questions with depth, offering insights that are not just academic but profoundly contextual, relevant, and illuminating.

The intricate interplay highlights not only the prevailing challenges, but also illuminates the potential for meaningful transformation, equity, and inclusion. It beckons to stakeholders, encompassing industry leaders, policymakers, and practitioners, to transition from mere observation to active participation in reshaping the paradigms and narratives that will influence the future of women's leadership within the South African REI. Every progression represents a moment for introspection, knowledge acquisition, and proactive measures, leading towards a future where equity, diversity, and inclusion transition from mere objectives to tangible realities.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

Embarking on this academic journey has unveiled the intricate interplay between unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI. This chapter is not just a conclusion but a synthesis of insights, a harmonious blend of literature and findings, echoing the silent yet powerful narratives that shape the professional landscape for women in this industry.

The culmination of this research journey is marked by reflections, insights, and the weaving together of threads of knowledge that have been meticulously gathered and analysed. The central theme, unconscious bias, has been the silent protagonist, its presence and influence echoing through the corridors of the South African REI. Unconscious bias, as defined by Hoffman and Winter (2022), refers to the attitudes and stereotypes, often negative, that individuals are unaware of but that influence their judgments and behaviours. It is a phenomenon that, like an invisible hand, subtly yet profoundly shapes the professional landscape, particularly for women.

The research embarked upon a quest to unravel, understand, and articulate the role of unconscious bias in shaping women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI. It was a journey that delved into the intricate dynamics between deeply ingrained societal norms, organisational cultures, and individual behaviours. The findings, a rich tapestry of data, narratives, and insights, have not only echoed but also amplified the voices within the existing literature.

So, does unconscious bias play a role in limiting women's leadership opportunities within the South African REI? The findings and the literature, in a harmonious yet poignant chorus, affirm this. The research questions, meticulously crafted to unveil the silent yet powerful influences of unconscious bias, have been answered. Each finding, each narrative, and each data point is a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, coming together to unveil a picture of a professional landscape where unconscious bias is not a myth but a lived reality.



## **7.2 MAIN FINDINGS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE**

### **7.2.1 THE ROLE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS EXISTENCE**

The study's findings, particularly in Chapter 5, have illuminated the pervasive existence of unconscious bias within the South African REI. The narratives of the participants, enriched by the qualitative data, have painted a vivid picture of a professional landscape where women's leadership trajectories are subtly yet profoundly shaped by unconscious bias. The literature, particularly the works of Ellemers (2018) and Hoffman and Winter (2022), resonates with these findings, echoing the silent yet powerful echoes of bias that permeate organisational cultures, decision-making processes, and professional interactions.

Both authors illustrate how unconscious bias not only affects women's leadership roles but also impacts their day-to-day interactions, professional growth, and opportunities within the industry. Addressing these biases requires a multi-faceted approach, including awareness campaigns, training programmes, and policy changes that promote a more inclusive and equitable work environment (Ellemers, 2018). Moreover, the presence of unconscious bias can lead to a significant loss of talent and potential within organisations. When biases go unchecked, they can deter talented individuals from pursuing opportunities, leading to a lack of diversity and innovation in the workplace (Hoffman & Winter, 2022).

### **7.2.2 CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL CONDITIONING**

The cultural and societal roots of unconscious bias have been a recurring theme throughout the study. The findings have unveiled the intricate dynamics between societal norms, cultural narratives, and individual behaviours. The literature, particularly the seminal works of Eagly and Karau (2002), has provided a theoretical lens through which these findings can be viewed, offering insights into the deeply ingrained nature of gender stereotypes and their influence on women's professional experiences and opportunities.

Moreover, the societal conditioning often starts from early childhood, where individuals are exposed to gender-specific roles and expectations (Ellemers, 2018). These early impressions can have a lasting impact, influencing perceptions and attitudes in professional settings. To challenge and change these deep-rooted beliefs, it is essential to start early, educating the younger generation about the

importance of gender equality and the dangers of unconscious bias (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Additionally, organisations play a pivotal role in challenging societal conditioning. By promoting diverse role models, implementing inclusive policies, and fostering an environment where all voices are heard, businesses can counteract the effects of societal conditioning and pave the way for a more inclusive future.

### **7.2.3 STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS**

The study has not only unveiled the challenges but also illuminated the pathways to transformation. The strategies to mitigate unconscious bias, as articulated by the participants and enriched by the literature, offer a beacon of hope. They underscore the potential for organisational and societal transformation through targeted interventions, policy reforms, and individual behavioural changes.

One of the key strategies highlighted by participants is the importance of continuous education and training on unconscious bias. By making individuals aware of their biases, they are better equipped to challenge and change their behaviours. Additionally, organisations can implement policies that promote diversity and inclusion, ensuring that all employees, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities and are evaluated based on their skills and contributions rather than stereotypes.

Furthermore, mentorship and sponsorship programmes can play a crucial role in mitigating unconscious bias. By pairing individuals with mentors or sponsors from diverse backgrounds, organisations can foster understanding, challenge biases, and provide individuals with the support they need to thrive.

## **7.3 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND ITS RELEVANCE**

The South African REI is a setting where gender disparity and unconscious bias are regularly observed. Both male and female professionals reflect the cultural influences and societal norms that have shaped their perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles.

## **7.4 BRIDGING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP**

The chasm between existing knowledge and the uncharted territories of understanding the nuanced dynamics of unconscious bias within the South African REI has been bridged. The study's methodology, a meticulous blend of qualitative techniques, unearthed rich insights from the voices echoing the silent yet powerful influences shaping women's professional trajectories.

Furthermore, this study serves as a foundation for future research around unconscious bias in other industries and regions. The methodologies and insights gained can be adapted and expanded upon to further explore the intricate dynamics of bias and its impact on professional growth and opportunities.

The bridging of this knowledge gap also has implications for educational institutions. By incorporating the findings of this study into curricula, educators can better prepare students to navigate the challenges posed by unconscious bias and equip them with the tools they need to promote inclusivity in their future workplaces.

## **7.5 INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**

Every narrative, data point, and insight gleaned is a thread, weaving a tapestry that unveils a silent actor – unconscious bias. It's a script written over time, engraved in organisational cultures, subtly influencing decisions, behaviours, and ultimately, the leadership landscape of the South African REI.

The interpretation also highlights the resilience and determination of women in the industry, who, despite facing challenges posed by unconscious bias, continue to strive for excellence and make significant contributions. Their stories serve as a testament to the need for change and the importance of creating a more inclusive and equitable professional environment. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of listening to and valuing diverse voices. By giving individuals from all backgrounds a platform to share their experiences, organisations can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and develop more effective strategies to address them.

## **7.6 CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARLY DEBATE AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This thesis provides in-depth insights, adding depth, texture, and layers to the understanding of unconscious bias. The practical implications are profound, serving as guidelines to organisations to pursue genuine transformation where diversity and inclusion are not buzzwords but lived realities.

In the broader scholarly debate, this research fills a critical gap, providing empirical evidence on the existence and impact of unconscious bias in the South African REI. The practical implications extend beyond the industry, offering valuable lessons for organisations worldwide on the importance of recognising and addressing unconscious bias to foster a more inclusive work culture. Furthermore, the study's findings can inform policy decisions at both the organisational and governmental levels. By understanding the root causes and manifestations of unconscious bias, policymakers can develop more effective strategies to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

## **7.7 LIMITATIONS**

While this study offers significant insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size and focus on the SA REI may limit the generalisability of the findings. The qualitative nature, though rich in depth, encompasses the subjective experiences of the participants, warranting a cautious interpretation and application of the findings.

The study primarily employed qualitative methods, which, while offering in-depth insights, might not capture the full spectrum of unconscious bias manifestations and impacts across the broader population in the SA REI. This therefore constituted methodological constraints.

In addition, the diversity of participants, though intentional, might not be fully representative of the entire South African REI. Different segments of the industry or levels of profession might exhibit varied experiences and perspectives on unconscious bias. Given the sensitive nature of unconscious bias, there is a potential for response bias where participants might have either underreported or exaggerated their experiences and perceptions, impacting the authenticity of the data.

Furthermore, the study was conducted at a specific point in time, and unconscious bias, being dynamic, might evolve. Thus, the findings might not reflect future developments or changes in societal and organisational norms and behaviours.

Although the researcher made every endeavour to interview participants from different provinces, the concentration on the South African REI provides specific insights but might not account for regional variations within the country or the global dynamics of unconscious bias in the REI.

Each of these limitations offers a nuanced lens through which the study's findings can be interpreted, providing avenues for future research to address and explore these gaps, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of unconscious bias in the South African REI.

## **7.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research on unconscious bias in the South African REI could benefit from broadening the geographical scope to include diverse cultural and organisational contexts, offering a more comprehensive view of bias manifestations and impacts. Incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative insights is another avenue, providing a balanced perspective that combines experiential and numerical data.

Longitudinal studies are essential to track the dynamic nature of unconscious bias over time, offering insights into its evolution and the long-term effectiveness of mitigation strategies. A focus on the intersectionality of biases, exploring the complex interplay between gender and other forms of bias like race and age, can provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women in leadership.

Evaluating the effectiveness of unconscious bias mitigation strategies and the role of organisational culture in perpetuating or mitigating bias is crucial. Such evaluations can inform the refinement of strategies and culture change initiatives, fostering a workplace where diversity and inclusion are core values. The impact of policies aimed at addressing gender bias and promoting diversity within the South African REI also warrants exploration, guiding future policy development and implementation.

These streamlined suggestions aim to enhance the understanding of unconscious bias, its impacts, and the development of effective mitigation strategies, contributing to the creation of a more equitable workplace in the South African REI and beyond.

## **7.9 CONCLUSION**

The results of this research emphasise the multifaceted and prevalent unconscious bias within the South African REI. Through methodological rigour and detailed analysis, the study has revealed a comprehensive understanding that melds the professional experiences with the scholarly literature on the topic.

Unconscious bias, as detailed in this research, is more than a singular obstacle. It is deeply rooted in the cultural, societal, and organisational structures that define the professional realm of the South African REI. The outcomes of this research highlight not mere numbers but are a testament to the subtle and significant challenges that shape women's leadership development, whereby the participants' testimonies, marked by genuine reflection, depict both challenges and successes related to gender diversity and inclusion in the South African REI. Each account, while individual, contributes to a broader comprehension of unconscious bias.

These findings, when aligned with existing literature, suggest a consistent understanding: unconscious bias, although abstract, has a consequential influence on the ambitions and successes of women in leadership within the South African REI. Yet, within these challenges emerges a narrative of resilience and a continuous pursuit of equality and diversity. Therefore, this research is a critical contribution to ongoing academic discussions, organisational deliberations, and societal considerations. It accentuates the need for joint contemplation, integrated initiatives, and a lasting commitment to address unconscious bias's challenges.

Concluding this research signifies a compelling invitation for scholars, industry professionals, policymakers, and stakeholders to act. The insights and proposals provided are intended to initiate changes that ensure a setting of equality, diversity, and inclusion. The importance lies in recognising and harnessing every individual's potential, devoid of unconscious bias.

Post this investigation, the aspiration is for a heightened focus on evolution, progression, and justice. This would pave the way for a period where unconscious bias is both recognised and actively challenged, creating a South African REI that genuinely embodies the nation's inclusive values.

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## **9 APPENDICES**

### **9.1 APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Name:**

**Organisation:**

**Job Title:**

**Date:**

**Start Time:**

**End Time:**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research interview. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights into whether unconscious bias exists, and if it does, its role in limiting women's leadership opportunities within the South African real estate industry. Your experiences and perspectives as a professional in this industry are invaluable in helping me understand the challenges women face in accessing and advancing to leadership positions.

The key objectives of this research are:

- To establish whether unconscious bias towards women exists in the South African real estate industry, and if so, what are its sources.
- To determine if unconscious bias has an impact on women's career advancement in the South African real estate industry, in the event that it exists.
- To propose strategies and interventions that can be implemented to reduce the impact, if it exists, of unconscious bias on women's advancement to leadership positions in the South African real estate industry.

Please note that all information provided will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. I therefore kindly ask you to answer all questions freely, with the confidence that you will remain anonymous.

Can I also ask you to sign the consent form and confirm if you are comfortable with me to record the interview with my cell phone and an additional recording device?

#### **1. Personal and Professional Background:**

- a. Can you briefly introduce yourself and provide an overview of your experience and role within the South African real estate industry?



- b. How long have you been working in the industry, and what positions have you held during your career?

## **2. Gender Equality and Leadership:**

- a. In your opinion, what is the current state of gender equality in leadership positions within the South African real estate industry?
- b. Have you observed any specific barriers or challenges that women face when it comes to accessing and advancing into leadership roles?
  - i. If yes, how important are the barriers or challenges?

## **3. Unconscious Bias:**

- a. What is your understanding of unconscious bias, and how do you think it may impact women's leadership opportunities in the industry?
- b. Can you provide any examples or instances where you have observed unconscious bias affecting women's advancement in **your** workplace or the industry as a whole?

## **4. Identification and Manifestation of Unconscious Bias:**

- a. Do you think unconscious bias manifests itself in the workplace, particularly in relation to women's leadership opportunities?
  - i. If so, how?
- b. Are there any specific behaviours, attitudes, or assumptions that you have noticed, which may indicate the presence of unconscious bias?

## **5. Organisational Culture and Practices:**

- a. How would you describe the organisational culture within the South African real estate industry regarding gender equality and diversity?
- b. Are there any existing practices or policies in place to mitigate unconscious bias and promote gender equality?
  - i. If so, what have been their effects, if any?

**6. Strategies and Interventions:**

- a. Based on your experiences and observations, what strategies or interventions do you believe would be effective in mitigating, if it exists, unconscious bias and promoting women's leadership opportunities?
- b. Are there any best practices or initiatives you are aware of that have been successful in addressing unconscious bias within the industry?

**7. Personal Experiences:**

- a. Have you personally faced any challenges related to unconscious bias in your career advancement? If comfortable, could you share a specific experience and its impact on you?
- b. Have you witnessed or been involved in any initiatives or efforts to promote gender equality and address unconscious bias within your organisation or the industry?

**8. Access to networks and mentors:**

- a. In your opinion, to what extent, does unconscious bias and gender stereotypes affect women's access to networks and mentors in the South African real estate industry?

**9. Recommendations:**

- a. Based on your insights and experiences, what recommendations would you make to industry leaders, organisations, and policymakers to address unconscious bias and enhance women's leadership opportunities within the South African real estate industry?

**10. Closing Remarks:**

- a. Is there any additional information or perspective you would like to share on the topic of unconscious bias and women's leadership opportunities in the South African real estate industry?

Thank you for your time and valuable input. Your participation in this interview is greatly appreciated and will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by women professionals in the industry.

## 9.2 APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT FORM

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.

I am conducting research on "The role of unconscious bias in limiting women's leadership opportunities in the South African real estate industry", and I am trying to establish whether unconscious bias actually exists, and if it does, what are its sources and impact. The interview is expected to last about one hour.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. All data will be reported without identifiers, ensuring your confidentiality is maintained. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher's name: Pangidzai Gazi

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Email: HollandM@gibs.co.za

Phone:

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### 9.3 APPENDIX 3: CODE LIST

#### Code

- current state
- recommendations
- impact of unconscious bias
- organisational culture
- strategy and interventions
- unconscious bias instances and manifestations

#### Theme

- fairly male dominated
- more male dominated
- no merit appointment
- organisational culture (2)
- racism
- room for improvement
- sexual abuse
- recommendation
- career progression
- negative lacking rapport
- negative no networking
- stereotype and segregation
- women leadership opportunities
- gender mainstreaming
- male domination
- top-down performance reviews
- white male domination
- bottom – up performance review
- clearer mechanism for performance appraisals
- engagement initiatives
- equality charter
- functions and celebrations
- gender mainstreaming
- mentorship
- network
- publicity
- transformational agenda
- transparency on board composition
- Women Property Network
- young women opportunities
- career progression

- less trust for women
- micro aggression
- physical attributions
- privileges
- aggression
- social positions
- social roles
- stereotype of emotions
- traditions
- underrepresented