

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING – A CASE OF DURBAN CORPORATE WOMEN

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Abstract

The glass ceiling is a concept that most frequently refers to barriers faced by women who attempt, or aspire, to attain senior positions as well as higher salary levels in corporations, government, education and non-profit organisations. It can also refer to racial and ethnic minorities and men when they experience barriers to advancement. A glass ceiling appears to exist in many organisations and also maybe a glass cliff, in which women are promoted into risky upper-level positions in which failure and subsequent loss of the high-level position is likely. This research investigated perceptions that Durban corporate women have towards the notion of glass ceiling barriers at work. A sample was chosen on a non-probability basis using convenience sampling of corporate women within Durban. Ninety participants completed the questionnaire. The data collected was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that women do not experience glass ceiling barriers to career advancement. Women also feel confident and respected by colleagues, subordinates and leadership and are capable of executing their designated duties. Respondents also showed confidence in the Employment Equity Act which suggests that the transformation charter is followed at their organisations.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Women, Corporate, Employment Equity

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1 Introduction

Artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities are the glass ceilings that hinder women in the workplace. The motivation for undertaking this study is the plight of women in corporate environment. After 17 years of democracy in South Africa, women still experience gender discrimination at work. However, this phenomenon is not unique to South Africa. Women reaching top-level positions are still uncommon in the corporate and private sector. Despite women having the ability, motivation, drive, professional skills, and experience necessary to be effective, women leaders are still held back. “The glass ceiling is a concept that most frequently refers to barriers faced by women who attempt, or aspire, to attain senior positions as well as higher salary levels in corporations, government, education and non-profit organisations, it can also refer to racial and ethnic minorities and men when they experience barriers to advancement” (Lockwood, 2004:1).

Grobler et al. (2006: 22) say that “gender discrimination continues to occur, although progress has been made, they assert that a glass ceiling for women who aspire top management still exists”. Kreitner and Kinicki (2008) added that it is an invisible barrier that segregates women and minorities from climbing the corporate ladder to senior roles in organisations.

Kreitner and Kinicki (2008: 44) said that “women therefore, find themselves stuck in lower

level jobs, ones that do not have profit-and-loss responsibility and those with less visibility and influence”. Grobler et al. (2006: 22 - 23) said that “With more single parents and dual-career couples, balancing the demands of home and work has become the great challenge of the typical South African worker and their employer, when there is a conflict between work and family, the family is three times more likely to suffer than the employees job performance”.

In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act has spearheaded the drive for employment equity and affirmative action within organisations, including the employment and progression of women. In some spheres these drives have been successful and the demographics within South African business have changed with more women holding senior executive positions than before. The question to ask however is how many of these women actually hold positions of power in top management, and the reality is very few.

The advent of the Employment Equity Act has resulted in an inflow of females into the place of work. Business Women’s Association Census (2007:16) indicates that 42.9 per cent of total employed population in the Republic of South Africa are women. This achievement is to a degree a product of a statutory change in industry and employment equity yielding employers.

Baxter (2007:81) contends that the numbers indicate that women in management and decision-making positions are still nowhere near representative

of the probable female personnel. In actuality, most of the high level jobs are held by men. Most organisations have moved towards equal representation in their employment equity status, but the same can seldom be said of their management and executive positions.

Women have been held back in industry through various factors. According to Helgesen (1998: 46–47), women have a long tradition of moving in and out of the workplace in order to care for aging parents; they generally feel less stigma than men when they have taken periods off; with less seniority, women have less job security and so often have been the first casualties of downsizing; they have been driven from large organizations at a faster rate than men by the persistence of the glass ceiling; they are more likely than men to seek retraining on their own time and using their own money. Thus, some of the very disadvantages that held women back in the industrial workplace are now often proving advantageous enabling women to the realities of the information economy, and pushing them to improvise individual solutions to the pervasive instability that confronts us all.

Baxter and Wright (2000:276) asserted that glass ceiling implies an impenetrable barrier that blocks upward movement of women. They said that “below this barrier, women are able to get promoted, beyond this barrier, they are not” Reskin and Padavic (1994:82) suggest that “a glass ceiling blocks the on-the-job mobility of women of all classes, as well as minorities of both sexes”.

Another factor that can hold woman back is self-confidence. “Self-confidence is a person’s belief that he or she can succeed, self-confidence is context-specific to particular tasks and some people seem to display this characteristic through a wide range of activities” (Perry, 2011: 219). Keating (2002:28) argued that “college-age women, women just entering the workforce and women changing careers are ripe for mentoring. It can boost your self-esteem, make you feel more competent and develop your professional identity”

Hillman et al. (1989), Greenhouse and Bordin (1994), Denmark and Guttentag (1987), Korman et al. (1989), Crocker and Luhtanen (1990), all cited in Soufi, et al, (2011) examined the following issue of women relating to their self-esteem as follows:

- Employed women have higher self-esteem more than housewives.
- Women who have high self-esteem show great desire to continue studying and achieve to aims.
- People who have high self-esteem choose further jobs and careers that they have more ability in it.
- One of the barriers to employment for women in them is lack of self-esteem or lack of accountability for employment.
- Barriers to acceptance of women in middle management level posts include: Organisational barriers ,
- Family, cultural and social barriers

- There are significant relationship among manager’s attitudes than technical skills, human, perception, loyalty, organisation commitment and lack of promotion of women in their employment.

Respect is another factor that woman look for within an organisation. Rawls (1971: 530) stated that, “one of the entitlements that individuals are due by virtue of their humanity is the right to be treated in a way that fosters positive self-regard”

The purpose of the Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998 is to achieve equity in the workplace, by:

- Promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and
- Implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce.

Change is a vital ingredient that transforms organisation. Women need to be actively embraced in top level management positions in the corporate world. Van Zyl and Roodt (2003:15) said that “women with children will constitute a major component of labour supply”. Women could no longer be treated as second-class workers. Employers would need to recognise career ambitions and domestic responsibilities. The only way to know how organisations would fare is by means of an employment equity audit. However, there still may be a possibility that an instrument used for assessing employment equity could still be biased and thereby further entrenching gender discrimination.

2 Research methodology

The aim of this study was to assess if corporate women in Durban encounter glass ceiling barriers to career development. The following objectives were formulated for the study.

2.1 Objectives

- To assess if women experience the glass ceiling barrier to career advancement.
- To assess how women balance family commitments and workplace commitments.
- To assess if women are confident in their ability to fulfil their roles at work.
- To assess if women in the work place think that they are respected for their ability and skills.
- To assess women’s views on the Employment Equity Act.

2.2 Respondents and location of the study

The study was conducted in Durban. The research was confined to women working for Durban based companies and organizations.

2.3 Population

The target population consisted of all women working for Durban companies and organizations. Unfortunately there is no data to support the population numerically such as Statistics South Africa's data on Durban working population.

2.4 Sampling

2.4.1 Sampling design

Due to time and cost constraints and despite its restrictions, snowball sampling was selected as the most suitable for this research. The respondents were selected on non-probability snowball sampling from the population of Durban corporate women and respondents that were known to the researcher. Some of the respondents assisted in identifying other potential respondents who were then invited to participate in the research.

2.4.2 Sample size

Given the time and resource constraints the sample size was limited to 107.

2.5 Questionnaire as a research instrument

An electronic questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument. The questionnaire was administered on the web through 'Questionpro'. Electronic questionnaires are easy to administer, inexpensive, fast and have a global reach. The closed type questionnaire had 21 of the 26 questions in five – point "Likert scale" form and this was intended to scrutinize whether participants "strongly disagreed", "disagreed", "uncertain", "agreed" and "strongly agreed" with the statements.

2.6 Pretesting, validation and reliability

Pretesting and validation is done to fish out imperfections in the design of the research apparatus.

Pretesting and warranting reliability and validity of the questionnaire is very important. In this study questionnaire was tested on a small batch of respondents, feedback was positive and the necessary changes were made. The minor changes were made to remove vagueness and misleading or ambiguous questions. For the purposes of this study the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. An alpha coefficient of ($\frac{21}{26} = 0.808$) was found, and it showed a very good rate of internal reliability for the questionnaire.

2.7 Limitations of the research

Most of the studies are challenged by some limitations. The following limitations were identified for this study. Due to time and funding constraints, the data was collected from a small sample of corporate women in Durban. Non-probability purposive sampling used for this study is the least reliable in terms of generalisation.

2.8 Questionnaire administration

Web based surveys are more well-organized and eye-catching hence in this study the web based online software programme was used. The choice selected was to email the URL link to possible respondents. This was done using the respondents email addresses.

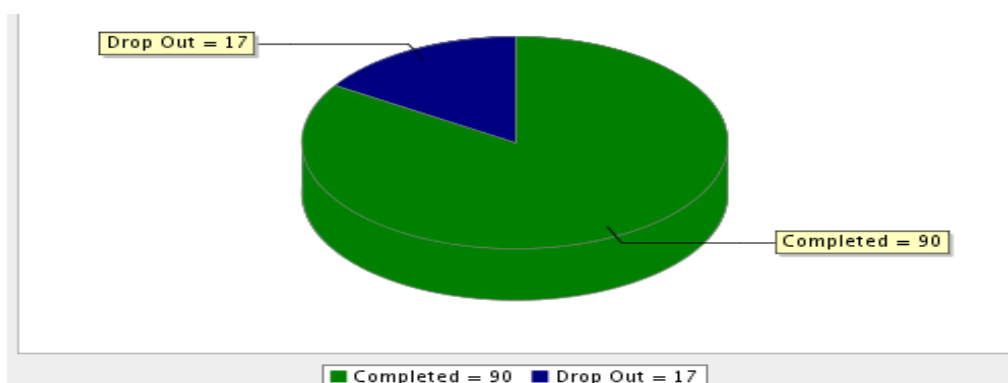
3 Analysis of data

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyse the data.

4 Presentation of results

107 respondents were targeted and 90 completed the survey, representing 84% completion as shown in Fig 1. The incomplete questionnaires were discarded and only data from the completed questionnaires was used.

Figure 1. Survey completion overview

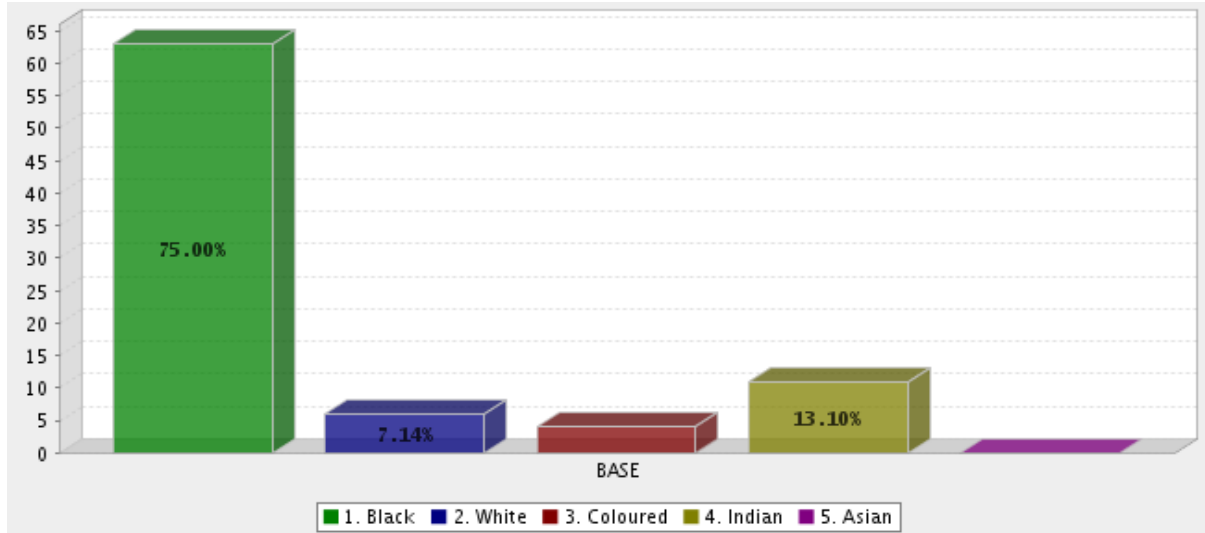


4.1 Race

Figure 2 shows race representation in percentage form. 75% respondents were Black or African, 13.1%

respondents were Indian, 7.14% respondents white a low number of responses from Coloured and Asian respondents was witnessed.

Figure 2. Race representation

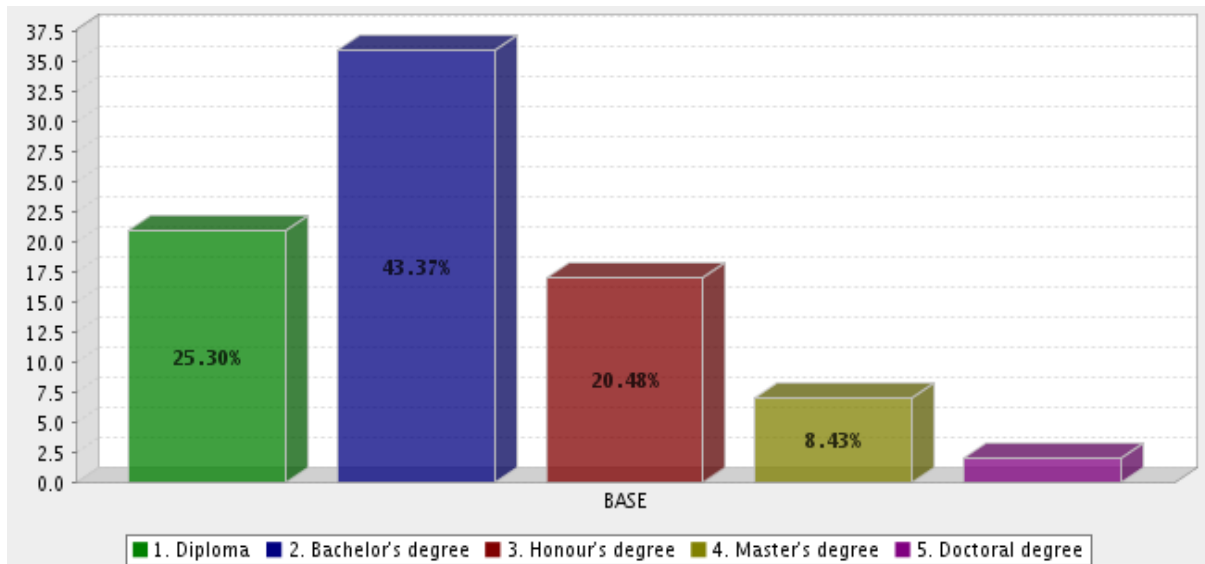


Race classification in South Africa is somewhat confusing as illustrated in Figure 2. It is not clear whether the low representation of Coloured and Asians is attributed to their low representation in Durban or from the fact that they generally classify themselves as Black.

4.2 Highest level of education

Figure 3 shows the highest level of education of respondents. 43.37% respondents held a Bachelor's degree while 25.30% of respondents held diplomas and 20.48% have Honours degrees.

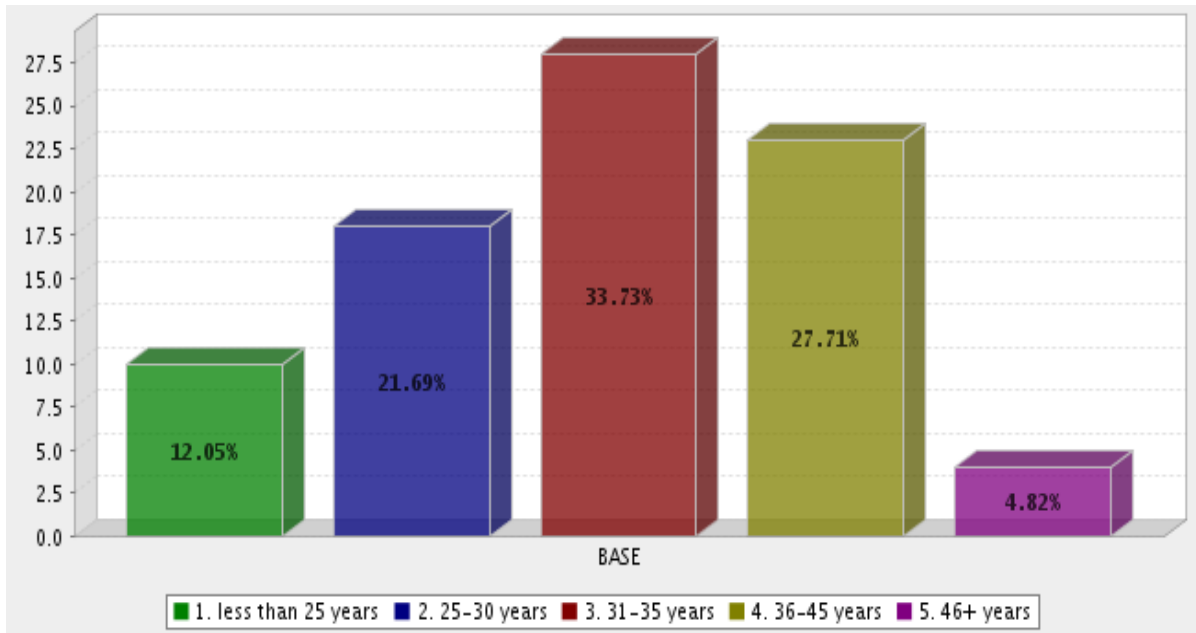
Figure 3. Highest level of education



4.3 Age

Figure 4 shows that 33.73% of respondents were between 31-35 years of age while only 4.82% were above 46 years.

Figure 4. Age representation

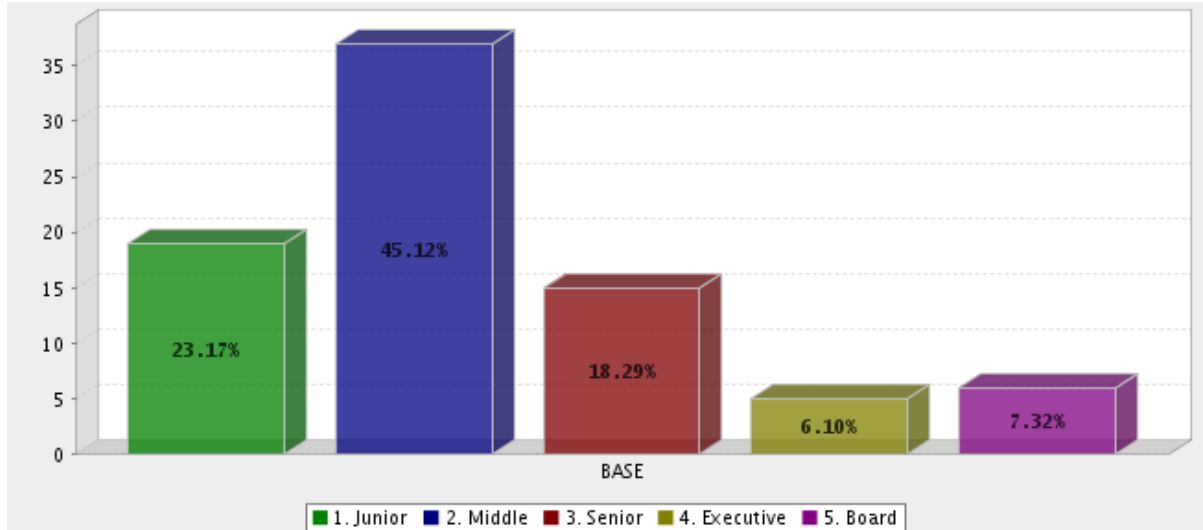


4.4 Level in organisation

7.32% were in executive and board levels respectively.

Figure 5 shows that 45.12% respondents were in middle management positions, while 6.10% and

Figure 5. Level in organisation



The research was limited to Durban corporate women and hence low responses from senior, executive and board members as they are mainly based in Johannesburg and Cape Town at corporate head-quarters of their organisations.

Figure 6 shows 29.63% of respondents disagreed and 16.05% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 22.22% agreed and 14.81% strongly agreed to the statement. In total 17.28% were uncertain. These results present neutrality in general as far as women

perception towards being appreciated for their efforts in a male dominated work setting.

Figure 7 shows that a majority of respondents 42.68% disagreed and 17.07% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 26.83% agreed and 4.88% strongly disagreed to it. The respondent's majority do not agree that their academic qualifications are not recognised in a male dominated work setting.

Figure 8 shows that 33.33% of respondents disagreed with the statement while 14.81% strongly disagreed to the statement. 28.40% of respondents

agreed with the statement and 14.81% strongly agreed. There was a mix in women perception about promotion. There was almost a balance between respondents who agree and those who disagree to the statement.

Figure 9 shows that a 40.78% disagreed with the statement and 11.11% strongly disagreed with the

statement. Some 28.40% agreed with the statement and 9.88% strongly agreed. Women generally disagree to a perception that male stereotypes hinder their potential to be promoted.

4.5 Industry

Table 1. Respondents respective industries

Industry	No. of Respondents
Engineering	10
Accounting and Finance	13
Energy	8
Banking	6
Petrochemical	8
Manufacturing	3
Logistics and Transport	8
Higher education	11
Policing	3
Information Technology	1
Government department	6
Media	1
Human Resources	1
Agriculture	1
Construction	4
Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	1
Health and Safety	3
Hospitality	2
Total	90

Figure 6. My work experience is not fully appreciated in a male dominated workplace

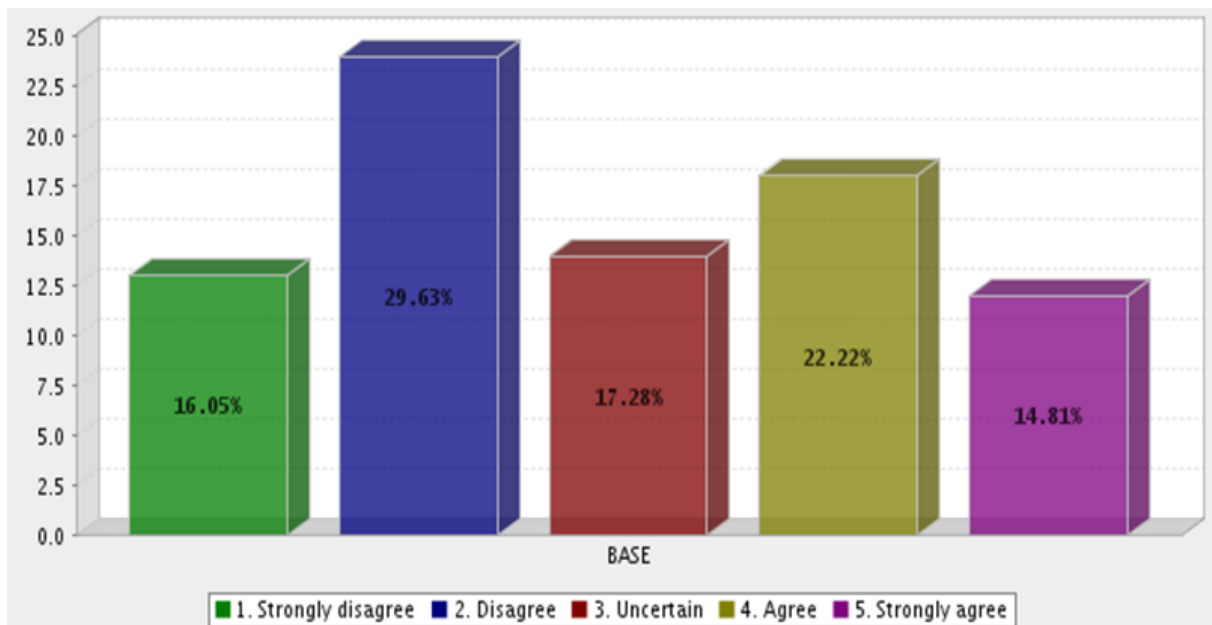


Figure 7. My academic qualifications do not mean much in a male dominated workplace

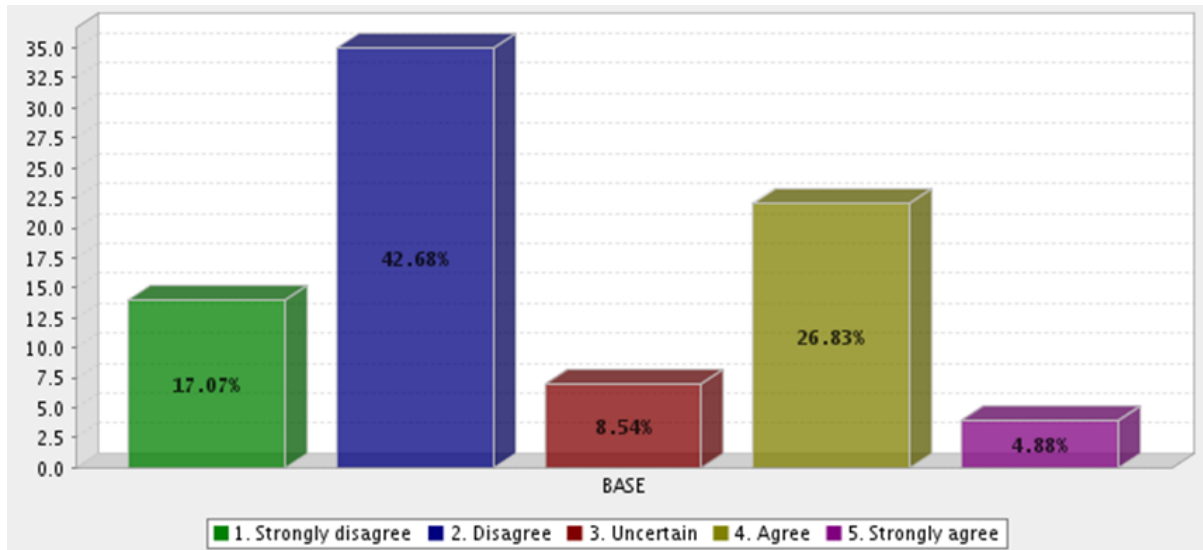


Figure 8. Higher level roles are reserved for men

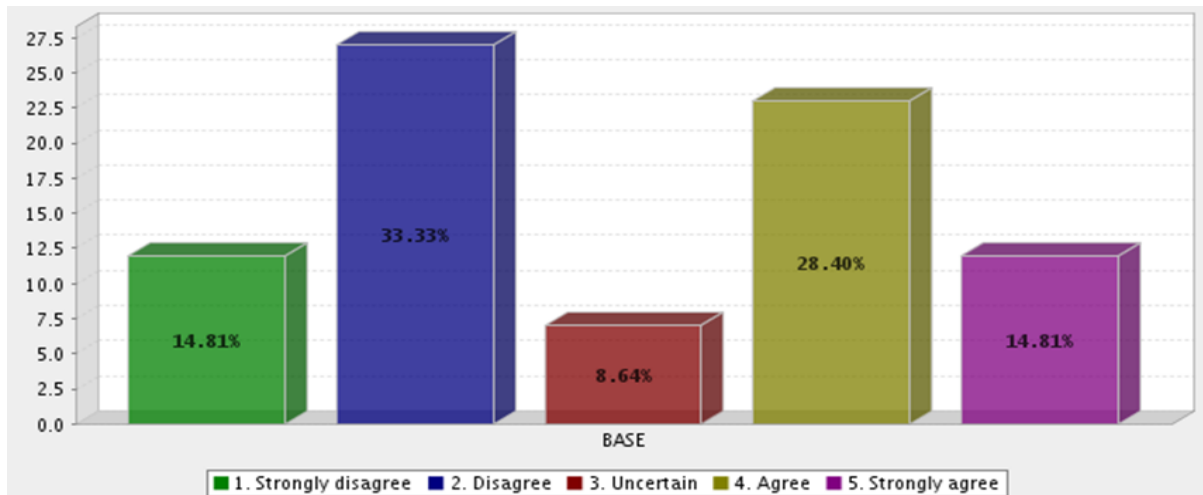


Figure 9. I feel that male stereotypes hinder my potential to land better and influential positions

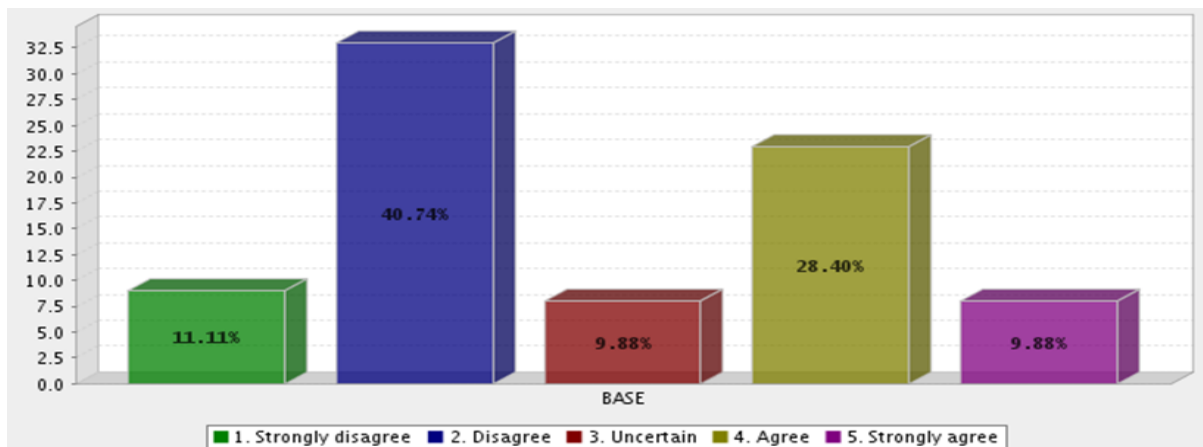


Figure 10 shows that 40.74% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 13.58% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 24.69% agreed with statement and 14.81% strongly agreed. Women

disagree to the statement and the implication is that those with family have a good balance for work vs. family commitments.

Figure 10. I give more priority to family commitments than work commitments

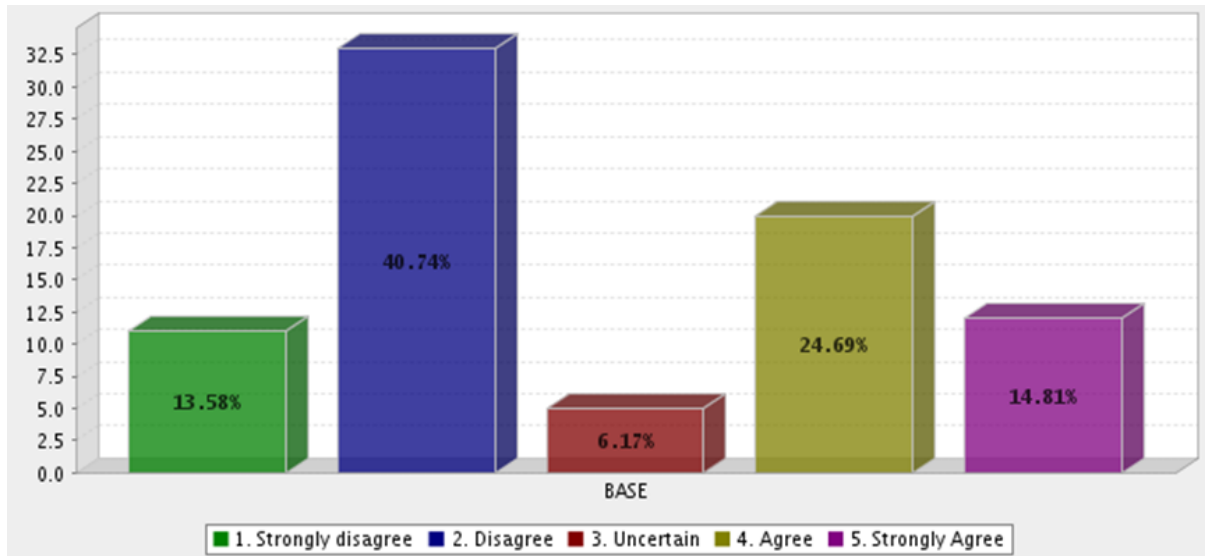


Figure 11 shows that 35.37% of respondents agreed to the statement and 18.29% strongly agreed with statement. Some 25.61% disagreed and 10.98% strongly disagreed. The general perception to the

statement is that maternal responsibilities are primary to women. This statement somewhat contradicts the previous one as women felt they have a struck a balance between family and work commitments.

Figure 11. I am a mother first and a corporate woman second

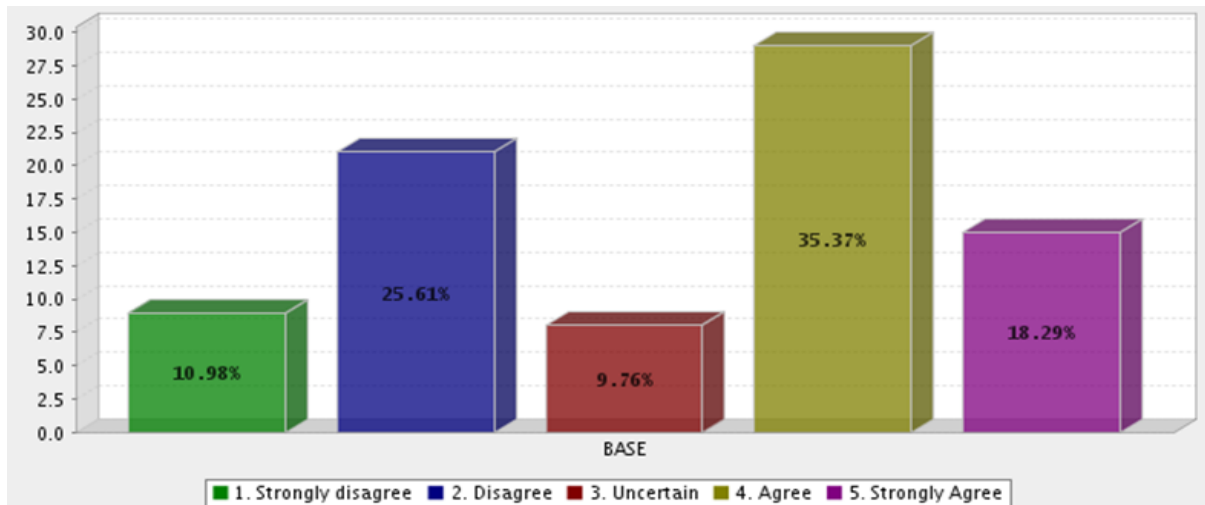


Figure 12 shows that 36.71% of respondents agreed with the statement and 26.58% strongly agreed with statement. Some 24.05% disagreed with the

statement and 11.39% strongly disagreed. Women generally prefer being close to their families and not be away for extended periods.

Figure 12. I prefer working in an office close to home as I do not want to be away from my family for extended periods

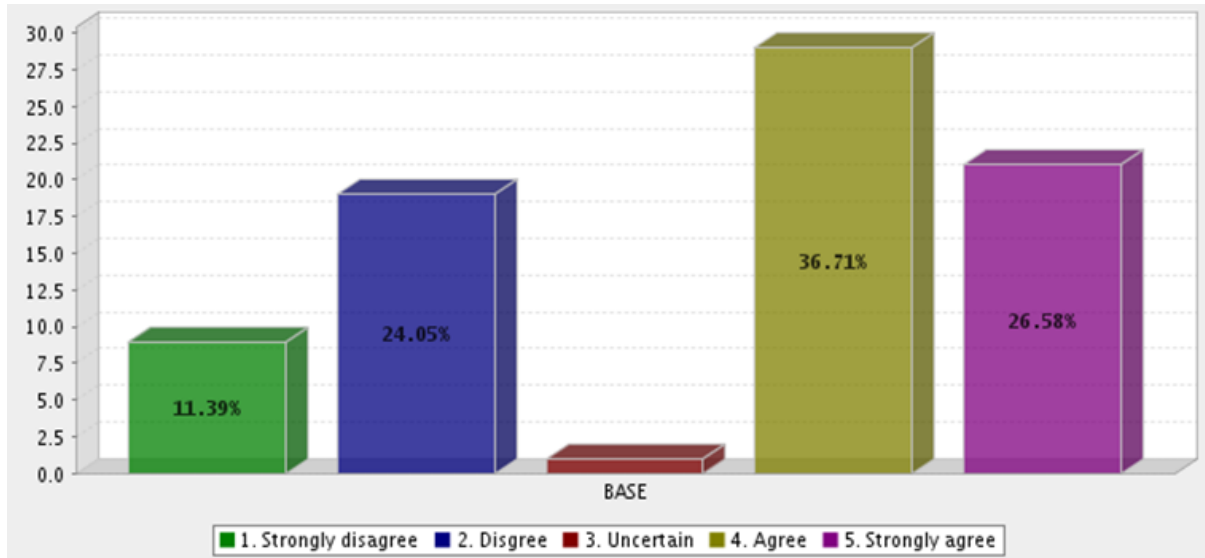


Figure 13 shows that 36.25% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 25.00% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 15.00% of respondents agreed with the statement and 11.25% strongly agreed with the

statement. In total 12.50% of respondents were uncertain. Women disagree with the statement; the responses show that they are generally comfortable with expatriate assignments.

Figure 13. I am reluctant to accept assignments that require long periods of time away from home; I would rather my male counterpart take up such assignments

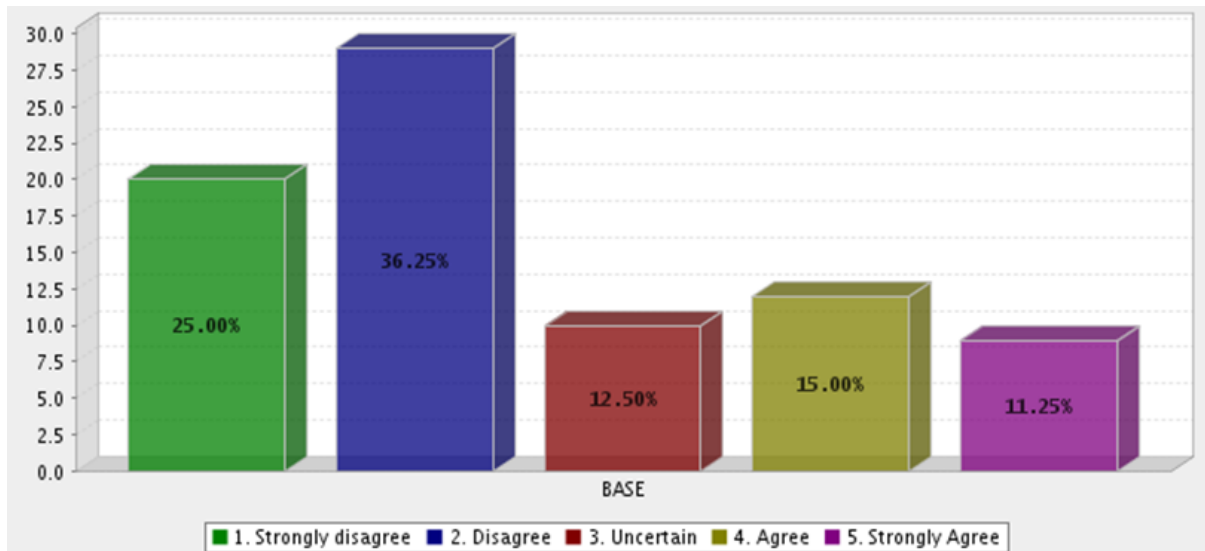


Figure 14 shows that the majority of respondents 44.44% disagreed with the statement and 17.28% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 18.52% agreed with the statement and 11.11% strongly

agreed. Women disagree with the statement, the majority of responses show that women are comfortable with networking sessions that happen after hours and on weekends.

Figure 14. I am not comfortable with corporate networking sessions that go beyond working hours

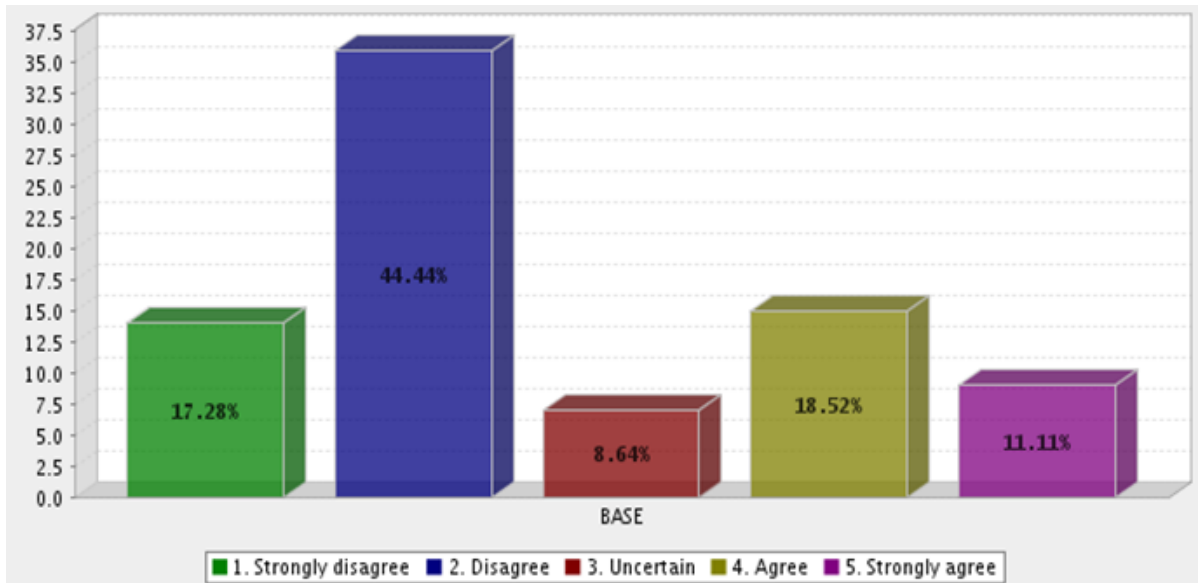


Figure 15 shows that 44.44% and 38.27% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement respectively. Only a small number of respondents were positive with only 6.17% for both agreed and strongly agreed. According to the responses women are not intimidated by male competition.

Figure 15. I am intimidated by male competition

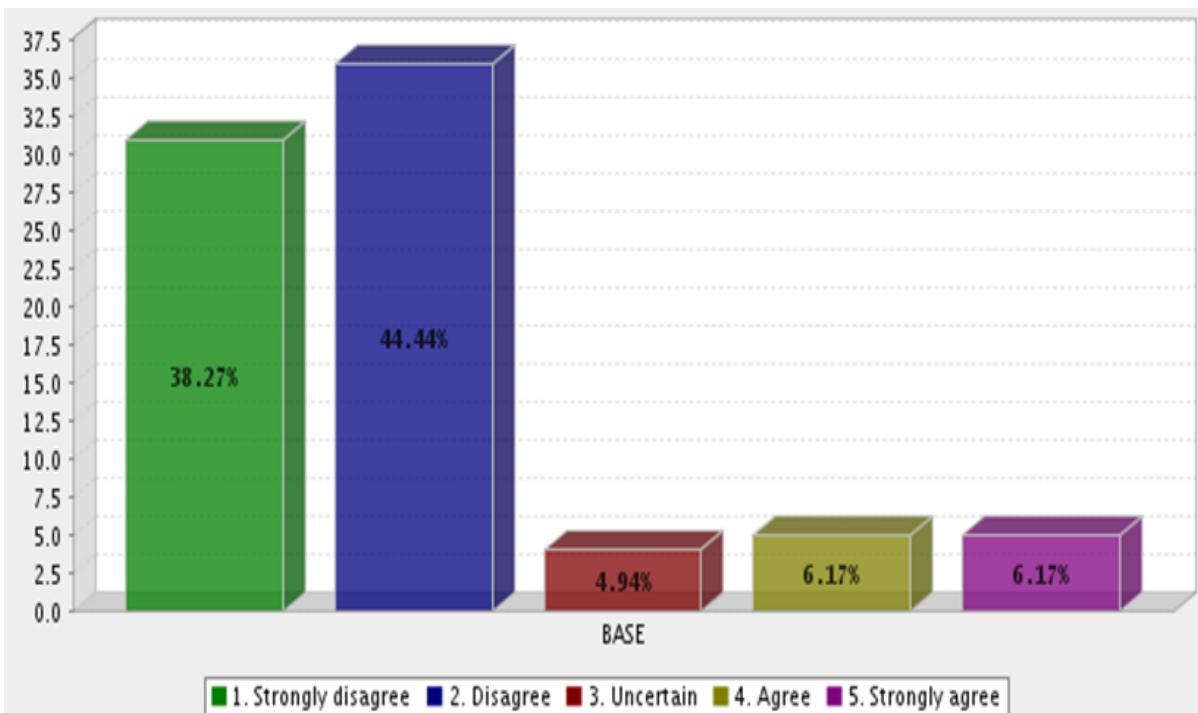


Figure 16 shows that 28.40% of respondents agreed with the statement and 18.52% of respondents strongly agreed. 25.93% of respondents disagreed and 20.99% strongly disagreed. There is almost a balance between respondents who agreed and those who disagreed that men are more dominant at work.

Figure 16. Men are more dominant at work as compared to women

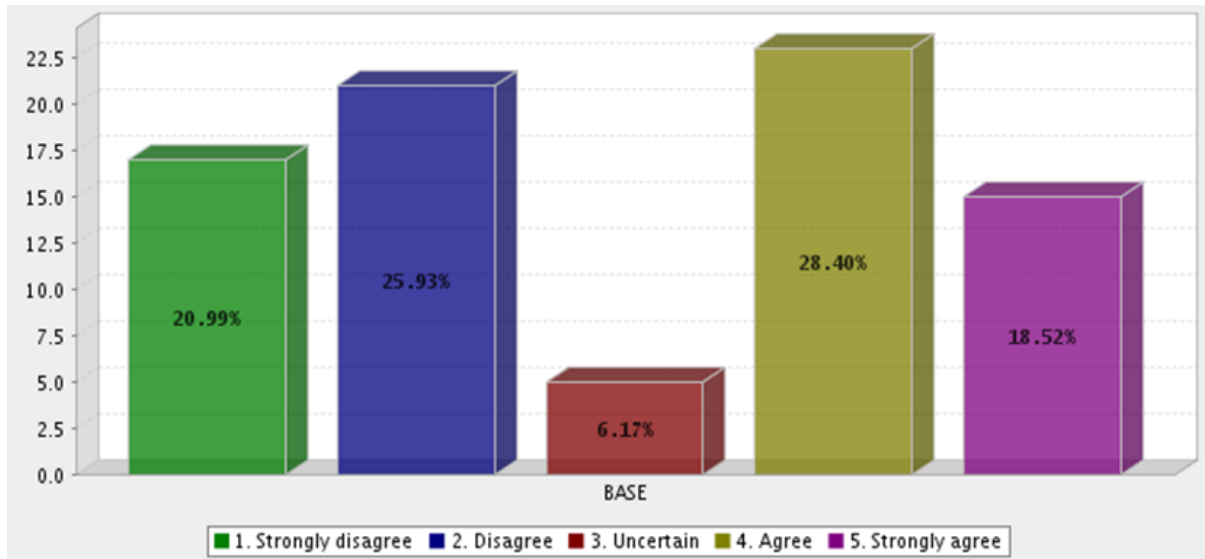


Figure 17 shows that 35.37% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 13.41% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 26.83% agreed with the statement and 14.63% of respondents strongly agreed. 9.76% of respondents were uncertain.

Women responses show that they almost disagreed with the statement that leadership does not take women seriously.

Figure 17. I sometimes feel that because of my gender I am not taken seriously by leadership

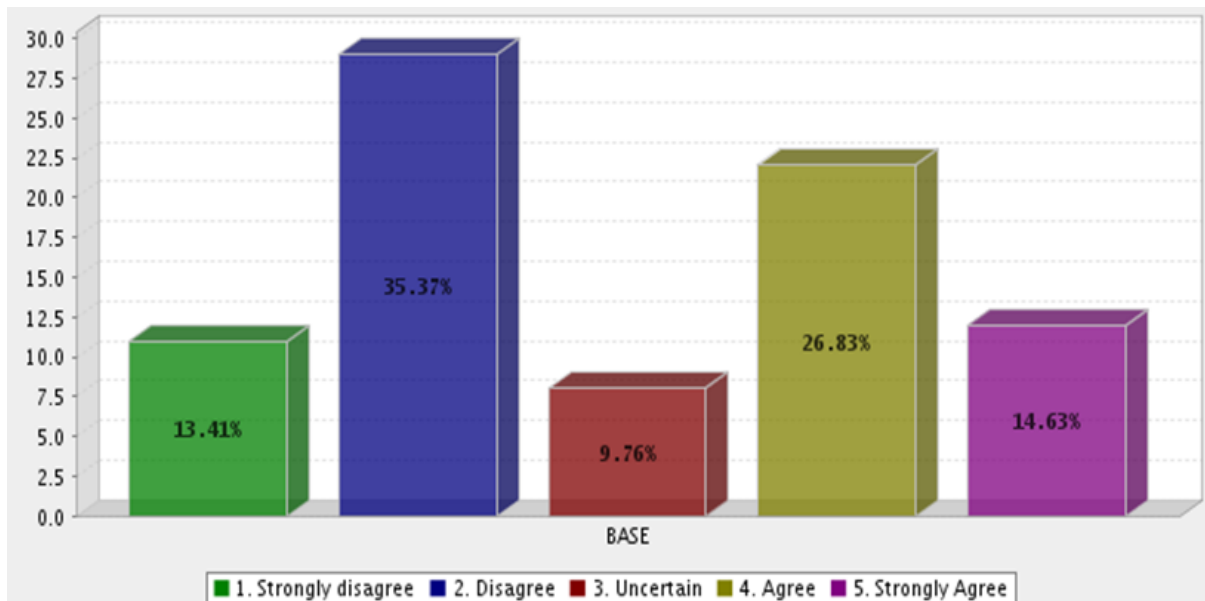


Figure 18 shows that 41.98% and 16.05% of respondents disagree and strongly disagree with the statement respectively. 20.99% and 14.81% of respondents agree and strongly agree respectively.

6.17% of respondents were uncertain. Women disagreed with the statement in general.

Figure 18. I sometimes feel that because of my gender I am not taken seriously by peers

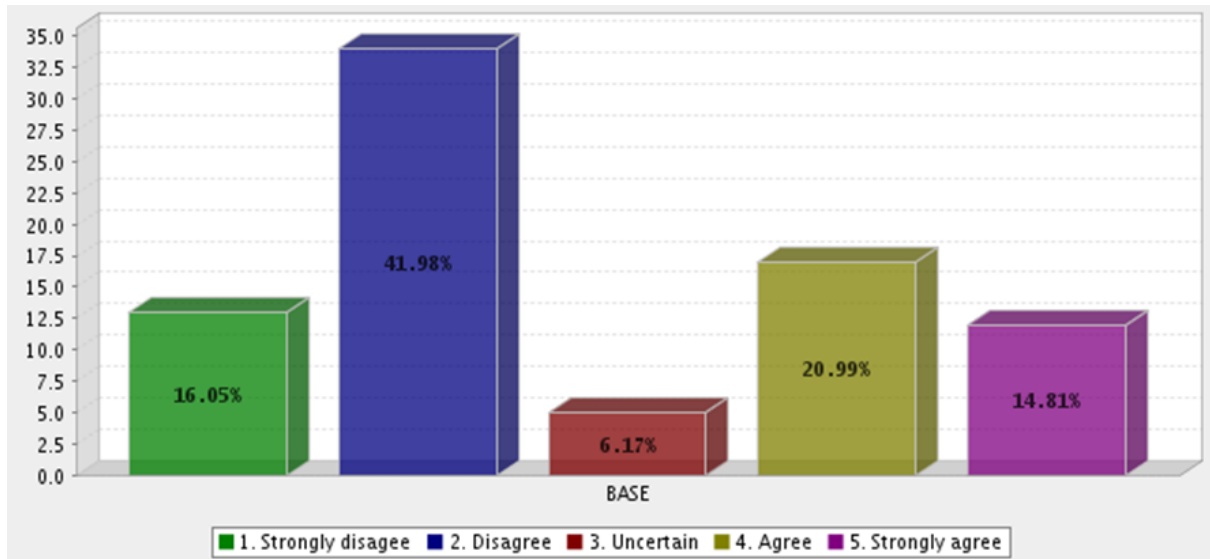


Figure 19 shows that 43.21% and 20.99% of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement respectively. 18.52% of respondents agreed with the statement while only 7.41% of respondents

strongly agreed. 9.88% of respondents were uncertain. The respondents disagreed to the statement.

Figure 19. I sometimes feel that because of my gender I am not taken seriously by subordinates

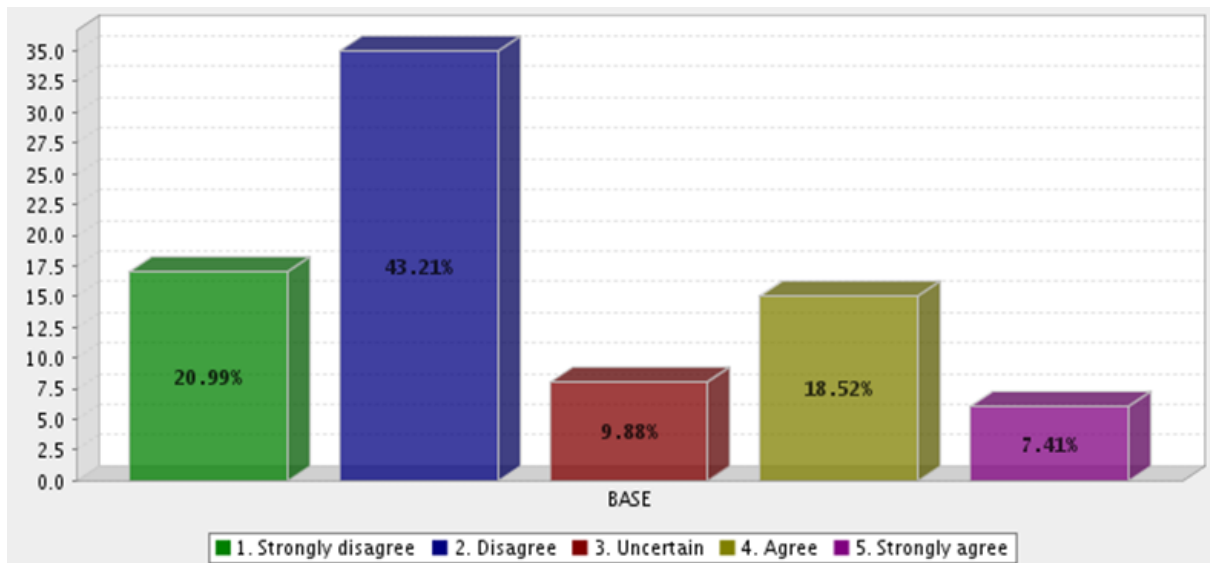


Figure 20 shows that 43.90% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 29.27% of respondents strongly disagreed. Some 6.10% of

respondents agreed and 13.41% strongly Women generally disagreed with the statement.

Figure 20. As a woman I am not comfortable with giving men work instructions

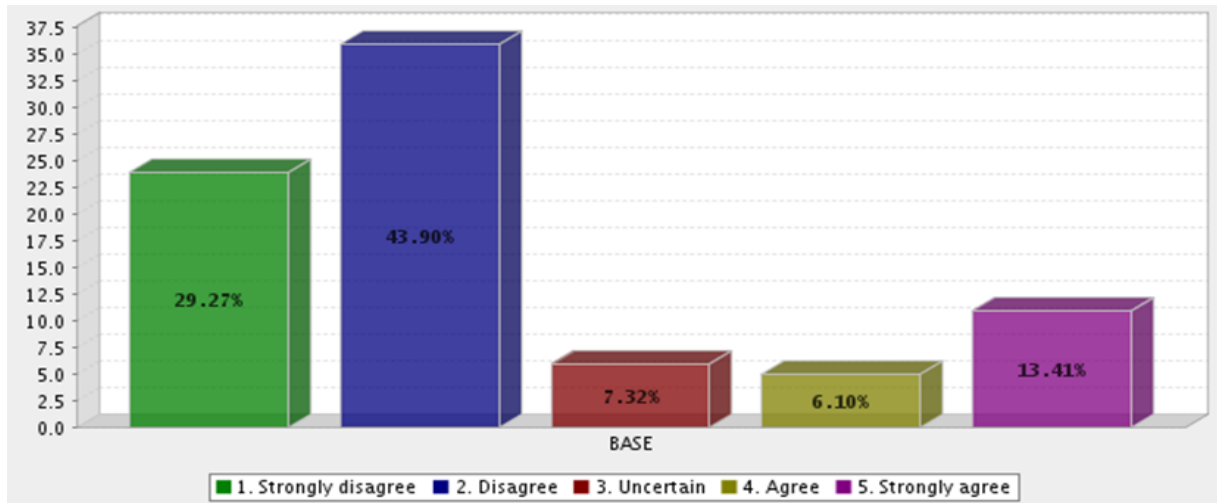


Figure 21 shows that the majority of respondents 48.75% agreed with the statement and 12.50% strongly agreed. Some 22.50% of respondents were uncertain. 7.50% of respondents disagreed and 8.75%

strongly disagreed with the statement. Women generally agreed and have a perception that they are respected by their male counterparts.

Figure 21. I feel respected by male counterparts at work

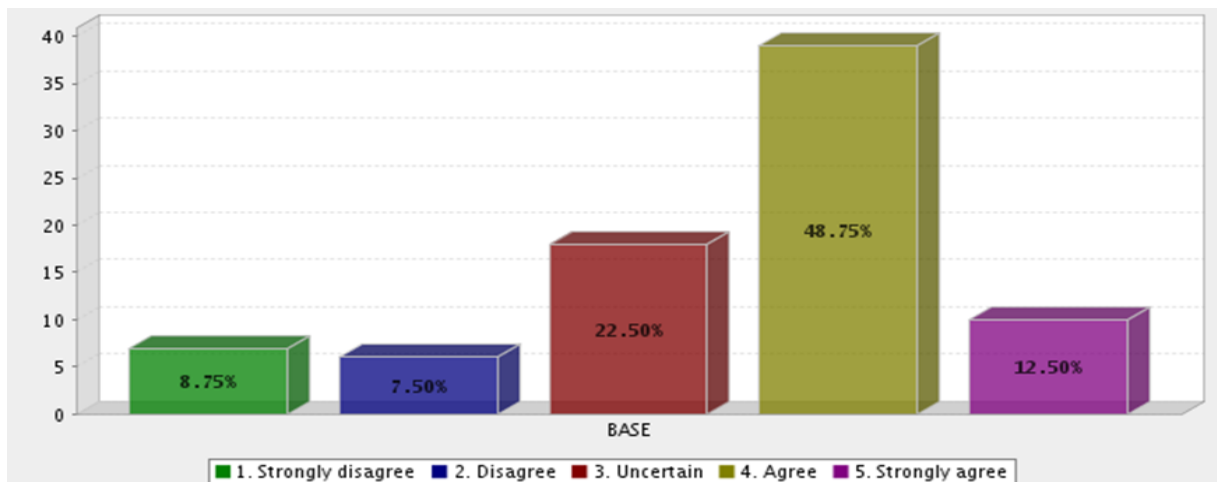


Figure 22 shows that the majority of respondents 45.00% agreed with the statement and 22.50% strongly agreed. Some 18.75% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 3.75% strongly

disagreed. 10.00% of respondents were uncertain. The respondents generally felt that they commanded respect at work.

Figure 22. I command respect at work

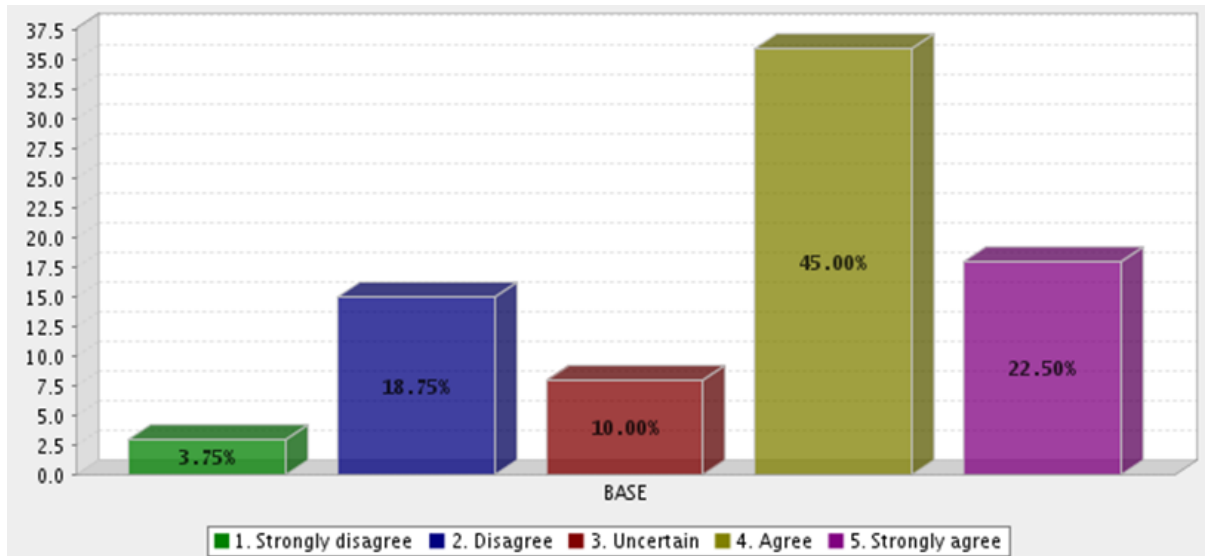


Figure 23 shows that the majority of respondents 54.32% disagreed with the statement and 22.22% strongly disagreed. 7.41% of respondents agreed with the statement and 11.11% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement. The respondents in general disagreed with the statement.

Figure 24 shows that the majority of respondents 50.00% disagreed with the statement and 14.63% strongly disagreed with the statement. Some 9.76% agreed with the statement and 13.41% strongly agreed with the statement. 12.20% of respondents were uncertain. The respondents generally disagree with the statement.

Figure 23. I do not get respect from female subordinates

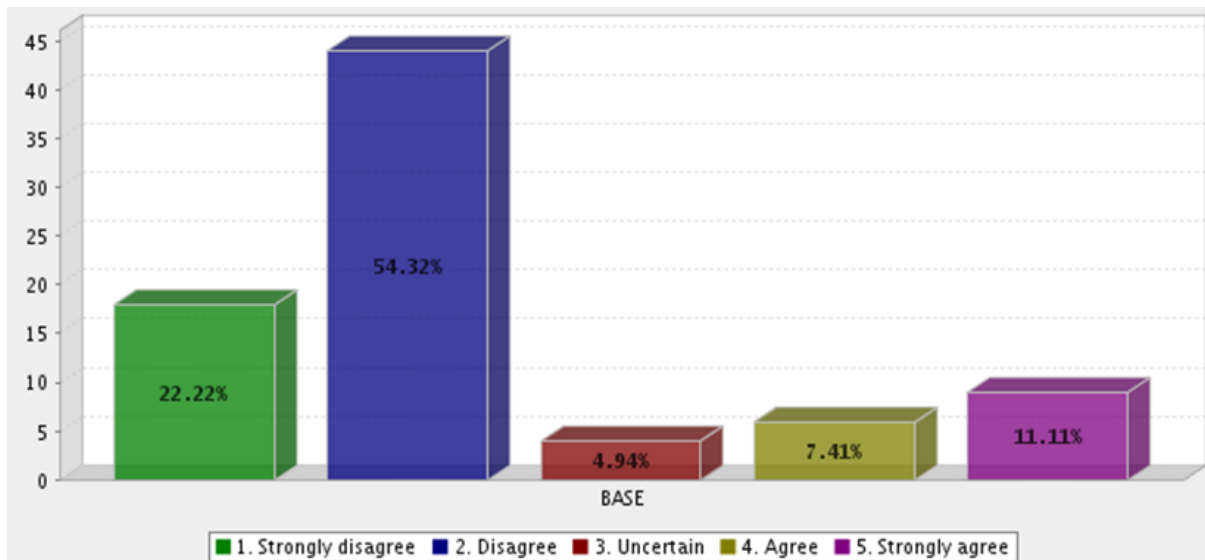


Figure 24. I do not get respect from male subordinates

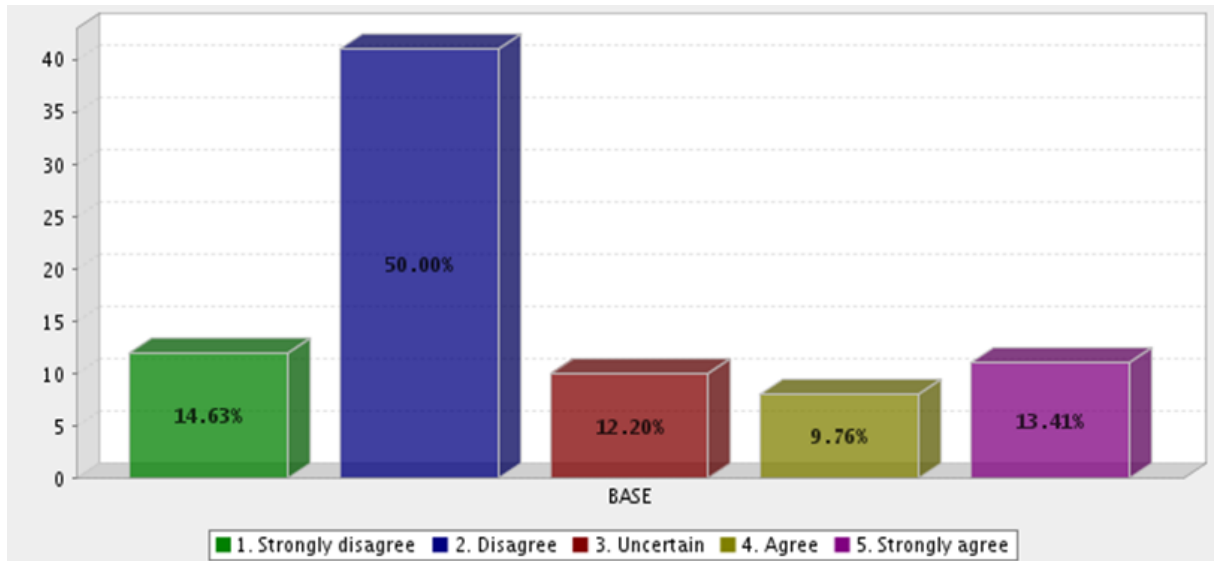


Figure 25 shows that 45.00% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 17.50% of respondents disagreed. Some 8.75% and 7.50% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed to the

statement respectively. 21.25% of respondents were uncertain. Women disagreed with the statement that the Employment Equity Act is patronising to women.

Figure 25. The Employment Equity Act is patronising to women

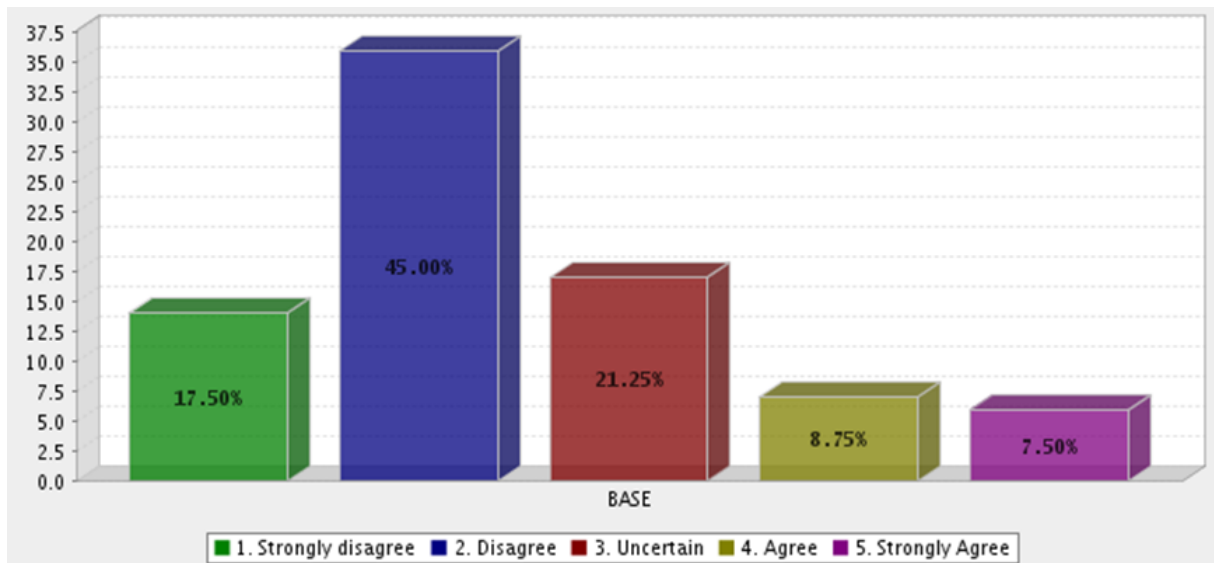
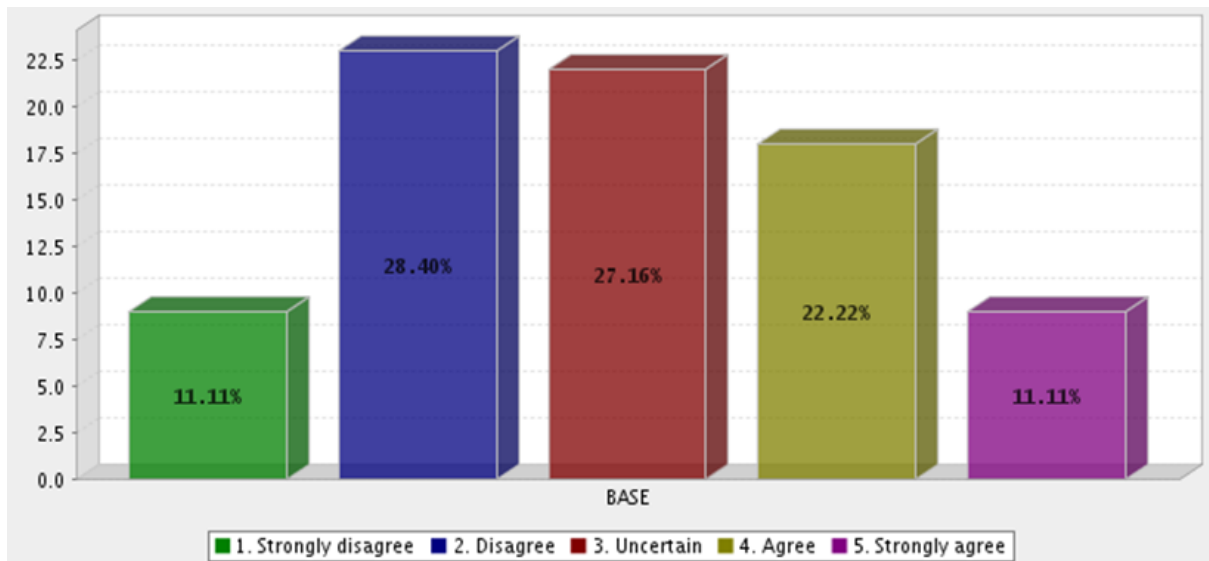


Figure 26 shows that 28.40% of respondents disagreed with the statement and 11.11% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. 22.22% of respondents agreed with the statement and

11.11% strongly agreed. Some 27.16% of respondents were uncertain. There was uncertainty about the statement that Employment Equity is nothing more than a window dressing.

Figure 26. Employment Equity is nothing more than window dressing

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Generally, the sample of women who responded to the questionnaire did not feel that they experience a glass ceiling to career advancement. The respondents leaned more on disagree and strongly disagree to statements made, that suggests that they could be experiencing barriers to career advancement. This could be attributed mainly to the transformation at the corporations at which they work as well as the positions the sampled women occupy.

About balancing family and work commitments there was a balance in the numbers of women disagreeing and those agreeing to the statements in the questionnaire. This suggests that as much as women are child bearers and family oriented, they fulfil work roles equally to their male counterparts. This also suggests that women are not willing to entertain the thought of being side-lined or overlooked for demanding and influential roles just because they are mothers.

The respondents generally felt confident in their roles and were not intimidated by male dominance at workplaces. Women, through their responses to questionnaire statements demonstrated that they were indeed confident in their ability to fulfil work roles. The respondents also demonstrated that they were confident that senior leadership, peers and subordinates took them seriously.

The responses reflected that women are respected by male counterparts, peers and subordinates. The respondents also felt that they command respect and their professional capabilities are respected.

The respondents seemed unsure of the role of the Employment Equity Act. They did not agree with the statement that the EE Act is patronising to women,

however, had mixed feelings about the role of the Act. A significant 26% of the respondents were uncertain about its function.

5.2 Recommendations

a) Women should read more and understand what the glass ceiling is and what it means.

b) Women must aim higher and not settle for less influential positions.

c) Organisations must allow women an opportunity to work on key or strategic accounts equally to men.

d) Child-bearing women must be given space to attend to their children without a fear of losing key occupations.

e) The lessons and perceptions of Durban corporate women from this research are shared nationally to promote women confidence at corporate level.

f) The lessons and perceptions of Durban corporate women from this research are shared nationally to promote a culture of workplace respect specifically gender based respect.

g) Women associations and forums such as BWA, coach women on workplace transformation with the view to educate on the transformation charter and the South African quota system.

h) Women should understand the role and objectives of the EE Act.

i) Women should not be content with accepting meaningless senior appointments. They should rather accept appointments of strategic value to the organisation where there is a likelihood of exerting impact in the organisation.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

- Future research should use probability sampling methods so that the outcomes of such research are more trustworthy and may be used with greater precision in generalising the findings to the whole population of corporate women.

- Although the research included executive and board members of corporations, the responses were not forthcoming. Future research should include other cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town since corporate leaders are usually based at the headquarters.

- Mixed study is encouraged as it accommodates qualitative techniques to compliment this quantitative one.

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