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# Shortage of Retail Management Skills and Employment Equity Strategies: Attracting Women for Permanent Retail Careers in Rural Areas

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the employment of women in retail management in rural South Africa, in order to improve their attraction, placement and retention in the sector. Research was based on literature and employment statistics from the sector, followed by depth interviews and a focus group, conducted with twenty supervisory and management participants from small, medium and large retailers. There were few women in such positions - mostly only in smaller retailers. Women managers are under-represented and under-paid, and influenced by barriers such as education, limited sector exposure, culture and traditions, non-fluency in business languages and employment as casual workers.

**JEL Classification:** J16; J24; L81.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Gender inequality, Rural development, Employment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The retail industry suffers from the perception that it is low skilled base and has poor career prospects, and is often seen as a short-term, stopgap employment option. Too many people feel that the industry is undesirable as a long-term career, because of the belief that there are few career opportunities for progression. A number of the industry's characteristics fuel these negative perceptions; it is traditionally regarded as a higher than average employment of part time and temporary casual workers and is coupled with a higher than average staff turnover. The prevalence of these kinds of workers in the industry has enabled businesses to have flexible and adaptable staff scheduling, while also providing employees with

opportunities to balance work with other responsibilities, such as caring or study (Global Dialogue Forum on Employment Relationships in Retail Commerce, 2015; Heidig, Dobbelstein, Mason & Jooste, 2017).

It is important to acknowledge the impact of apartheid in terms of the spatial mismatch between economic activity and population. This is particularly important in the context of the fact that working age women are more likely to be located in the former homeland areas (which in this case are referred to as rural areas) than their male counterparts (29.8 percent of working age women, compared to 27.3 percent of men). These areas are characterized by low levels of formal sector economic activity and work seekers are often confronted by high costs associated with seeking employment. Most of these people over time move away from these areas to the urban areas to seek better employment opportunities (Department: Women, Republic of South Africa, 2015:78).

Women are more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations and less likely to be employed in high-skilled occupations. Only 11.7 percent of employed women are in high-skilled occupations, with 52.1 percent in skilled occupations and 36.2 percent in low-skilled occupations. In contrast, for men these proportions are 14.4 percent, 60.8 percent and 24.8 percent respectively. These differences are partly the result of the relatively large proportion of women employed as domestic workers (14.3 percent, compared to 0.5 percent amongst men) and the relatively small proportion of women employed as managers (5.7 percent compared to 10.0 percent). However, a slightly higher proportion of women than men are employed in professional occupations (6.0 percent compared with 4.4 percent) (Department: Women, Republic of South Africa, 2015:60).

The challenge seems to be acute in rural areas, presenting an opportunity for creating an impact through government's land redistribution and tenure programmes. Despite educational gains, women remain more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations. This difference is driven largely by the proportion of women working as domestic workers. Conversely, women are less likely to be employed in the informal sector. Within the formal sector, women are more likely to have written contracts and leave entitlements and are less likely to work excessively long hours. Women remain disadvantaged in terms of earnings and dominate lower earnings categories. This is borne out by both household survey and tax data (Department: Women, Republic of South Africa, 2015:10).

Based on the above-mentioned challenges it is imperative for the researchers to explore the prevailing trends globally with a focus in some of the BRICS countries in order to determine the challenges faced by women. India has been included in this study, to illustrate the challenges faced by women in management, because of its similarity with the South African population in terms of poverty and women in rural areas of the country.

## **2. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Women are “seriously under represented” at the most senior executive levels in the grocery, retail and consumer goods sectors despite being the most important target market for retailers and brands, according to new research. The analysis of top-tier management committee roles at 150 of the biggest consumer brands and grocers across Europe was conducted by Dublin-headquartered industry publication, Paul, 2016).

Despite considerable progress, gender gaps in the labour market persist throughout the world, and are especially prevalent in emerging economies. While more women are working, they continue to have

worse jobs than men do. Across emerging economies, a woman earns 19% less than a man on average for every hour of work she does, whereas the OECD gender pay gap is 15%. An effective strategy to curb gender gaps needs to encompass a number of policy domains, including measures to help reconcile work with family responsibilities (OECD, 2016).

The main purpose of this section is to highlight the global challenges and the impact of women in the retail sector in other countries with similar challenges in the developing and emerging markets.

## **India**

India is the second-most populous country in the world with an estimated 1.26 billion persons at end-2014. Accordingly, a female labour force participation (FLFP) rate of 33 percent implies that only 125 million of the roughly 380 million working-age Indian females are seeking work or are currently employed (Das, Jain-Chandra, Kochhar & Kumar, 2015).

India has one of the lowest FLFP rates — typically measured as the share of women that are employed or seeking work as a share of the working-age female population — among emerging markets and developing countries. FLFP rates vary widely between urban and rural areas. Labour force participation of women in rural areas is much higher than participation of women in urban areas. Over time, the gap between urban and rural areas has narrowed moderately, with most of the convergence being driven by the fall in participation rates in rural areas. As a result, taken together, FLFP rates nationwide have fallen since the mid-2000s (Das et. al., 2015).

The retail market in India continues to be unorganised and fragmented with a pronounced rural bias despite a market size worth \$180 billion. According to the 'report by Price Waterhouse Coopers (2012), 98 per cent of the 12 million retail outlets in the country are in the unorganised sector (the largest number in the world). The report said this sector provides jobs to 15 per cent employable adults and perhaps makes the largest contribution to the GDP.

With entry of new players in rural markets, marketers are innovating new cost effective approaches to reach these markets. Looking at the bottlenecks of rural distribution, the solution is likely to centre on maximizing the existing infrastructure and ensuring the participation and economic sustainability of all the stakeholders. In rural markets, as new approaches to marketing have emerged, distribution has also changed with the times (Sathyanarayana & Ganesh, 2008).

The above-mentioned situation is similar to the South African rural situation in terms of being unorganized, a rural bias with a lack of infrastructure and agriculturally skewed in design. India has a large poor population, which is similar to the South African environment (van Klaveren, Tijdens, Hughie-Williams & Martin, 2009).

## **Brazil**

In the 21st century, Brazil has made its mark among the other upcoming economic powers, namely the BRICs countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). This has been not only in showing high GDP growth rates, but also in their promising efforts to reduce poverty and improving education, health and living standards. However, much still needs to be done, especially in the field of women's work and employment. Currently the eighth largest economy in the world, Brazil has transformed into an upper-middle-income

country. In 2016 its GDP per capita reached USD (PPP) 15,127, ranking 79th in the world. The estimated earned income for men was USD 14,857, and for women USD 9,056 (UNDP 2017), suggesting a women to men parity rate of 0.56. This outcome points at very large gender gaps in income and pay, which as we will see, are persistent in Brazil (van Klaveren, et. al., 2009).

Based on the supplied statistics that indicate over 90% of all women in the three highest ranked occupational groups worked in services (broadly defined), Education alone accounted for 37% of all women in these three groups, followed by health (14%), public administration (10%), and wholesale and retail (also 10%). With 36% of all, wholesale and retail housed a considerable share of female managers, most likely, for the largest part, store managers. Clerks proved to be widely and evenly spread across industries. As to be expected, wholesale and retail accounted for a major part (42%) of all service and sales workers, though they are widely dispersed too, with considerable shares in other community services (16%), and restaurants and hotels (14%) (van Klaveren, et. al., 2009).

The situation of women in rural areas is very precarious, and should be studied taking into account the changes that have occurred over the past decades in Brazil: expansion of the salaried system, rapid modernization of agriculture, and land ownership concentration, factors which have brought about a widespread impoverishment of rural families. An increasing number of members from the same family are hence obliged to enter the labour market in order to guarantee the survival of the family (Rossini & Calio, 1996).

The unification of the rural and urban labour market has led workers to alternate their rural and urban activities. The family organization has changed very little, however, what has changed to a certain degree refers to the authority issue, since the activity to be developed by the family members is no longer decided by the “head of household”; each individual organizes his/her life according to the individual opportunities. Due to salaried work, women have become part of the workforce, and are not merely an available and manageable labour force within the domestic unit. The relation between labour production and the workforce are dependent on the wages and lead the family group to organize itself as a unit of consumers. Despite many improvements, poverty, inequality and social exclusion are still factors to which the population, and women in particular, are subjected to in Brazil.

### **3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

Presently South Africa has a total population of 52.9 million people living in 14.4 million households with a total household income of R1, 631 billion (€154 million). Approximately 51% of this population is female. About 29.2% of the population is aged younger than 15 years and approximately 7.8% (4, 15 million) is 60 years or older. This means there are about 1.87 million females of working age ( $52.9\text{m} \times 51\% \text{ female} \times \pm 63\% \text{ working age} \times \pm 50\% \text{ female employment} \times 22\% \text{ retail}$ ) who should be working in the retail sector, compared against 1.5million women who are actually employed in the retail sector. This implies that there are 370000 fewer women working in the retail sector than could be expected (Shocking state of employment in South Africa, 2016).

According to quarterly labour force of the first quarter in 2016, women account for only 2.6 % of the managerial positions in the retail sector. This implies that in real terms only 39000 women were occupying managerial positions in the retail sector. Considering those who should be working in the retail sector,

there should have been 48620 women managers in the retail sector, a significant gap of 9620 (Statistics SA, 2016).

The retail sector in South Africa is large in its diversified nature. In 2012, total retail sales in South Africa amounted to R654, 1billion (€62 billion). Retail sales have grown steadily during the last 5 years although the actual level of growth started to decline from 2012 onwards. According to Derek Engelbrecht of Ernst & Young, “The deterioration in retail sales growth since mid-2012 can in all likelihood be ascribed to a slowdown in real income growth on the back of poor job creation and rising inflation, coupled with a deceleration in the pace of unsecured lending and a substantial drop in consumer confidence levels” (Overview of the South African Retail Market, 2013:1).

In 2012, the retail, wholesale, catering and accommodation sector contributed 14.4% to overall GDP and reflected growth of 3.5% over the previous year. The retail and wholesale sectors employ an estimated 2,825,000 people, 22% of the national labour force. This situation positions retail as an important sector in the overall South African economy.

In the nine provinces of South Africa, there are three that, from the perspective of suppliers of consumer goods, are extremely important. Some 54% of the population and 66% of total personal income is earned in these three provinces, namely Gauteng, Kwa Zulu-Natal and the Western Cape. South Africa has one of the most skewed income distribution patterns in the world, with the top 10% of the population accounting for 47% of consumption or income. A typical household in the highest income group earns 71 times more than a household in the lowest income group (Overview of the South African Retail Market, 2013).

The above highlighted retail information is crucial to understand the South African retail sector industry and its dynamics, as well as in relation to the global retail sector. South Africa is following retail trends currently experienced by emerging markets and developing countries. Moreover, the sector is presently undergoing a shift that will have a medium to long term impact in economic development and employment growth opportunities.

#### **4. DYNAMICS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL INDUSTRY**

##### **Challenges of the Rural Communities**

South African rural communities are facing a number of challenges related to their changing human capital needs such as a declining and aging population and the out-migration of youth encouraged by the free movement and migration from rural to urban and suburban areas.

Rural communities and people in South Africa are defined in terms of their distance from each other and from major population centres. They are equally characterized by lower densities both across communities and within them. As a result, they do not have the advantages of agglomeration economies that often drive the urbanization process. From an immigration perspective, distance and density are in turn likely to affect the awareness, services, institutional completeness, diversity and network structures that function to attract and retain immigrants (Irshad, 2010).

In situations where communities that successfully address human capital as part of their economic development strategies, tend to also promote inclusion and an increased sense of cohesiveness and belonging within the community. The result is a growth in the community’s stock of social capital, with

greater civic participation and diverse involvement from the community. Engagement and participation of community members in attraction and retention strategies is also beneficial on a broader basis. These activities increase the resilience of the community by improving community dynamics and increasing the capacity to collaborate and by identifying and meeting common goals.

Companies face unique challenges when operating in the rural regions of emerging markets where many of these customers live. For example, the consumer population is dispersed over a wide geographic area, transportation infrastructure is often poorly developed, and many consumers have sporadic and extremely low incomes (Neuwirth, 2012).

### **Employment of Women in the Retail Sector**

Gender oppression occurs in all societies and its form rests on the socio-political forces located in the society. In South Africa, female oppression was mainly shaped by two socio-political factors:

- The ideology of apartheid and racial exclusivity that fostered white supremacy and black inferiority. “Thus black women created occupational mobility for white women. Racism rigidified the occupational structure with white women occupying the skilled jobs and black women doing menial and unskilled work” (Fenyese and Lalthapersad, 2000)
- The development of the capitalist sector (Gwagwa, 1989). ‘Deskilling makes workers more interchangeable and expendable. Typically, “women’s jobs” are more prone to deskilling and displacement from technological change. Microelectronic technology can replace clerical work and repetitive tasks in manufacturing, like assembly-line work and packing’ (Fenyese and Lalthapersad, 2000).

Black women endured the cumulative burden of low wages for themselves and their spouses, male migration, live-in domestic jobs, poverty, customary law, traditionalism and state regulation. The state exerted rigid control over the lives of black families. Laws governed the physical movement of black people, access to the cities, the right to housing and access to the job market (Berger, 1992: 13).

The concept of promoting women’s economic and political empowerment has gained greater attention over the last three decades such as the adoption of Rights of Women in Africa; laws have been relaxed to give women equal rights in the world of work, the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment. However, progress in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women at country and local levels has been hampered by various constraints. Although there has been recent focus on developing women’s entrepreneurship in Africa, much of the focus has been on growth-oriented women’s businesses (OECD, 2011).

A hierarchical and male-led work culture in most multinational corporations could be a block to the promotion of professional women and hence could be the reason for low numbers of women in executive and senior management roles. To get more women into leadership roles, succession planning, talent pools, career development programmes and job shadowing for potential women executives and senior managers have been suggested as options for retail banks to consider (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2013).

Women’s entrepreneurship in micro and small business that are often considered informal, despite concerted efforts of poverty reduction initiatives through increased access to skills training and micro-

credit, have not been able to reach the growth potential. Over the last three decades, gender issues and women's empowerment have received greater visibility and attention on global, regional and country-level development agendas, resulting in modest and uneven attainments in most regions in general, and in Sub Saharan Africa in particular (Dejene, 2007).

Presently, six African countries have attained 30% and above (Beijing goal) representation of women in national parliaments (Rwanda 48.8%, Mozambique 34.8%, South Africa 32.8 %, Burundi, 30.5 %, United Republic of Tanzania, 30.4% and Uganda 29.8 %). Women's participation in politics has gained modestly in Namibia (26.9%), Tunisia (22.8 %), Eritrea (22%), Senegal (22.0%) and Ethiopia (21.9 %) (Dejene, 2007).

While these developments and attainments are important, there is a growing realization that gender equality and empowerment of women has not been fully integrated into policy formulation and project design. Considerable gaps between men and women in education attainment, economic opportunities, voices and decision-making and well- being are persistent in many parts of Africa (Dejene, 2007).

When one looks at the development of women and the employment opportunities afforded to women in the workplace, the above assertion is akin to the South African situation. It is also especially true of the retail sector, which specializes more in the employment of casual labour than the employment of permanent employees.

## **5. EMPLOYMENT STRUCTURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL SECTOR**

The introduction of modern retailing in developing countries also poses new challenges for small indigenous retailers, local suppliers as well as policy makers (Humphrey, 2007; Durand, 2007; Emongor & Kirsten, 2009). South Africa is not immune to these emerging developments because it is also involved in the global changes.

For example, small indigenous retailers have been pushed out of the market, local suppliers have been compelled to adhere to strict quality requirements and existing policies fail to adequately address the emerging realities (Arnold & Luthra, 2000; Hart et. al., 2007; Reardon et. al., 2007; Ahmad, et. al., 2008; Tschirley et. al., 2010). This is true to the South African retail sector in its growth and spread into the rural areas, townships and informal settlements sectors or the lower end or sector of market.

However, the depth of the implications of retail transformations in developing countries remains unclear (Humphrey, 2007). The existing literature rarely offers a sound and in-depth analysis of retail trends occurring across a spectrum of principal sectors in developing countries (Phambuka-Ntsimbi, 2015).

### **Labour Brokers**

Over the past few decades, business owners in South Africa have increasingly sought to 'outsource' the traditional full-time, permanent, employer-employee relationship into a triangular labour broker connection. This occurs when labour brokers make workers available to third-party clients that assign their duties and supervise the execution of their work. Most often, the labour broker enters into a contract of employment with the worker, administers the payroll of persons who have been placed with clients, and assumes the responsibilities of deducting tax from the worker's salary. The contract of employment is often made subject to the condition that the agreement continues for as long as the client requires the services of the

employee. The labour broker concludes a commercial agreement with the client in terms of which the client is invoiced for the services being rendered, the labour broker pays the worker's wages and there is no contractual relationship between the client and the worker (Theron, 2008).

The situation in South Africa is complicated by the trade unions' demands to the employers, especially if they are sourcing their employees through Temporary Employment Services (TES), colloquially known as labour brokers. This has had a bearing in curtailing the employment opportunities especially within the retail sector in South Africa that depends heavily on the labour brokers for supplying casual workers.

According to Professor Bhorat, "Labour brokers" created 14 percent of all new jobs since 1995" (le Roux, 2014). The TES sector currently has about 970 000 employees and has created about 770 000 jobs since 1995". This represents about 14 percent of the 5.6-million jobs created in total across all sectors in the last 19 years.

The contribution of TES or labour brokers in the employment sector has been seen as a value add, whereas the trade unions see the involvement of labour brokers as exploitative.

The demographic characteristics of TES (labour brokers) and non-TES formal sector employees by gender, area and race in 2014 are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic characteristics of TES and other formal employment**

	<i>Demographic characteristics</i>	<i>Other formal employment</i>	<i>TES formal employment</i>
Gender	Male	57.6	61.6
	Female	42.4	38.4
	Total	100.0	100.0
Area	Urban	81.1	87.6
	Rural	18.9	12.4
	Total	100.0	100.0
Race	African	68.9	77.2
	Coloured	12.5	9.8
	Indian	3.7	3.1
	White	14.9	9.9
		100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics SA (2014).

In terms of gender, males comprised 57.6% and 61.6%, while females only comprised 42.4% and 38.4% in the other formal employment and TES formal employment categories respectively.

In terms of area of origin of employees, other formal employment accounted for 81.1% for urban and 19.9% for rural areas, while the TES labour brokers' involvement indicated 87.6% in the urban and 12.4% in the rural areas.

In terms of racial spread of TES labour brokers employment is higher, at 77.2%, than other formal employment, at 68.9%. However, other formal employment is higher for all other races than TES employment, namely Coloured 12.5% versus 9.8%, Indians 3.7% versus 3.1% and whites 14.9% versus 9.9%, respectively.



## 6. DRIVERS OF CHANGE

### Integrated Rural Economy

Retail trade is pivotal to the development of rural economies. The retail sector is a critical medium for the re-spending needed to create an integrated economy. Local merchants are often prominent in civic affairs and among the most important constituencies for economic development. In addition, increased retail shopping outlets can markedly improve the quality of life in isolated rural communities. Attempts to strengthen the retail sector in rural areas have focused largely on increasing market size by attracting manufacturing activities. Some economic development scholars, however, have questioned the potency of manufacturing as a spur to retail development in rural areas (Testa 1993; Yanagida 1991). Women mostly dominate in the services sector and men mostly dominate in the manufacturing sector. Therefore promoting manufacturing in rural areas is unlikely to help grow employment opportunities for women in rural areas.

### Changes in Rural Buying Patterns

*The Influence of culture:* Culture and tradition influence perception and buying behaviour. For example, the preference in respect of colour, size and shape is often the result of cultural factors. Rural consumers' perception of products is strongly influenced by cultural factors.

*The geographic locations:* Rural consumer behaviour is also influenced by the geographic location of the consumers. For example, nearness to feeder towns and industrial areas influence the buying behaviour of consumers in their respective villages. To give one more example of how geographic location affects buying behaviour, one can point out the fact that the lack of electricity in many rural households acts as a barrier to the purchase of certain consumer durables.

*The exposure to urban lifestyles:* The extent and level of exposure of rural consumers to urban lifestyles also influences their buying behaviour. An increased exposure and interaction with urban communities has been the developing and common trend in recent years.

*The manner in which the consumer uses the products:* The situation in which the consumers utilize the product also influences their buying habits. The example of lack of electricity affecting buying behaviour succinctly illustrates this point as well. Lack of electricity automatically increases the purchase of batteries by rural consumers. Similarly, since rural consumers cannot use washing powders/detergent powders that much, as they wash their clothes in streams or ponds, they go in more for washing bars and detergent cakes (Sathyanarayana & Ganesh, 2008).

### Women Labour Market Casualization

Black women are more likely to be employed in part-time and casual jobs. They are prone to employment insecurity (likely to be arbitrarily dismissed due to the nature of their employment); job insecurity (denied the means to develop a career); work insecurity (likely to work in dangerous and unsafe conditions) and income insecurity (earn extremely low wages and have little chance of improving their income levels) (Standing et. al., 1996). The nature of jobs that black women do is prone to downsizing and redundancies.

## **7. STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS**

The dynamic and changing environment with pressures from macroeconomic factors and the microeconomic including the transformative effect (long term) of rural markets retailing will require new strategies for current retailers to sustain and increase their sales. This is an important factor as it has been established that many retail jobs are considered vulnerable, and employment growth in the retail sector responds well to labour market demands and economic performance. Hence, the continued success of the sector is likely to have a direct impact on employment.

Women's ability to participate in trade depends upon their access to jobs, credit, education and training. Yet these are areas in which they have been discriminated against and from which they have been excluded (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007:14).

## **8. CHANGE THEORY**

The theory applied in this research is Change Theory because change is a common thread that runs through all businesses regardless of size, industry or age. The world is changing fast and this demands that organizations must adapt to change quickly too. Organizations that handle change will thrive, while those that do not may struggle to survive (Planning and Executing Change Effectively, n.d.).

The strategy of applying change management theory helps companies to prepare for planned and unplanned changes. It also helps to mitigate risks by creating a blueprint of how to proactively deal with opposition or any other problems that may arise during and after the implementation. The biggest risk is acceptance - acceptance by employees, staff, management, and stakeholders should be the topmost priority when initiating change (Robbins, 2003: 564-65).

Employing women in positions previously held by men needs a well-planned strategy and execution methodology (Planning and Executing Change Effectively, n.d.). Change Management theory is based on a large and rapidly growing discipline that is being increasingly deployed on a global scale by all types of organizations. It refers to a structured approach that facilitates the adoption of change by groups and individuals within an organization. The underlying principle is that change does not happen in isolation. It influences the whole organization and each individual associated with it (Planning and Executing Change Effectively, n.d.:4).

The availability of information and providing the correct navigation helps to accelerate change and increases the likelihood of success. As organizations mature, many encounter challenges that lead to developing negative patterns, processes and habits that have led to the creation of an entire industry around organizational re-engineering and change management. There are many theories of organizational change. The one that will work best for an organization will depend on many things, including how resistant the organization is to change or how the organization embraces change (Planning and Executing Change Effectively, n.d.:8).

In order for women to benefit in employment, it is imperative to introduce change management in companies, especially the retail sector, because a structured approach to change management is beneficial as it moves organizations away from merely reacting to resistance to change to providing a solid framework for engaging and mobilizing affected employees, particularly women in this case. Methodologies that are easy to use and easy to explain to others can gain serious traction and become a vital component of the

project activities. The awareness of the need and value of change management is increasing at all levels of organizations (Robbins, 2003: 564-65).

The above literature supports the experiences of South African communities and the challenges they are facing with the geographic distances and the lack of infrastructure. These problems and the skewed demographics between the urban and rural communities have an impact on the development and empowerment of women.

## **9. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative questionnaire was developed in consultation with representatives from the Wholesale & Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA). The selected population comprised managers in the retail sector, both female and male. Purposive sampling was employed, with the W&RSETA supplying a list of retail stores to contact and the names of relevant people to approach. Respondents were selected based on their positions and roles at retail stores. The twenty participants selected were employed in managerial and supervisory positions in the retail sector, and had connections with retailing in the rural areas. The initial approach was to target women in management positions, but due to a lack of women managers, some male managers were also added in order to have a sizeable response. It also proved worthwhile getting the male perceptions of the problem of women being under-represented in management.

### **Data Collection and Sampling**

The W&RSETA supplied contact details from their database, and initially distributed questionnaires to W&RSETA-affiliated retailers. The questionnaires were distributed to twenty respondents from small, medium and large retail entities with an interest in the rural areas, and in the promotion and empowerment of women. Using this questionnaire, a series of telephonic interviews were conducted with the twenty participants employed in different supervisory and management positions within the retail sector. After analysis of these interviews, a focus group was held with the respondents to peer-review the findings and to explore, in more depth, the issues identified. This form of method triangulation provided confidence in the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed qualitatively based on the key issues that were raised from the literature and confirmed by the questionnaires and the interviews. The two sets of data are presented and analysed thematically, based on the key issues that were raised in both the interviews and focus group. Nine main issues were raised:

- Profile of respondents according to position in company
- The size of the retail organisation
- Provincial breakdown of respondents
- The ability of the retail sector to employ women in management positions
- Constraints on employing women in management positions

- Labour environment opportunities
- Rural women development and empowerment
- Women employment in management positions within retail sector
- The exposure of women to technology in the retail sector

### **Participant Profile**

The respondents' ages varied between 35 and 51, and their years of experience in the retail sector varied between 7 years and 34 years. The positions occupied by the respondents included: Accounts Manager, Area Manager, Senior Area Manager, Director, Category Buyer, and Controller. Seven women were from big companies, eight were from medium-sized companies, and five were from small companies. The majority of respondents were from Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape, although there were some respondents from Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West.

### **Research Findings**

The results and findings of this research are mostly consistent with the barriers and challenges to employment of women in management positions as identified in the literature. The following are the main findings from this empirical study related to the employment of women in the retail sector.

**Finding 1:** Women are still discriminated against and marginalized in the workplace when it comes to their promotion or consideration thereof to fill up management positions.

**Finding 2:** Women earn less than men in the retail sector do, even though they are employed in large numbers by the retail sector. There is a salary gap between men and women in the retail sector. They are representative only in small retailers.

**Finding 3:** Most rural women are disadvantaged by the lack of exposure to the retail business sector and this situation further disadvantages them when management positions are available - they are deemed not ready for appointment.

**Finding 4:** Poor command of business languages, such as English, becomes a barrier to the assertiveness and confidence of rural women in the retail sector. This jeopardises their chances of promotion and consideration for management positions.

**Finding 5:** There is a lack of proper training of rural women and of preparing them for management positions in the retail sector. The available training in most instances is unorganized and insufficient to prepare them for management positions.

**Finding 6:** Traditional and cultural demands and expectations suggest that women should take care of their families first - their career aspirations will be considered later. This in a sense stifles the progress of rural women.

**Finding 7:** The lack of female role models and mentors contributes to too many women accepting the status quo in the retail sector, which adds to the lack of ambition to climb the ladder of success and promotion, resulting in personal limitations.

## 10. DISCUSSION

According to Paul (2016), women are “seriously under represented”, especially at the most senior executive levels in the grocery, retail and consumer goods sectors, despite being the most important target market for retailers and brands. There is also a strong view that women are underpaid, and earn less than their male counterparts earn. This study supports this view, having found that the employment of women in managerial positions in the retail sector in rural areas is affected by many barriers. Factors such as their education level, their exposure to the retail business industry, cultural and traditional factors, and employment conditions such as being employed as casual workers tend to block their progress to managerial positions.

The identified trends in the employment of women in management positions indicate that few women are employed in management positions even though more women than men are employed in the retail sector. The study has found that women have succeeded in becoming managers in small retailers, but the medium and large retailers are still male dominated at management levels. The majority of female participants in the retail sector are employed at the lower end, as cashiers and sales people.

A further finding was that permanent employment of rural women in the retail sector was very low due to their lack of exposure to the retail business sector. Language also served as a barrier, which created lack of self-confidence and assertiveness. Cultural and traditional demands, including rural community expectations for women to raise and care for their families, also tended to discourage the appointment of women into permanent positions.

The main factors influencing the employment of women, and the workplace opportunities and experiences offered to them, especially in rural areas, are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Factors influencing employment of rural women**

<i>Influencing factors</i>
Equity considerations
Transformation of the retail sector
Empowerment of rural women
Travelling distance from the nearby retail stores

Different countries are applying different strategies to retain women such as creating flexible working conditions in order to enable them the opportunity to study and care for their families. However, in South Africa these strategies and opportunities are being undermined by the factors discussed above, which are effectively threats to the employment of rural women within the retail sector. This is illustrated by the comparison provided in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Threats & opportunities**

<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
Flexible working conditions	Traditional and cultural factors
Empowerment of women and equity considerations	Discrimination and undermining of women managers
Permanent Employment	Lack of permanent employment through casualization
Equal earning power and salaries	Unequal payment for same work

## 11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The main objective and purpose of this research was to identify the challenges and barriers affecting rural women in occupying management positions in the retail sector. The findings based on this research have led to the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** Based on change management theory, eliminating discrimination against female workers could increase productivity per worker by 25–40 percent, depending on the type and degree of exclusion from the labour force and the managerial pool. Eliminating barriers that prevent women from entering certain occupations or sectors of employment would have similar positive effects, reducing the productivity gap between men and women.

**Recommendation 2:** Reducing and eliminating the earning disparities between men and women will reduce the current wage gap in the retail sector; it will also promote and advance equity in the workplace. Currently there is a wide gap in wages because most management positions are occupied by men in the retail sector. Change management through transformation and equity can reduce this gap.

**Recommendation 3:** W&RSETA should consider introducing programmes that are focused on developing and empowering rural women in the retail sector for occupying management positions when they become available.

**Recommendation 4:** Women in the rural areas should be assisted in overcoming the language barriers through bridging programmes or given opportunities to improve their communication skills in order to operate optimally in the retail sector by the employing companies.

**Recommendation 5:** The consideration of cultural and traditional demands affecting rural women should be allowed for in the retail sector in a flexible manner in order to enable them to contribute in retail management positions. Policies need to be in place in order to recognize their norms and values, and to ensure the adaptation of Eurocentric rules to traditional rules.

**Recommendation 6:** The retail sector, in conjunction with W&RSETA, must consider introducing programmes for mentoring prospective rural women recruited for promotional positions in the industry and incorporate succession strategies that are implementable, and which should be monitored and evaluated by the assigned personnel.

## 12. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In conclusion, the creation and retention of jobs within the retail sector has shown that this is not based on one factor, but requires a multi-factor approach. Since the external environment plays a vital role in developing this sector, the PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, environment and legal) model could help to understand this. The Political decisions have an impact on the retail sector direction, with the National Development Plan being a classic example. The economic factors have a strong bearing in driving the retail sector to create jobs or shed jobs based on the supply and demand within the sector.

The Social factors cannot be ignored as they also play a pivotal role in determining the retail sector contribution, especially regarding the support of emerging small businesses in creating jobs.

The power and influence of Technology cannot be overlooked by the retail sector as this is one of the key factors affecting retail, especially online shopping, e-commerce and e-marketing, which reduce the space of the shop floor and influences warehousing and transport logistics. Mechanisation and automation in the sector is going to create new jobs and careers.

The study has shown that a comprehensive and viable strategy that is actionable is crucial for alleviating unemployment in the sector, especially regarding unemployment of rural women. The usage of different integrated strategies and methods by the retail sector and W&RSETA are an important factor in finding solutions to reduce unemployment through offering the youth entrepreneurial opportunities in the sector.

The empowerment and transformation of the retail sector is an imperative. The retail sector cannot afford to be an onlooker but must be an active stakeholder in changing and improving retailing.

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