



## Queen Bee Syndrome at the Workplace; Perspectives of Female Business Students at a South African Private University

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### Abstract

It has been found out that some female leaders exercise certain behavioural traits in the workplace that are discriminatory towards other females. This behaviour is referred to as the Queen Bee Syndrome. To shed light on the syndrome, this paper aims to discover the perceptions of final year female Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) students in a South African private university about their opinions on female leadership and to discover the prevalence of the Queen Bee Syndrome. Qualitative interviews were conducted on final year female students in a South African private university in Pietermaritzburg. The sample was obtained using snowball sampling method. The information gathered was analysed using content analysis. The key discoveries made were that the female students generally would prefer to work with a male manager due to the negative characteristics of competitiveness, emotionality and jealousy that was associated with the female leaders they have worked with. Respondents were also of the opinion that the Queen Bee Syndrome exists and that it is a resultant of society norms spilling over into the workplace. It is believed that social norms contribute to this problem, hence it is crucial that discriminatory behaviour in society be alleviated to strengthen and support the current women movement fighting for equality.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Discrimination; Motivation; Queen bee syndrome; Workplace.



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### 1. Introduction

In Africa, only a meagre 5% of Chief Executive Officers (CEO) in top companies are women, although it has been established that companies that have the highest female representation on their executive committees achieve 20% higher profit margins (Mphahlele, 2018). In South Africa, amongst the top 40 Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) listed companies there is only one female CEO. This phenomenon is very strange because if it is proven that qualified female leaders increase profitability, then why are companies reluctant to appoint female leaders? This occurrence may be due to the Queen Bee syndrome, which describes women in the workplace, especially those higher in the hierarchy, as competing against each other for the opportunities of leadership and power. In those cases, such women in the workplace regard fellow female colleagues as more of a threat than their male colleagues (Sills, 2007).

The Queen Bee Syndrome was first coined by Staines *et al.* (1973) study. This phenomenon describes female behaviour in the workplace that is discriminatory towards other women. The mentioned act of discrimination has been seen to intensify as females rise in the ranks of authority especially in a male-dominated profession (Gabriel, 2018). In the South African context, the Queen Bee Syndrome is described as the way in which women knowingly act to hinder the promotion of female subordinates by analysing their female subordinates' performance more critically than that of their male subordinates (Molatseli-Tsiane, 2018).

Research conducted in 2012 by the Workplace Bullying Institute showed that females focused their bullying behaviour onto other women 80% of the time and this result increased by 9% from the same study conducted in 2007 (Coetzer, 2016). Another study in 2011 questioned 1,000 women in the workplace and found that 95% of the respondents said that they had experienced undermining by another woman (Coetzer, 2016). The study also found that women described working for another female as more stressful than working for a male. This claim is substantiated by South African statistics showing that of the entire South African workforce only 44% of skilled positions were filled by women in 2002 (Statistics South Africa, 2017). This figure still remained at 44% in 2017 (Statistics South Africa, 2017). If top management of South African organisations is looked at it can be seen that 31% of South African organisations have no females in senior management roles and only 10% of companies listed on the JSE have female CEOs (Maureen and Fajardo, 2017).

## 2. Aim of Study

In view of the above problem, the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome's impact on organisational and national gender equality progress cannot be underplayed as the Syndrome influences gender equality progress in organisations and thus in society in the long term (Molatseli-Tsiane, 2018). The purpose of the study is to shed light onto the perceived reality of the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome amongst female third year business students in an attempt to redirect gender equality efforts to assist in alleviating this syndrome.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1. Leadership

Evolutionary theories have suggested ways to explain the phenomena of leadership from the viewpoint of both leaders and followers. Some theories suggest that leadership, leaders and followers do not exist naturally and are merely results of adjusting to competition by means of being either dominant or submissive in a group (Van Vugt, 2006). Furthermore, Van Vugt (2006) explains another school of thought, the Evolutionary Game Theory which explains that leadership originated to fulfil the need of solving organizational problems. In viewing the above two schools of thought, it is evident that the nature of leadership can be viewed from many standpoints thus increasing the complexity of constructing a definition as Antonakis and Day (2018) suggest that the practice of leadership is easier seen than what it is to construct a definition for it.

Over the years however, several researchers have proposed different definitions of the concept of leadership. Gardner (2006) explains leadership to be relationships that deal with the ability to influence others to embrace new values, attitudes, goals and behave in accordance with these changes. Likewise, Summerfield (2014) suggests that leadership is the driver that directs leaders and followers towards a shared goal. From these two definitions it can be seen that, although different, common themes do exist. It can thus be pointed out that the common themes in the nature of leadership is a relationship between a leader and followers, shared goals and the ability of a leader to influence behaviour that aids in achieving the shared goal.

To further conceptualize the discipline of leadership, leadership theories were established. These theories were developed with the aim of determining the characteristics and behaviour of a good leader. The most common leadership theories are the trait, behavioural and contingency theories (Erasmus *et al.*, 2013). The trait theory suggests that good leaders possess certain traits that distinguishes them from bad leaders. On the other hand, the behavioural theory proposes that good leaders and bad leaders behave differently and thus behaviour sheds light on the success of a leader. The contingency theory however argues that a successful leader cannot be judged on merely traits and behaviour due to the complexity of leadership. Contingency theory thus attempts to decide on the best leadership style given the situation (Malos, 2012).

The situations experienced in a dynamic business environment calls for effective leadership. Leadership within an organization allows for an enabling structure that facilitates both coordination and collaboration as well as providing a support system to aid in the attainment of shared goals (Hackman, 2002). The way in which leaders drive organizations and people towards change and goals is done through the specific leadership style adopted by the leader. Leaders can adopt three basic leadership styles, autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire, according to Erasmus *et al.* (2013). Elaborating on this, an autocratic leader's leadership style is a transactional style while a democratic leader's leadership style is a transformational style. These two styles are in contrast with each other as a transactional leader motivates with money and monetary equivalents whereas a transformational leader motivates with feelings of trust and respect (Erasmus *et al.*, 2013). From these three basic leadership styles four contemporary leadership styles have emerged. The first contemporary style is a charismatic leader who enjoys a strong relationship with subordinates and exudes self-confidence, sensitivity and has the ability to form a vision (Jones and George, 2018). A visionary leadership style is the second contemporary leadership style and focuses on the leaders' ability to create and communicate an exciting and realistic vision.

From the discussion of the various leadership definitions, leadership theories and styles it can be seen that the topic of leadership is a fundamental issue in the investigation of the Queen Bee Syndrome among final year female BCom students as the root of this investigation revolves around the way in which a leader interacts with subordinates. The understanding of the crux of leadership and leadership styles is important as through these, the elements of female leadership can be understood.

### 3.2. Female Leadership

In societal conditions, men and women enjoy different traits, and these differences are said to have an impact on their way of leading. Gender stereotypes advocate that a men's leadership style is described as autocratic, aggressive, self-assured, overriding and competitive (Carli and Eagly, 2011). On the other hand, a woman's leadership style is described as democratic, interpersonal, motivating and creative (Carli and Eagly, 2011). A meta-analysis revealed that the differences between men and women's leadership styles were moderate except that men displayed greater aggression, especially physical aggression, in the workplace (Carli and Eagly, 2011).

Although female leadership is a well-known topic, the action taken to implement change have been uninspiring. As highlighted earlier, South African organisations have little female representation in senior management and leadership roles and even fewer companies listed on the JSE have female CEOs (Maureen and Fajardo, 2017). According to the University of Cape Town (2017), South Africa scores dismal on the characteristic of females in senior management and leadership positions if compared to the rest of the world. According to Smith (2002), if females are in managerial positions, the positions tend to be in lower management where they supervise mainly

females and receive lower remuneration than males in the same position. Although many females occupy lower and middle management and leadership positions in South Africa, the chances of promotion are small as these females are thought of as not being ready to carry larger responsibilities (University of Cape Town, 2017).

This thought that has been hindering promotions is distorted as the Big Five predictor of leadership has found that neither gender has an advantage according to the Big Five traits linked to leadership (Halpern and LaMay, 2000). Carli and Eagly (2011), also agree that females tend to display similar behaviour as their male colleagues. Therefore the act of hindering promotions or employment based on gender is one way of discriminating against women in the workplace. Gender stereotypes regarding female leadership gives, according to Heilman and Caleo (2018), gave rise to this gender discrimination.

### 3.3. Discrimination

Gender discrimination is illegal in South Africa. According to the South African Employment Equity Act (EEA), no individual may discriminate, against an employee based on race, gender, sexual orientation, family responsibility, ethnicity, age, disability, religion, political view, culture, or language (Department of Labour, 2018). In the working environment women frequently encounter acts of gender discrimination. These acts can be performed by both males and females (Wolfe, 2017). Some acts of discrimination against women is the refusal of promotion due to pregnancy, judged on the way one dresses, speaks or one's age (Wolfe, 2017). In a study on the discrimination in the Korean workplace, it is found that the act of discrimination has a great influence on female recruitment, employment, promotion and remuneration (Yukongdi and Benson, 2005). It is important to note however that men are also victims of gender discrimination (Wolfe, 2017). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this investigation discrimination against women in the workplace will be focused upon.

Discrimination in organisations also has implications for managers. In the discussion of a study conducted by Sipe *et al.* (2016) it is noted that for as long as managers turn a blind eye to discrimination in their workplace they hamper the progress of gender equality. If organisations were not to discriminate based on gender and give women the responsibility of leading, their suggested way of leading would have a favourable impact on organisational outcomes, especially that of financial outcomes. Studies have proven that there is a positive relationship between organisational performance and the percentage of women in positions of leadership and authority. Fortune 1000 has found that positions of authority and boards of directors that have female representation do better in terms of financial outcomes than positions of authority and boards of directors with no female representation (Carli and Eagly, 2011). The question thus remains, why is gender discrimination still prevalent if the benefits of inclusivity are evident?

A popular form of gender discrimination that might cause for little female representation in higher positions and on boards is known as the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a term that refers to the unseen barriers that inhibit women from reaching higher positions in an organisation (Wolfe, 2017). Previously, the main barrier preventing women from reaching higher positions were thought to be their male colleagues. However studies found that, colleague women also hinder the progress of other women in the workplace (Coetzer, 2016).

### 3.4. Queen Bee Syndrome

The introduction of legislation regarding female employment, such as that of the Employment Equity Act in South Africa which requires that women who are capable of doing work conventionally done by men may not be discriminated against in terms of gender, has seen an increase in female employment (Department of Labour, 2018). As a result of acts such as the above, the number of women entering male-dominated professions is also seen to be on the increase. However, it has been discovered that it is women who, once in the male-dominated profession, discriminate against female subordinates in lower positions, an act referred to as the Queen Bee Syndrome. The Queen Bee Syndrome manifests itself when a woman changes her behaviour to suit a male-dominated environment (Martin, 2016). The behavioural change that women undergo according to the Queen Bee Syndrome is parallel to the phrase 'if you can't beat them join them' that is so often heard in society. This behaviour, in turn, hinders the progress of female subordinates. The impact of hindering promotions is the stagnation of the number of females in positions of authority within organisations. This is usually a result of females who analyse their female subordinates' performance more critically than that of their male subordinates (Molatseli-Tsiane, 2018).

In the last decade, a great deal has been done regarding the discrimination and the inequality status of women worldwide both socially and economically. Unfortunately, the same progress has not been noted in promoting women to positions of leadership. Unquestionably, women such as Theresa May, Melinda Gates and Helen Zille have risen in their organisational hierarchy but these women are only a handful of female leaders succeeding in a male-dominated environment (Forbes, 2017). The most logical solution to promote more females to leadership positions would be for the women who have made it to positions of leadership to mentor and support female subordinates in an attempt to climb the hierarchy. However, this is often not the case as the opposite tends to happen (Drexler, 2013).

But the question remains, is the supposed Queen Bee Syndrome still capable of hindering women's progress in their careers in reality? The opinions regarding this question vary. Professor Joyce Benenson performed a study in the US and concluded that the Queen Bee phenomenon does exist and commented that competition amongst women is cut-throat. The author suggested that the competition between women stems from evolutionary theories in the sense that women are used to competing for male partners and for resources (BBC News, 2018). Similarly, Professor Naomi Ellemers agrees on the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome but disagrees that it stems from evolutionary theories. Professor Naomi Ellemers, argues that the Queen Bee Syndrome is a result of gender stereotyping and

sexism where women knowingly create distance between themselves and other women (BBC News, 2018). Agreeing with the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome is Brinded (2017) study which sought to find whether or not gender played a role in female's preferences for leaders and managers. It is found that females perceive other females as good leaders and managers but however showed no desire to work for them (Brinded, 2017). Another study that agrees with the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome is that of Sundvik and Lindeman (1993) who investigated the role of sex identity on employee ratings. Sundvik and Lindeman (1993), note that it is, according to their findings, more likely for leaders or managers to view subordinates of the same sex as a greater threat than subordinates of the opposite sex.

Schieman and McMullen (2008), measured the negative effects on female subordinates experiencing the Queen Bee Syndrome and found both evidence of physical and psychological stress. Female subordinates found it more stressful reporting to female leaders and managers as opposed to reporting to male leaders and managers (Schieman and McMullen, 2008). The study also concluded that the mean and emotional relationships between female leaders or managers and female subordinates have a negative effect on the wellbeing of these subordinates which includes anxiety, stress, depression and a loss of motivation and purpose (Schieman and McMullen, 2008). These negative effects on an individual have a negative effect on an individual's performance hence organisational performance and give rise to internal conflict (Schieman and McMullen, 2008).

A study done by Hurst *et al.* (2018) on the career impacts of women managing other women stated that a negative professional relationship between a Queen Bee and her female subordinates has been associated with job dissatisfaction and as a result a high employee turnover rate. Due to these impacts, personal lives have been affected due to unemployment periods and depression (Hurst *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, a study about the incivility at work also suggested that the Queen Bee Syndrome impacts job satisfaction levels and thus higher employee turnover rates which, as Gabriel (2018) suggests, affects an individual's health and also affects an organisation's management efficiency. Another study published in the Handbook of Research on Promoting Women's Careers noted that negative relationships between women in the workplace are an important contributor to organisational experiences and careers (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2013).

## 4. Methodology

This is a qualitative study which aims to yield detailed descriptions of perceived female students' experiences, their perceptions of a female leader or manager and their interpretation and viewpoint of the Queen Bee Syndrome. In addition to this, the choice of qualitative research is also aligned with the interpretive paradigm, which involves understanding a phenomenon through detailed and rich accounts of perceived human experiences and opinions (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

Interviews were conducted with respondents to gather information from BCom female final year students. Final years were chosen because they were the likeliest to have worked. A qualitative interview is a brief interview or a discussion with individuals about a specific topic (McGivern, 2013). This method of research will be appropriate for this investigation as respondents will provide information regarding their perceptions and opinions of female leaders' behaviour as well as discrimination by female leaders or managers in the workplace.

The sampling technique to be used is snowball sampling which works on a referral basis (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Out of the population of about 50 students, a sample of 10 was used. Dworkin (2012), purports that a sample size between 5-50 respondents is adequate for a qualitative study. Data gathered was then analysed with content analysis.

## 5. Results and Discussion

After content analysis was performed on responses from the 10 participants, the following themes emerged:

### 5.1. Difficulty to Work With

Most respondents were of the idea that female leaders were more difficult to work with. Some respondents felt that female managers are more competitive and judgemental. This judgement is said to stem from the female leader feeling threatened by a female subordinate as she feels that her position might be at risk.

The following are some of the verbatim responses:

*Respondent A: It's quite difficult as women are already competitive in general so working with them is more difficult.*

*Respondent C: A female might have an agenda against you which will also cloud her judgement.*

*Respondent G: Male leaders don't judge in an overcritical way and they treat you better. They would listen to your opinions and take it into consideration whereas females won't pay attention to what you are saying.*

*Respondent J: I prefer working for a male leader due to potential for growth, as females are often insecure and feel like their position is at risk which makes them difficult to work with.*

The above responses corroborate some previous studies. Some female subordinates found it more stressful reporting to female leaders and managers as opposed to reporting to male leaders and managers (Schieman and McMullen, 2008). Respondent's viewpoints are also in accordance with the Queen Bee Syndrome. Professor Joyce Benenson commented that competition amongst women is cut-throat while Professor Naomi Ellemers argues that the Queen Bee Syndrome is a result of gender stereotyping and sexism where women knowingly create distance between themselves and other women (BBC News, 2018). Some theories also suggest that leaders and followers do not exist naturally and are merely results of adjusting to competition by means of either being dominant or submissive in a group (Van Vugt, 2006). Sundvik and Lindeman (1993), also note that it is more likely, according to

their findings, for leaders or managers to view subordinates of the same sex as a greater threat than subordinates of the opposite sex. These comments support the idea of competitiveness in the workplace, especially women as well as the responses of judgements being passed because of a feeling of threat that female subordinates bring.

## 5.2. Discrimination

All respondents were of the opinion that discrimination by females against females does occur in the workplaces they found themselves in. Respondents thought that society and its norms contributed to this syndrome. It was said that females in general within society are competitive with one another, seem to judge each other mainly on appearances and are jealous if another female is seen as being better. This mentality then spills over into the workplace. An example was given about movies who portray this exact behaviour of the proposed Queen Bee. Together with societal influences, there is also pressure on women to succeed due to the momentous women empowerment movement. This pressure converts into a cut-throat competitive environment.

The following are some of the verbatim responses:

*Respondent E: in my experience, discrimination by females against females does happen in the workplace due to societal pressure on women to succeed and maintain a standard.*

*Respondent F: Society influences discrimination as there is usually a popular girl who breaks down the other popular girl to be the only popular girl. This is almost like the movie "Mean Girls."*

*Respondent I: Some women are more emotional and competitive by nature and then it is difficult to separate emotions from work issues. I believe that this is a combination of inherent qualities and influences from society.*

*Respondent J: I believe that the harsh environment of the professional life forces you to discriminate against people as your job is always on the line.*

One would assume that women who have made it to positions of leadership will mentor and support fellow female subordinates in an attempt to climb the hierarchy, however, this is often not the case (Drexler, 2013). The responses from the interviews regarding the reasons for the discrimination are very similar to what previous studies have found. Similarly, Professor Joyce Benenson suggests that the competition between women stems from evolutionary theories in the sense that women are used to competing for male partners and for resources (BBC News, 2018). From these statements, one can say that competition, judgements and jealousy are instilled in the norms of society and these are practised by the majority of humans. However, one can also argue that the Queen Bee Syndrome is female leaders or managers adapting their behaviour to their surroundings. This adapted behaviour will see female managers being more critical towards female subordinates as the Queen Bee Syndrome suggests. This behavioural change that women undergo is parallel to the phrase 'if you can't beat them join them' that is so often heard in society (Martin, 2016). Thus after the analysing of literature and responses, it can be seen that the Queen Bee Syndrome is perceived to be a by-product of societal contributions.

## 6. Conclusion

Common themes that surfaced pointed to the fact that female leaders and managers that the respondents served under were difficult to work with and also discriminated against female subordinates. Respondents strongly believed that this was because of a contribution of society's norms such as competitiveness, jealousy and a judgemental mentality amongst girls and women. Majority of final year BCom female students are of the opinion that there are differences between male and female leadership. Some are of the opinion that female managers are understanding and caring while male managers are straightforward while others are of the opinion that females allow emotion to enter the workplace while male managers are able to separate emotion from work. From the interview responses, it can be said that most of the interviewed final year BCom female students are of the opinion that females in senior positions discriminate against their female subordinates.

Respondents are of the opinion that women in senior positions discriminate or undermine their female subordinates due to societal contributions. It is believed that the competitiveness, jealousy and judgemental mentality that females are associated with and practise in society spill over into the workplace. This competitiveness, jealousy and judgemental mentality originate from a women's need to succeed at all costs and to be better than other females.

The consequences of these acts are self-doubt, frustration, strained and professional relationships. These consequences spill into a subordinate's personal life and affect personal relationships and an individual's mental health. These discoveries indicate that although women fight for gender equality, it is them too who are guilty of discrimination against other women. Due to the fact that it is believed that social norms contribute to this problem, it is crucial that discriminatory behaviour in society be alleviated to strengthen and support the current women movement fighting for equality.

To ameliorate this problem, both female leaders, as well as female subordinates, need to first recognise that the syndrome exists and begin to work together. Females in the workplace should view working together as a collaboration rather than a competition. In that way, they will all work diligently to achieve a common goal. Also, there has to be clear and open communication based on honesty. Without clear communication, subordinates will not know what is expected of them and vice versa. Finally, the media must play its part in portraying a better image of females in the workspace. Constantly playing them against the other in movies, shows, etc., feeds into the discrimination narrative. If the media depicts the good side of female interaction at the workplace, it sets the premise for building positive working relationships and the eradication of the Queen Bee syndrome.

In terms of further studies, it is recommended that other researchers conduct interviews with females who are in a professional field in a full-time capacity. These interviews could be from both a female and male perspective to see

if, first of all, the findings differ between students and full-time employees and secondly if findings differ because of a respondents' gender.

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