Article

Examining the Impact of Gender Discriminatory Practices on Women's Development and Progression at Work

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Abstract: Although there has been a worldwide cry for gender equity within organizations, gender discriminatory practices continue to be a challenge. Many women still suffer from gender discrimination and remain at the bottom of organizational structures despite their efforts to ascend. This paper seeks to examine the link between gender discriminatory practices and women's skill development and progression within the workplace. The study espoused a quantitative approach. A questionnaire survey was self-administered online to 412 women through a convenient non-probability sampling method. Descriptive tendencies, test normality, validity, reliability, and regression analysis were performed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS), AMOS 27. The results reveal that women's skill development is impacted by workplace gender discriminatory practices, and the career progression of women is linked to their skill development. Yet it rejects the claim that workplace gender discriminatory practices impact women's career progression. While having a gender-friendly work environment is applaudable, developing women's skills and promoting their advancement at work will require more effort from companies. Organizations need to be deliberate about the skills development and career progression of women and institutionalize initiatives that directly encourage women to engage in developmental activities as well as initiatives geared towards promoting women's career advancement.

Keywords: career progression; feminism; gender discriminatory practices; skills development; women; workplace

1. Introduction

Despite past efforts to eradicate gender inequality, the challenge continues unabated, thereby impacting women's skill development and career progression [1], as well as their professional, psychological, and social lives [2]. Cultural norms, values, beliefs, ideologies, statuses, and gender roles influence women's participation in skills development and career advancement initiatives [3,4]. More so than family constraints [5,6], the lack of powerful networks, inadequate education, ineffective mentorship, and poor personal marketing influence women's development and progression at work [7]. Hence, women experience slower career progress than men [8,9] and consequently stay longer in lower positions.

Globally, women encounter more challenges in their career advancement than men [10,11]. Even though the number of women in senior positions has increased worldwide, women are still underrepresented at the top levels [12,13]. More urgent efforts are required from firms to address practices that hamper women's careers [14]. Similarly, improvements in women's career advancement in Africa have been slow [11]. Studies in Kenya [15], Namibia [16], as well as Nigeria and Zambia [17,18], reveal that women struggle to develop themselves and progress within the workplace. In South Africa, women face several challenges in their careers [4,5,19,20] resulting in their being under-represented in several fields [21–23] and in managerial positions [9,24]. Women's slow progress has been attributed to several reasons, such as gender unfairness and gender inequality in the workplace [25,26],

women's personalities [27], the previous apartheid regime [28,29], gender occupational segregation [4,22,23,30], work-family conflicts [5,25], and ambiguous labor laws [31,32]. Regardless of existing legislation affirming women and prohibiting gender discrimination in the workplace, women continue to face direct and indirect gender-related prejudice in the South African workplace [1,24,33], which impacts their skill development and career progression [33]. This is either due to the ambiguous scope of existing laws [31], the lack of implementation of gender-related laws, practices that constrain women's careers [2], or a lack of commitment to gender equity [6,34]. Thus, several aspects of discrimination against women persist within the workplace [35], and the day-to-day experiences of women continue to differ from the promised standards [36], thereby negatively impacting women's skill development and their career progression [1]. It, therefore, becomes important to investigate organizational practices that exclude women from developmental opportunities and hinder them from attaining senior leadership roles [1,31].

Gendered practices within organizations often influence promotion decisions [37–39], resulting in women being left to occupy junior positions while men occupy senior positions. In addition, gender plays a vital role in the development of women, resulting in women having fewer development opportunities than men [1,14]. Women are often deprived of the development opportunities needed to advance their careers [34,37], thus keeping them at the bottom of the hierarchy while men dominate top-level positions [20], which perpetuates organizational injustice [40]. When employees do not have clear information about promotion requirements, they can become frustrated and demotivated to continue to develop their skills [34,41,42]. Previous research affirms that women's career progression is related to their skill development [20,34]. This implies that factors that affect women's skill development are likely to impact their career progression, and vice versa. However, few researchers have investigated the impact of gender discriminatory practices on women's skill development and their career progression simultaneously.

Even though gender discriminatory practices within the workplace have long been researched, gender equality remains an important agenda item for the world's most influential organizations [43]. Currently, no country has achieved a full level of gender equality, even in the workplace [11]. Hence the need for research on the topic to bring about desired gender perceptions and monitoring at different levels [44].

Another rationale for this study is its focus on the service sector, which is one of the best-performing sectors nationally and internationally, with rapid growth in employment and remarkable prospects for further growth [45]. Additionally, the service sector in South Africa is mostly dominated by women [46] and holds opportunities for employee development and inclusive growth [47]. Hence, the sector is ideal for research on women.

This paper seeks to investigate whether gender discriminatory practices within the workplace impact women's skill development and their progression. It also seeks to establish whether the skill development of women is related to their career progression. Three research questions will be answered, namely: Is there a statistical relationship between gender discriminatory practices and women's skill development? Is there a statistical relationship between gender discriminatory practices and women's career progression? And is the skill development of women linked to their career progression?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Context

This research leans on three theories, namely: the human capital theory, the theory of work adjustment, and the feminist theory. The human capital theory seeks to explain motivations for engaging in developmental activities, such as achieving a higher labor market price for individuals [48] and achieving returns on investment for organizations [49]. Expectations of certain outcomes stimulate individuals to take actions that will yield these desired outcomes [50,51]. These expectations often cause employees to set and pursue development goals [50,52]. Organizations usually provide incentives for employees to meet their unsatisfied skills development needs [48,50] and enable them to contribute

toward the organization's output. This theory provides the rationale for employee engagement in developmental activities as well as the motivation for firms' investments in employee development.

The theory of work adjustment purports that workers often attempt to modify their work environment or adopt behaviors that increase compatibility between their abilities and the job's requirements [53]. This practice points to interactive and reciprocal activities between employees and their work environment [54]. The theory explains why women pursue developmental opportunities relevant to their career advancement. Nevertheless, their efforts are often challenged by gendered practices that limit their development and progress within the workplace.

The feminist theory reveals that historically, women have been regarded as weak, less self-determined, vulnerable, and second-class human beings who have limited legal rights [29,37]. Feminist research investigates gender inequalities, women's oppression, limitations placed on women, sex-role differences, and unfair gender experiences [55]. In South Africa, the struggle for gender equity is driven by younger women who are determined to eradicate gender discriminatory behaviors [25]. This theory explains the root of persistent gender discriminatory practices in the South African workplace.

The theoretical context discussed above anchors the constructs considered in this study, namely: skills development, career progression, and workplace gender discriminatory practices. These constructs are discussed in the next section.

2.2. Conceptual Context

The conceptual context provides the literature review necessary to understand the constructs under investigation and develop the research instrument.

2.2.1. Skills Development

Skills development happens when workers acquire new skills and develop themselves [20,52,56]. This practice involves improving the workforce through the attainment of higher qualifications, enhanced capabilities, greater potential, and better performance [51,57]. Employee development is beneficial for individuals [58,59], teams [60,61], and organizations [62]. However, skill development is often costly [62] despite the fact that it can help with turnover intention [63]. Hence, even though organizations have the responsibility to enhance employees' future employability by providing development opportunities [64], they may feel reluctant to invest in female employees, especially when they do not perceive commensurate returns on their investments due to women-specific factors such as family-related career breaks [37,65] and negative perceptions about women's professional abilities [2,34,39]. Hence, gendered practices obstruct women's skill development.

2.2.2. Career Progression

Career progression is when a worker moves from a lower position to a higher position [66]. This is often accompanied by increased work authority, additional responsibilities [67], and a new job title [68]. Women have been progressing to leadership positions at a slower pace than men, especially in Africa [11]. Hence, they are underrepresented in key roles [12–14]. Even though women's sluggish progress has been attributed to factors such as inadequate professional experience [6,33] and limited education [34,69], there are gendered prejudices that hinder women's career advancement. Some scholars dispute that women lack education and attribute women's slow progress to their insufficient leadership preparation, which is motivated by unfounded prejudices about their incompetence to assume strategic roles [13,70,71]. In fact, women are often isolated from developmental assignments used to groom men for leadership positions [72]. Contrary to men and regardless of their educational background, women have to demonstrate leadership qualities before being considered for promotion to leadership positions [37]. These prejudices depict the existence of gender discriminatory practices.

2.2.3. Gender Discriminatory Practices

The eight most common gender discriminatory practices found during the literature review were considered under the construct 'gender discriminatory practices', namely: gender stereotypes, culturally assigned roles, promotion malpractices, the glass ceiling, the gender pay gap, sexual harassment, the under-representation of women at senior levels, and not addressing gender discriminatory practices. These were used in designing items for the research scale.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are personalities ascribed to women and men, basing people's competencies and abilities on their gender, often in favor of men [73]. These stereotypes segregate people based upon the attributes of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' that are entrenched in youth and later creep into the workplace to impact the way women are treated and, often, limit their career progression [5]. Women at work are expected to exhibit nurturing qualities, while men are expected to display leadership qualities [74]. In addition, women are viewed as sensitive, indecisive, and dependent, while men are perceived as tough, enduring, and committed [6,33]. These stereotypes have adverse consequences for women's career outcomes [43]. Resulting in few women being considered for development opportunities or promotion to critical roles. Yet women who exhibit male-attributed traits and act in the same manner as successful men are usually punished socially, economically, and professionally because they do not fit with the established norms [75]. More so, a man is viewed as the heroic and ideal worker who values work and does not allow non-work imperatives to obstruct his job performance [4], while a woman is often perceived solely as a mother or caregiver [6]. Such ideologies disadvantage working women who shoulder family responsibilities, thus hampering their careers [4,76]. Companies may not regard women as ideal candidates because they assume caregiving responsibilities that often conflict with their careers. However, women do not want to be confined to definite roles and deny culturally and socially constructed gender realities that stereotype them [72].

Culturally Assigned Roles

Gender roles are norms within a society that define acceptable behaviors for women and men [77]. These roles are often based on community, religious, and societal beliefs and prejudices [4,5] that promote male supremacy and obstruct women's access to their rights [78,79]. Gendered identities [4] and gender labels nurture the perception of maintaining women's submissiveness, hence invoking gender inequality in the workplace [24]. Allocating gender roles implies that women are only capable of fulfilling positions that match their culturally assigned roles [33,79]. Usually, people unconsciously ascribe management roles to men [4,39], and some traditional men reject women's authority [72,76]. Submission to a woman, even in the workplace, might be difficult for some men, so some firms may hesitate to promote women to certain roles. Although these practices place structural limitations on the careers of women [5], women usually abide by them to protect their social reputation at the expense of their careers, particularly in developing countries where people are concerned about how others perceive them [2].

Promotion Malpractices

Promotion processes are not often transparent within organizations, and growth opportunities, self-development, and competencies are rarely linked to promotion [34]. Even women with career plans frequently feel confused and frustrated about their progress [41]. Most women cannot identify the issues that encumber their career progression, and many do not know what procedures they need to follow to reach the top of the organizational ladder [4]. Sometimes positions are not even advertised [37], while other times preferred candidates are shortlisted for the position based on subjective reasons [38]. Promotion malpractices are often fueled by corporate politics [14], biased preferences [76], unconscious prejudices regarding women's professional abilities, and the fact that men form the

majority of decision-makers in companies [39,72,75]. Thus creating loopholes that allow decision-makers to counteract transparency protocols and perpetuate gender discrimination that hinders women from accessing developmental opportunities and attaining strategic positions. Obfuscated promotion guidelines make it difficult for women to align their career trajectories to the next senior level [35,36] and disrupt their hope of being promoted [69], thus, demotivating them from developing their skills [42]. When women are unjustly excluded from promotion opportunities, they feel reluctant to equip themselves to contest future opportunities [4,35]. When women lack knowledge of corporate limitations to their careers and how to bypass them, it is difficult for them to progress [70]. That notwithstanding, some women may not be willing or able to meet the demands of promotion due to family responsibilities and personal circumstances [41], hence they will not pursue promotion opportunities.

Glass Ceiling

The 'glass ceiling' is an invisible, unofficial, attitudinal, and systemic barrier that prevents women from rising to senior leadership positions [14,79]. Most women are promoted to mid-level leadership, at which stage they reach a career plateau [4,37], regardless of their growth potential and their positive contribution towards the achievement of organizational goals. The main causes of the glass ceiling are organizational and supervisory obstacles [55], career breaks, career plateaus, work allocation, performance criteria [7], and social expectations [4]. Moreso, higher performance standards are often set for women than for men [14,70], making it difficult for women to progress beyond certain levels. The glass ceiling limits the extent to which women can benefit from leadership experiences that will enable them to progress further. However, research reveals that the biggest obstacle to women's progression is not the glass ceiling but the broken rung [14]. Most women remain in lower positions, and only a few advance to management positions from which they can be considered for promotion to executive roles.

Gender Pay Gap

The gender wage gap is the amount by which a woman's wage is lower than that of a man's wage in a comparable role [11]. In South Africa, women earn less than their male counterparts for fulfilling the same role [24]. Women's salaries are often disadvantaged during recruitment for higher posts, and a woman is considered to have lower financial needs because she is expected to be married to a man who will provide for her and the family [4,33,72]. Additionally, young couples tend to prioritize the man's career over that of the woman's because of greater financial growth prospects [6]. This results in more consideration being given to the man's career to the detriment of the woman's career. Determining pay is often a complex and subjective exercise that involves several factors such as education, job performance, length of service, location, career history, special skills, the role, job stability, wage negotiations, and talent pipelines [80]. Hence, it is difficult to identify and contest gender pay differences. That notwithstanding, when women fail to perceive and/or receive equal financial benefits from their skill development and career progression as men, they feel discouraged from expending effort on enhancing skills relevant to their career [33].

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment comprises unwelcome sexual advances [6]. Women in leadership positions and those in technical roles will likely experience sexual harassment behaviors such as sexist jokes, sexual touches, and persistent, unwanted attempts to initiate intimate relationships [14]. However, sexual harassment cases are often difficult to win, and victims are usually intimidated [32], so many women hesitate to report such behaviors even though they jeopardize their careers. The victims may end up avoiding contact with their predators (which may likely affect their performance at work) or finally yield to their advances. Sexual harassment impedes women's professional credibility and career advancement,

making it difficult for people to assess whether women's career advancement is a result of their performance or in anticipation of sexual favors [6,74].

The Underrepresentation of Women at Senior Levels

Women are often under-represented in management positions [12,13,19]. There is a lack of gender diversity at all organizational levels, and many women in senior positions and technical roles are generally the only women 'in that role' within a department, resulting in them being undermined, ignored, or 'talked over' [14]. Diversity in South Africa is complex and often associated with conflicts and distrust that make it difficult to manage [79]. Apartheid and the resulting skills shortage have affected people from designated groups [81], evoking the diversity agenda in the workplace. Although there are legislative mandates to promote gender representation at the top levels, management often approaches gender equity as a compliance issue [34] without a conscious desire to see change. This depicts an unwillingness to promote women to senior roles; hence, women continue to be underrepresented in management positions in the corporate sector [9].

Not Addressing Gender Discriminatory Practices

Organizations' failure to deal with gender discriminatory practices is a form of discrimination against women. Tolerance of discriminatory practices is an indication that the organization does not value women [4]. Women are usually unsure whether reporting gender discrimination will result in investigations and sanctions [14]. Even when reported, such issues are often insufficiently addressed, and sometimes victims are intimidated [32] because such allegations are usually difficult to prove. Hence, victims often remain silent for fear of being discredited, victimized, or penalized in their career, especially if the offender is their direct senior or manager. However, gender discriminatory practices negatively affect women's careers [27].

Based on the theoretical and conceptual contexts discussed above, a research framework was developed, as presented in Figure 1 below.
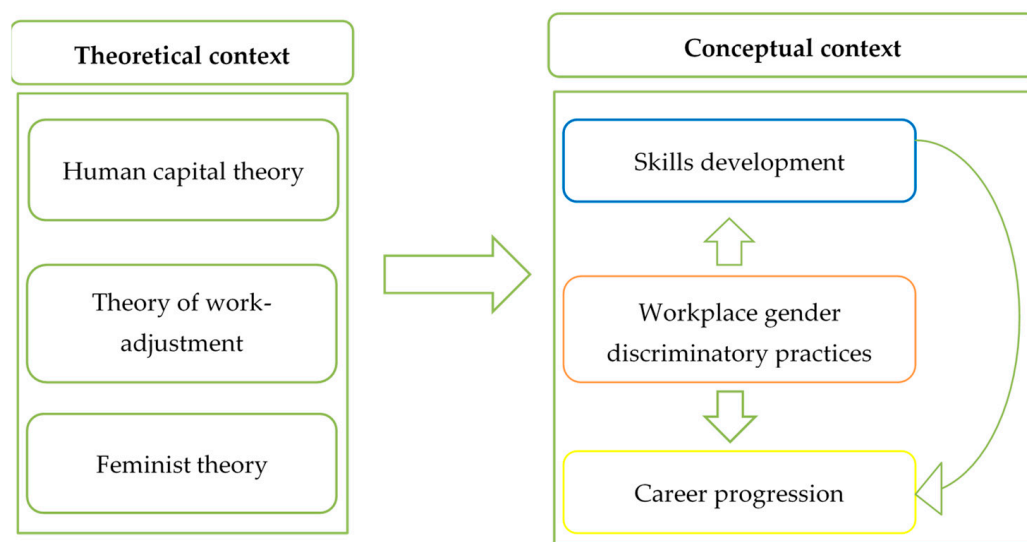
Figure 1. Research framework.

2.3. The Development of Hypotheses

This section leans on previous discussions to present how hypotheses were developed.

Gender stereotypes that ascribe leadership qualities to men exclude women from leadership development opportunities [74]. In addition, the perception that some roles are meant for men and others for women [33,79] creates barriers to the development of certain skills in women. Moreover, when growth and development opportunities are not linked to promotion [34], women are demotivated, and it becomes highly unlikely

that they will put in the required effort to develop skills relevant to their growth [4, 35,42]. Furthermore, the glass ceiling jeopardizes women's careers [14,55,70], thereby limiting the extent to which they can improve their leadership skills. In addition, women's salaries are often lower than men's [4,33,70]. When women perceive inferior financial benefits from their skill development, they feel discouraged to invest in enhancing their skills [33]. More so, although women experience sexual harassment [14], it is often difficult to prove such without being intimidated [32]. As a result, many women may refrain from reporting such behaviors and resort to avoiding contact with their predators, even when the contact is necessary for their development. Similarly, the underrepresentation of women in management roles [12,13,19] indicates that women are deprived of the development opportunities attached to those positions. Lastly, tolerance of discriminatory practices reveals that the organization does not value women [4] and may discourage women from investing in their career development. Connections between these gender discriminatory practices and the skill development of women led to the development of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis H1. *There is a negative relationship between workplace gender discriminatory practices and the skill development of women.*

In the same vein, stereotypical views about women's indecisiveness and dependency [6,33] limit the degree to which women can progress to leadership positions. Similarly, masculine supremacy maintains women's submissiveness and obstructs women's access to superior roles that do not fit into their culturally assigned roles [4,24]. In addition, promotion malpractices confuse and frustrate women [41] and make it difficult for them to align their career trajectories [35,36] to corporate requirements [70], thereby hindering their career progression. Furthermore, the glass ceiling limits women's access to influential decision-making positions [4,37]. Moreover, men's careers have greater financial growth prospects than women's, hence their careers are often prioritized over women's [6]. This results in women expending fewer efforts toward their career growth and advancement. In addition, sexual harassment creates doubts about women's professional credibility for career advancement [6,74], thereby impacting their careers negatively. Similarly, the hesitancy to promote women to senior positions has led to the underrepresentation of women in management positions [9,14,34]. Finally, gender discriminatory practices adversely impact women's careers [27], and neglecting to address such practices indicates that the organization condones them. These links between gender discriminatory practices and the career progression of women have led to the development of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis H2. *There is a negative relationship between workplace gender discriminatory practices and the career progression of women.*

In addition, past research has confirmed the link between women's career progression and their skill development [20,34]. Women's slow progress to leadership positions [11] and their underrepresentation in key roles [12,13] have been attributed to their isolation from leadership development opportunities [72], limited professional experience to assume senior roles [6,33], and limited education [34,69]. Hence, the development of skills is vital for career advancement. This has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis H3. *There is a positive link between the skills development and the career progression of women.*

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

A positivist approach was used to test existing theories and reveal scientific truths [82]. Quantitative and deductive methods were used in this cross-sectional research [83]. A

descriptive approach was used to gather information about constructs without further judgment or interpretation [55]. A correlative approach was used to test empirical relationships between constructs [84]. A survey method was used to gather attitudes, opinions, and trends about the skills development, career progression, and gender discriminatory practices experiences of the sample [82].

3.2. Population and Sample

The target population was women working in the service industry in Johannesburg, South Africa. The sample size of the population could not be estimated; hence, a sample size above 209 was used for a target population exceeding 10 000 [85]. The sample consisted of 412 women gathered using a convenience non-probability sampling method [84]. This number was determined by the financial budget allocated to the research. The final sample consisted of women from the following company categories: accounting/consulting ($n = 174$, 42.3%), banking ($n = 17$, 4.1%), hospitality ($n = 23$, 5.6%), media/communication ($n = 5$, 1.2%), information technology ($n = 7$, 1.7%), recreation ($n = 2$, 0.5%), social work ($n = 7$, 1.7%), retail ($n = 21$, 5.1%), education ($n = 64$, 15.6%), insurance ($n = 4$, 1%), healthcare ($n = 48$, 11.7%), marketing/sales ($n = 15$, 3.6%), transport ($n = 12$, 2.9%), and law ($n = 7$, 1.7%). A total of 5 participants indicated that they did not belong to any of these categories (1.2%), and 1 participant did not indicate the company's category (0.2%). Data were collected from women within the target population who were accessible and available to respond to the questionnaire from January 2022 to March 2022.

3.3. Data Collection

The questionnaire comprised 24 questions partitioned into four sections. Section A had seven questions that captured demographic details used to describe the sample. Section B had four questions that gathered data on women's engagement in skills development activities. Section C consisted of five questions and collected information about women's career advancement. Section D consisted of eight questions that captured gender discriminatory practices within the workplace. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), was used to capture opinions. The questionnaire was unpublished and was developed using a rigorous approach; the constructs were operationalized and items were developed through an intensive literature review, a summary of which is provided in the conceptual context (refer to Section 2.2). Each item was developed based on at least three different publications by different authors. The questionnaire was piloted with 40 respondents to establish the validity and internal consistency of the items [82]. After piloting, a preliminary analysis was conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the instrument for testing the research hypotheses, after which the questionnaire was refined [83]. The sample used for piloting was not part of the final study.

A self-administered online survey approach was used to collect data. The respondents were given the link to the 'Google form' survey until the target of 412 respondents was achieved.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Central University of Technology, and individual respondents were free to consent and to voluntarily participate anonymously in the study.

3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data [82], using IBM SPSS Amos version 27 [86]. The relationships between constructs were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The SEM methodology is ideal to represent, test, and estimate theoretical models. It was also used to explain variances and evaluate the structural relationships among the variables. In this study, the SEM approach was ideal to test causal relationships between variables under investigation (i.e., gender workplace discriminatory practices, skill development, and career progression). Another benefit of the approach is that it establishes the strength of relationships and provides data in a

visual display that is easy to interpret. The AMOS module of SPSS is used in this paper to derive results in visual form during the SEM. This paper sought to test previous research findings on the role gender discriminatory practices play in the skill development and career progression of women. Hence, SEM was appropriate [86]. To assess the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, followed by a structural model analysis. Factor loading values were calculated to determine the correlation coefficient, and standardized regression analysis was performed to reveal statistical relationships between constructs [86].

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Demographic results are presented in this section, followed by central tendency measures, normality tests, statistical evidence of the reliability and validity of constructs, and standardized regression weights.

4.1.1. Demographics

The female participants represented different age groups, races, marital statuses, qualifications, job levels, tenures, and different-sized companies, as presented in Appendix A (demographic variables of respondents). The sample mostly consisted of educated and unmarried African women younger than 45 years old. These women occupied positions at lower organizational hierarchies and had worked for less than 10 years for their relatively small companies; hence, they have growth potential.

4.1.2. Central Tendency

Central tendency measures for the constructs are presented in Appendix B and discussed below. Central tendency measures reveal the means and standard deviations for the constructs 'skills development' (mean = 2.90, Std. Dev = 1.536), 'career progression' (mean = 2.92, Std. Dev = 1.258), and 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' (mean = 2.50, Std. Dev = 1.049). The means for the three constructs are either on or above the Likert midpoint (that is, 2.5), while standard deviation values range between 1.049 and 1.536, thus indicating a narrow spread of the values around the mean.

Central tendency measures for the construct 'Skills Development' indicate that most women do not engage in programs that develop their skills at work (51.7%). The majority of participants also denied that their skills have progressively improved over time (50.5%), while most women disagreed that the skills development opportunities offered by their company are aligned with their career plans (50.5%). The majority of women also disagreed that they continuously learn new skills at work (52.9%). Overall, most women disagree that their skills are being developed in their workplace.

Additionally, according to central tendency measures for the construct 'Career Progression', most women denied that they were promoted into higher positions (47.6%), that their responsibilities at work had increased over time (42.5%), that their authority has been amplified over time within their companies (45.0%), and that their job titles have changed favorably over time (45.9%). Therefore, most women in the sample believe that they are not progressing in their workplace. However, 40.7% indicated that they were satisfied with their career progress, while only 38.1% disagreed with this statement.

Similarly, central tendency measures for the construct 'Workplace Gender Discriminatory Practices' indicate that among the participating women, 48.8% disagreed about the existence of biased preconceptions about women's attributes or professional abilities, 52% disagreed that women are treated according to their culturally-assigned roles, 55.4% disagreed that women are subjected to unfavorable perceptions when assessed for promotion, 55.3% disagreed that women's careers stagnate, 58.7% disagreed that women earn lower salaries than men, 59.4% disagreed that sexual harassment occurred in their workplace, 59.5% disagreed that women are unequally represented at senior levels, and 59% disagreed

that their company fails to address reported discriminatory gender practices. In sum, gender discriminatory practices were not identified by most women.

4.1.3. Normality Test

To assume normality, [87] recommends the values of the skewness and kurtosis coefficients be below ±3 and ±10, respectively. Normality test results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Normality tests-Skewness and Kurtosis coefficients.

Constructs	Skewness	Kurtosis
Skills development of women	0.145	−1.628
Career progression of women	0.194	−1.261
Workplace gender discrimination	0.665	−0.332

The values presented in Table 1 above are below the threshold for skewness (±3), and kurtosis (±10), hence the assumption of univariate normality was met. This result means that analyses are more likely to provide accurate descriptions of the population and, thus, inferential statistics that assume normality, such as the standard regression analysis, can be used.

4.2. *Assessment of the Measurement/Research Model*

A confirmatory factor analysis and a structural model analysis were conducted to assess the measurement model.

4.2.1. Confirmatory Factors Analysis

It covers aspects of 'goodness-of-fit', validity of the measurement model, reliability and convergent validity, and statistical evidence of discriminant validity.

To ensure goodness of fit, the Chi-square ratio of the model should be below 5 [88], the CFI (goodness-of-fit index) and TLI (Tucker Lewis index) should be above 0.90 [89], the NFI (normed fit index) should be above 0.90 [90], and the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) value should be less than 0.08 [91]. The initial model measurement indicated a CMIN/DF above 5 (i.e., 5.001); hence, the model was improved to ensure fitness by removing the question "There are preconceptions about women's attributes, characteristics or professional abilities in my organization". (GENDESC1) because it had the lowest factor loading in the initial assessment (i.e., 0.72). Hence the construct 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' had 7 questions in total (instead of 8), after which the model was reassessed. After reassessing the final model, CMIN/DF (chi-square/degree of freedom) was 2.787, RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) was 0.066, CFI (comparative fit index) was 0.981, TLI (Tucker Lewis Index) was 0.977, GFI (goodness-of-fit index) was 0.924, and NFI (normed fit index) was 0.971, thus meeting the thresholds.

Reliability is the extent to which measurements of a construct provide consistent results [92]. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are often used to measure the reliability of a scale, with a recommended cut-off value of 0.7 for both measures [93]. Discriminant validity is the level to which a construct discriminates from other constructs or latent variables [92] and is measured by comparing correlations among all pairs of constructs with the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct [93]. The AVE is expected to be above the inter-construct correlation coefficients, and values greater than the square root of the AVE indicate poor discriminant validity between the constructs. Convergent validity was confirmed when factor loadings were 0.5 or higher [88].

The Cronbach alpha values in Table 2 below exceed 0.7, indicating a satisfactory overall level of internal consistency for all the constructs. Cronbach alpha results are further supported by composite reliability coefficients, which are also all above 0.7. Convergent validity was also confirmed as factor loadings were higher than 0.5 [88]. Therefore, the

questions retained in the final measurement model are deemed to be reliable measures of their constructs.

Table 2. Statistical evidence of reliability and convergent validity of constructs.

Constructs	Item Codes *	Factor Loadings	p-Value	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Final Number of Items
Skill Development	SKILDEV1	0.968	***	0.986	0.986	0.945	4
	SKILDEV2	0.969	***				
	SKILDEV3	0.980	***				
	SKILDEV4	0.972	***				
Career Progression	CARPROG1	0.830	***	0.963	0.954	0.748	5
	CARPROG2	0.938	***				
	CARPROG3	0.933	***				
	CARPROG4	0.943	***				
	CARPROG5	0.935	***				
Gender Discriminatory Practices	GENDESC2	0.793	***	0.957	0.963	0.841	7
	GENDESC3	0.822	***				
	GENDESC4	0.857	***				
	GENDESC5	0.883	***				
	GENDESC6	0.905	***				
	GENDESC7	0.888	***				
	GENDESC8	0.898	***				

* Refer to Appendix B for full description of item codes. *** Indicates significance at 99% confidence interval.

Results in Table 3 below indicate that there is no discriminant validity concern between the constructs because all their AVE square roots are above their inter-construct correlation values.

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix to assess the discriminant validity.

	Skill Development	Gender Discriminatory Practices	Career Progression
Skill Development	0.972		
Gender Discriminatory Practices	0.449	0.865	
Career Progression	0.914	0.421	0.917

In conclusion, the measurement model fits the data satisfactorily, and the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is satisfactory as all the thresholds were met. Hence, the structural model was used to test the hypothesis.

4.2.2. Structural Model Analysis

The maximum likelihood was performed using AMOS 27 to test the structural model presented in Figure 2 below.

The predictive effects of the independent variable on dependent variables were established using beta (β) and *p*-values (Sig). *p*-values estimate the significance of the predictive effect, and beta (β) values indicate the direction and strength of the relationship [94], as presented in Table 4 below. Higher beta values indicate stronger effects; positive values indicate positive relationships; and negative values indicate negative relationships. Significance was considered below 0.05 at a 95% confidence interval.
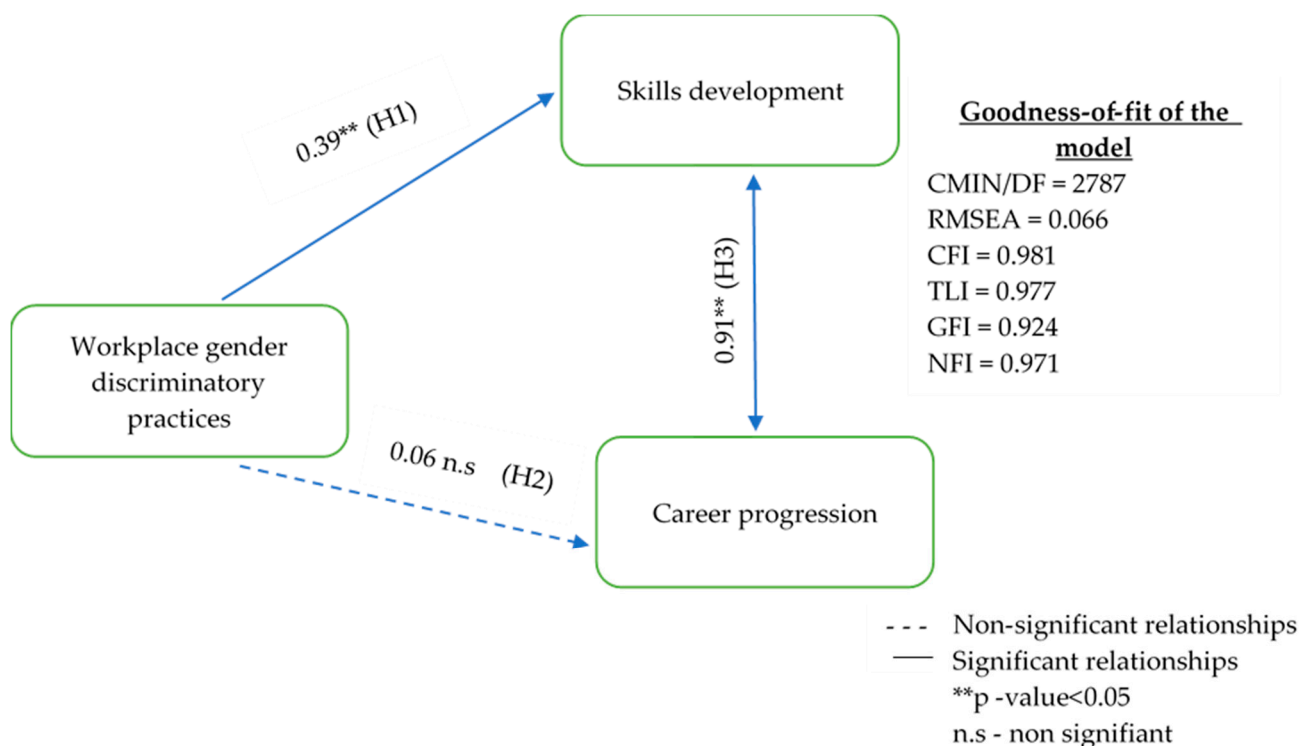
Figure 2. Structural model.

Table 4. Standardized regression weights.

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	β Values	*p*-Values	Conclusions
Skills Development of Women	Workplace Gender Discriminatory Practices	0.393	0.002	H1 is accepted
Career Progression of Women	Workplace Gender Discriminatory Practices	0.062	0.624	H2 is rejected
Career Progression of Women	Skills Development of Women	0.91	0.000	H3 is accepted

The construct 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' was statistically linked to the construct 'skills development' but not to the construct 'career progression' for women in the sample. In addition, there was a statistically significant relationship between the construct 'skills development' and the construct 'career progression'. Hence, hypotheses H1 and H3 were accepted, while hypothesis H2 was rejected.

5. Discussion

Results from central tendency measures for 'skills development' reveal that most women's skills are not being developed in their workplaces. These findings are in tandem with previous research findings claiming that women's skills are not sufficiently developed for them to assume senior roles [6,95]. Yet studies have proven the importance of learning new skills at work [56,96], engaging in skills development projects, and aligning skills development opportunities to the employee's career [97]. This result could imply that the organizations are either not intentional about developing the skills of women employees or they put very little effort into women's development.

In addition, the central tendency measures for "career advancement' indicate that most women in the sample have not benefited from career progression. This confirms previous studies affirming that women's careers stagnate [37,70] because they lack skills [6,79] and are inadequately prepared for senior roles [13]. Thus, women are not moving up the organizational ladder as fast as men.

Similarly, findings from central tendency measures for 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' deny the existence of gendered perceptions. This contradicts previous

research revealing that the competencies and abilities of people are based on their gender and that men are often favored over women [54,86]. Demographic variables such as the age group of participants could be the reason for the non-existence of gender discriminatory practices because younger women in South Africa are leading the fight against gender discrimination [25]. Young women, who are the majority in the sample, will not tolerate discriminatory practices. Moreso, the absence of gender discriminatory practices confirmed in this study is contrary to previous claims that women are often unfavorably assessed for senior positions, that promotion is based on relationships rather than competence [33,70], and that men occupy the majority of top positions within organizations [4,34,75]. The reason for these contradictory findings could be that gender representation at senior levels is sector-specific. The relational nature of work in the service industry could make it easier for women to ascend to top positions because women perform well in human interaction settings [33,39] such as the service industry. Moreover, the findings from this study do not synchronize with previous research findings that confirm the existence of workplace gender prejudices and stereotypes [5]. Although prior research has ascertained that women usually stagnate at mid-career levels because of invisible barriers that hinder them from progressing [4,37], this study does not find evidence to support this claim. In addition, cases of sexual harassment were denied by most women. This could be because sexual harassment behaviors are difficult to identify and challenge [14]. The results in this paper do not also support claims of a gender pay gap. This is in contrast to earlier research revealing unequal pay in favor of men globally and in South Africa [11]. This discrepancy in findings on the gender pay gap could also be a sector-specific issue because previous studies show that female-dominated occupations are more likely to experience overall lower pay [98] than male-dominated occupations [99]. Thus, women in women-dominated sectors, such as the service industry, may not realize the existence of gender pay gaps and accept the fact that they are on a low pay scale. Moreso, the undetected gender pay gaps could be due to ignorance and employees not knowing what their colleagues earn because salaries are confidential and unpublished by most companies. Women in this study deny that companies neglect to address reported discriminatory practices. This contradicts claims that gender malpractices are not diligently investigated and dealt with when reported [14].

Standardized regression weight results confirmed the statistical link between "workplace gender discriminatory practices and 'skills development' (H1). This means that the presence of gender discriminatory practices in the workplace will hinder the skill development of women. Previous research confirms that gendered practices in favor of men obstruct their skill development [35,70,74]. There was also a statistical relationship between 'skills development 'and 'career progression' for women (H3). This implies that when women develop the right skills, they are more likely to progress to senior positions.

Previous scholars have confirmed this link [20,34]. The dual direction of the arrow between the two constructs in Figure 2 also indicates that career progression impacts the skill development of women. This confirms that women develop new skills when they are promoted to senior roles [4,12]. However, findings in this paper did not provide statistical evidence for the relationship between 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' and 'career progression' for women (H2). This implies that eliminating workplace gender discriminatory practices will not automatically translate to the career progression of women. This result contradicts previous research indicating that inappropriate gender practices hinder women's promotion to senior positions within the workplace [14] and challenges the ideology that depriving women of opportunities, resources, and power limits their career potential [78,79].

For organizations to develop women's skills, they need to eradicate gender discriminatory practices. Similarly, for firms to ensure the promotion of women, they need to equip women with the skills needed for them to grow into senior roles (e.g., by offering training activities, funding education, on-the-job training, etc.). Companies also need to go beyond eliminating gender discriminatory practices and also design initiatives that will

directly impact women's career progression (e.g., career planning, mentorship, sponsorship initiatives that encourage women to apply for senior positions, etc.).

6. Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

This paper has investigated the impact of workplace gender discriminatory practices on women's skill development and their career advancement. Theoretically, this means that addressing practices that disfavor women, as per feminist theory, will promote the skill development of women, and developing women will increase their chances of being promoted at work. Hence, pro-women and human capital development initiatives are required to propel women to the top.

The findings in this paper provide statistical evidence that workplace gender discriminatory practices negatively affect women's skill development. Practically, this means that the development and progression of women will require organizations to address discriminatory practices. This will require company-wide audits to identify unfair treatment and redress it accordingly. Firms have to start by interrogating women to understand the challenges they face in their workplace. Emphasis should be placed on eradicating practices that reflect gendered norms, such as gender stereotypes, gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and other practices that hinder the ascension of women to top positions. Overall, firms should provide gender-friendly environments for women to flourish. Findings also reveal a non-statistical relationship between workplace gender discriminatory practices and career progression for women in the sample. The practical implication of this finding is that, although it is important to eradicate gender discriminatory practices, organizations need to do more to see women progress. Organizations need to design targeted interventions aimed at promoting women to top positions. These could include opportunities for personal development that will lead to promotion, such as mentorship, leadership development, and sponsorship programs. Lastly, the results show that the career progression of women is linked to their skill development. This implies that organizations that want to see women in top positions and be applauded for their gender parity should be intentional about the skill development of their female employees. More career-relevant development opportunities should be provided to aspiring and high-performing women who want to climb the organizational ladder. These initiatives will prepare women and give them access to senior roles.

Industry-wide interventions may also be necessary. The service industry could initiate strategic initiatives to sensitize and educate employers and employees on gender discriminatory practices, ways to prevent them, and approaches to address them. The service industry could also carry out research to identify the specific skills women need to progress within the industry, organize programs to unlock women's growth potential within the sector, and lobby for change. This might require having gender-friendly policies to support women within the industry.

7. Research Limitations and Recommendations

The convenient non-probability sampling method used in this study does not guarantee a proportional representation of the sample. Hence, findings may not be generalized. Sector-specific research (e.g., in accounting, hospitality, mining, etc.) is recommended to confirm the consistency of findings using a more vigorous sampling approach. Additionally, the questionnaire used was unpublished. Although the reliability and validity values in this study were acceptable, it is suggested that they be tested in a different setting to ascertain their psychometric properties. Subsequent research should test the hypothesized relationships in different settings. Moreover, since the study focused on women, it would be interesting to conduct research with other gender groups to compare findings.

8. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine the relationship between gender discriminatory practices and women's development as well as their progression within the workplace.

Overall central tendency measures tend to deny the existence of gender discriminatory practices. However, they also reveal that women's skills are not adequately developed and that women are not progressing at work. The regression weights provide statistical links between the construct 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' and the construct 'skills development' for women. It also provides statistical evidence of a relationship between 'career progression' and 'skills development' for women. Nevertheless, the relationship between the construct 'workplace gender discriminatory practices' and 'career progression' was statistically insignificant for women in the sample. This means that eliminating gender discriminatory practices in the workplace will result in the development of women, and developing women will lead to their career progression. It also implies that, in addition to eradicating gender discriminatory practices, firms should focus on identifying and implementing initiatives that directly develop women's skills and promote their progression at work. This will require organizations to design strategies that will facilitate women's skill development and boost their career progression. For example, they should institutionalize targeted development programs that help women develop critical skills and groom them for leadership roles. Such initiatives should also consider the overall well-being of women, addressing all aspects of their lives.

Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic variables of respondents.

Demographic Variable		Frequency	Percentage (n = 412)
	Below 21	1	0.2
	21–25	75	18.2
	26–30	150	36.4
	31–35	87	21.1
Age	36–40	63	15.3
	41–45	18	4.4
	46–50	12	2.9
	51–55	4	1.0
	56–60	2	0.5

Table A1. *Cont.*

Demographic Variable		Frequency	Percentage (*n* = 412)
	Single	224	54.4
	Married	147	35.7
Marital status	Widowed	7	1.7
	Divorced/separated	15	3.6
	Partnership/Cohabitation	19	4.6
	African	347	84.2
	Colored	41	10
Race	Indian/Asian	6	1.5
	White	17	4.1
	Others	1	0.2
	Semi-skilled worker	91	22.1
	Skilled worker/Junior manager	213	51.7
Job level	Manager	50	12.1
	Middle manager	25	6.1
	Senior manager	23	5.6
	Top manager/Executive	10	2.4
	No matric	4	1
	Matric	53	12.9
Qualification level	Certificate or diploma	120	29.1
	1st degree	141	34.2
	Honors/Postgraduate	69	16.7
	Masters and above	25	6.1
	1–5 years	253	61.4
Tenure at the company	6–10 years	126	30.6
	11–20 years	24	5.8
	21 and above	9	2.2
	Less than 10	48	11.7
Number of employees in your company	11–50 employees	182	44.2
	51–200 employees	80	19.4
	Above 200 employees	48	11.7
	I don't know	54	13.1

Appendix B

Table A2. Central tendency measures.

Item Codes	Item	Overall Disagree (Strongly Disagree and Disagree)	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Overall Agree (Strongly Agree and Agree)	Mean	Standard Deviation
		Skills Development (Mean = 2.90, Std. Dev = 1.536)				
SKILDEV1	At work, I engage in programs/projects that develop my skills.	51.7%	3.9%	44.4%	2.91	1.577
SKILDEV2	The skills development opportunities offered by my company are aligned to my career plans/needs.	50.5%	6.8%	42.7%	2.89	1.527
SKILDEV3	My skills have progressively improved over time.	50.5%	5.6%	44%	2.93	1.561
SKILDEV4	I continuously learn new things in my work.	52.9%	3.2%	43.9%	2.87	1.609

Table A2. *Cont.*

Item Codes	Item	Overall Disagree (Strongly Disagree and Disagree)	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Overall Agree (Strongly Agree and Agree)	Mean	Standard Deviation
		Career progression (Mean = 2.92, Std. Dev = 1.258)				
CARPROG1	I got promoted into a higher position within my organization.	47.6%	19.9%	32.6%	2.83	1.305
CARPROG2	My responsibilities at work have increased over time.	42.5%	16.7%	40.7%	2.99	1.288
CARPROG3	My authority in my company has increased over time.	45.0%	18.4%	35.9%	2.91	1.309
CARPROG4	I am satisfied with my career progress at work.	38.1%	14.6%	40.7%	2.94	1.434
CARPROG5	My Job title has changed favorably over time.	45.9%	15.0%	39.0%	2.93	1.401
		Gender discriminatory practices (Mean = 2.50, Std. Dev = 1.049)				
GENDESC1	There are preconceptions about women's attributes, characteristics or professional abilities in my organization.	48.8%	23.8%	27.5%	2.73	1.240
GENDESC2	In my workplace, women are treated based on their culturally assigned roles.	52%	25.5%	22.5%	2.57	1.178
GENDESC3	In my organization women are subjected to unfavorable perceptions when assessed for promotion.	55.4%	22.1%	22.5%	2.54	1.188
GENDESC4	I feel that women's careers are stuck at lower and middle management levels in my organization.	55.3%	20.9%	23.8%	2.52	1.237
GENDESC5	In my company, women earn lower salaries than men for the same job done.	58.7%	22.8%	18.4%	2.39	1.182
GENDESC6	Cases of sexual harassment were reported by women in my workplace.	59.4%	21.8%	18.7%	2.40	1.185
GENDESC7	Women are unfairly represented (less than 50%) at senior levels in the organization.	59.5%	20.1%	20.4%	2.42	1.194
GENDESC8	When reported, my organization puts in little or no effort to address discriminatory gender practices.	59%	22.1%	18.9%	2.41	1.210

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