

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Breaking the glass ceiling: A study of single academic women in one Zimbabwean university**

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**The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that contributed to the success of single women lecturers who had hit the glass ceiling to become some of the respected PhD holders and professors at one university in Zimbabwe. The study employs the Africana Womanism theory, whereby the effects of the core independent dimensions of the theory are analyzed, namely; self-naming, self-defining, strength and ambition. Using the qualitative research approach, the research employed a case study design where in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Ten single female lecturers who are heads of families were purposively sampled from two departments under the School of Education. Data analysis was done using thematic coding. Findings indicate that factors which assisted single-mother lecturers to achieve their goals in their careers include positive attitudes, strong personalities, mentorship from colleagues and self-motivation. Recommendations were made for universities to promote factors which empower single women lecturers through facilitating discussions of identity issues, eliminating the obstacles that prevent them from advancing, and fostering work environments that allow them to work collaboratively in order to break the glass ceiling.**

**Key words:** Glass ceiling, family, single parenting, women empowerment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Zimbabwe has made great efforts towards equality in the workplace, especially in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development (MHTESTD). However, despite the progress that has been made for women in the workplace and universities in particular in recent years, there is still a very strong likelihood that the boss is male. If we take a look at leadership employment by gender on universities in the country, currently only two (2) universities out of the

twenty one (21) are being headed by women, meaning that only two women break the glass ceiling in being university vice chancellors.

There is practical evidence that provides suggestions that the number of women lecturers who can be equated to directors is very much lower than those of men. The initial thresholds are also higher for women to achieve success, as reflected in Kurup et al. (2011) works on women directors. Thus, it is imperative for organizations

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to create workplaces where a proper policy framework is in place to improve women's access and opportunities (Abbas et al., 2021). The new policy on Zimbabwe's Ministry of Higher and Tertiary, Science and Technology in March 2017 highlighted the Education 5.0 company best practices that can help close economic gender gaps. The gender gap report of 2017 suggests a few types of changes when it added innovation and industrialization, including cash transfer programmes, equal access to credit and financial services, parental leave, affordable childcare facilities, innovative hiring processes, redesigned career paths, and meaningful mentoring programmes (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2013). To engage in these change initiatives, universities need to adopt tools and techniques to identify and enable women to overcome the challenges they face as academics.

It is almost universally acknowledged that higher education institutions (HEIs) play a fundamental role in the progression of advanced knowledge economies (Secundo et al., 2010). Nevertheless, today universities as organizations, like many other institutions, do operate in a volatile and dynamic environment in which they need to respond and adapt swiftly to the changes in the environment (Middle et al., 2007). This is because of a paradigmatic shift from non-profit institutions to for-profit organizations that call for a more entrepreneurial mode in leading the higher education institutions (Gibb et al., 2013). According to Terry (1995, cited in Abbas et al., 2021), empowerment research agrees that the conditions under which teachers work are often accompanied by too much isolation, which denies them a sense of efficacy, success, and self-worth. In order to break the 'glass ceiling' that these barriers form, universities need to do more to eliminate the obstacles that prevent women from advancing and to foster work environments that allow them to work collaboratively to achieve their goals (Akkaya, 2020). This study focuses on the factors that facilitated the success of single mothers in academia as university lecturers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Glass ceiling

The term 'glass ceiling' was used to explain the hidden barriers to women's career advancement that were going unrecognized in the 1970s (Rana and Raju, 2019). Glass ceiling is also described as a well enshrined phenomenon supported by conclusive evidence (Man et al., 2009 cited in Al-Manasra, 2013). Although the glass ceiling could exist at different levels in different organizations or industries, the term naturally is used to suggest a barrier for women from entering into top-level management positions (Akkaya, 2020; Amaefula, 2021). These beliefs of women glass ceiling are similar to the patriarchal thinking where women's place is believed to be in the

kitchen, hence, when given a chance to work, they are not accorded higher posts (Abbas et al., 2021). Al-Manasra (2013:40) avers that while women traditionally encounter a "glass ceiling", men are more likely to be accelerated into management positions by means of a "glass escalator".

The glass ceiling is usually a result of unconscious bias, innate beliefs about ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, social class and religion (Akkaya, 2020). In some cases, glass ceilings have become a problem in the culture of an organization (Rana and Raju, 2019; Abbas et al., 2021). Glass ceilings are unwritten rules and decisions made under the influence of unconscious biases in organizations, that is, families, schools, churches and universities included.

However, glass ceilings are rarely in the form of strictly defined corporate policies and they are almost never deliberately obvious (Akkaya, 2020). It is because of these barriers that women are more likely to face restricted access, limited opportunities, low esteem and lower compensation, which prevent them from gaining promotions (Canning et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021). Usually, people at the top deny that a glass ceiling exists, mainly because they did not experience it themselves, or in some cases they fear that acknowledging it would threaten their positions of power (Canning et al., 2020).

In Zimbabwe, it is critical for women to break the glass ceiling since the current emphasis in Higher Education is on Education 5.0, which focuses on the five pillars which are research, teaching, community services, innovation and industrialization. The lecturers are expected to empower their students to use their theoretical content knowledge in the creation of tangible goods and services in order to alleviate the country's unemployment crisis (Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology, 2018; Keche, 2021).

### Challenges faced in single parenting

Research has proved that single parenthood is associated with a lot of challenges and adjustments. Some of these challenges include financial instability, time management, balancing different responsibilities such as work, social life and child rearing, sometimes with little or no help from others (Mugove, 2017; Mupfumira, 2017; Akkaya, 2020; Abbas et al., 2021). With reference to Korea, Kim and Kim (2020) report that single-parent status of families is mainly caused by divorce, and in most cases single parents often face the challenge of blaming themselves for having failed in life and may be stressed by perceived negative societal sentiments. Kim and Kim's (2020) study established that economic difficulties strongly affected the quality of life in the single mother group, since they had no other adult to split financial responsibilities with, as the case with

married couples. These authors further observed that skills and education help single mothers in securing employment that offers dependable income and a higher standard of living. In the context of this study, pursuing a PhD and subsequent professorial position would afford a single-mother lecturer the opportunity for a better grade, which can lead to a better lifestyle (Canning et al., 2020; Kim and Kim, 2020).

### Statement of the problem

The value of this study is to highlight first-hand information on factors that assisted the single-mother lecturers at one university in Zimbabwe to break the glass ceiling in their academic careers. Studies conducted elsewhere (Adisa et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021) and in Zimbabwe (Chabaya et al., 2009; Hlatywayo et al., 2014; Motilal and Chakanyuka, 2021) have mainly focused on challenges faced by women in accessing management positions at primary, secondary and tertiary levels as well as in companies. To the best knowledge of the researchers, not much has been documented in Zimbabwe on factors that assist single women to advance to higher levels in academia in a university, against all odds. The study was guided by the following research question: *What factors contribute towards empowering single women lecturers to break the glass ceiling in a university context?*

### Theoretical framework

This study is framed and guided by the Africana-Womanism Theory. The theory is a traditional African concept and broadly defined, it is a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of specifically Black women (Hudson-Weems, 1997). Africana-Womanism Theory is a family-oriented ideology, deeply rooted in African culture and Afro-centricity that focuses on the dynamic relationship between men and women of African descent (Amaefula, 2021).

For the purpose of this study, we shall concentrate on only four aspects of this theory which are: self-naming, self-defining, ambition and strength.

Self-naming is the first of two Africana-Womanist methods for authentically identifying women of Afro-descent. This is best for single-mother lecturers who need to identify themselves. It involves defining oneself on the basis of one's self-perception, life experiences, and personal needs. Self-naming also promotes looking back into the past in an effort to recover one's historical and cultural origin. It promotes flexibility and planning for the future as subjects modify their life experiences based on such reshaped identities. Self-naming offers the power to name oneself (single-mother lecturer) in one's own voice "I am who I say I am" (Msila, 2021; Keche,

2021). Therefore, a single-mother lecturer is her own person operating according to forces in her own life. Most importantly, it translates experience into identity. Self-naming assures single-mother lecturers that they possess an identity that empowers them to act on behalf of themselves as well as their communities. "This is the reality of my existence" is a self-defining method that gives one an identity (Opara et al., 2020; Msila, 2021; Keche, 2021). Self-definition allows Black women to describe their everyday experiences through their own point of view of the world, against that of the dominant patriarchy (Adisa et al., 2020, Opara et al., 2020; Msila, 2021). With reference to the theory of Africana-Womanism, Hudson-Weems (1997) believes that the Africana man does not have institutional power to subdue the Africana woman and neither does the woman see him as her enemy. As self-definers, single-mother lecturers in this study were expected to narrate their own truths irrespective of 'official' stories that previously created uninformed and imagined histories for Black women.

For single women in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, there is no partner who can help them, especially in a society which treasures role allocation, so they are expected to manage all responsibilities by themselves. Thus, those challenges require a single woman who has physical strength, confidence and courage to do dual duties, similar to the ethic of Africana-Womanism. In the context of this study, single-mother lecturers were expected to express their views, in their own voices, pertaining to how they got the courage to successfully attain their highest academic and professional qualifications in view of the anticipated challenges.

Ambition is another characteristic of the Africana-Womanism theory (Msila, 2021; Keche, 2021) which might be attributed to a single-woman lecturer since she has the desire and determination to succeed as a mother, a provider, and family protector. It would be interesting to learn whether single-mother lecturers in this study were driven by ambition in order to break the glass ceiling. The purpose of this study was, thus, to learn more about the circumstances surrounding the success of single-mother lecturers at one university in Masvingo. The researchers hoped that identification of these factors would lead to more flexible resources and proactive academic planning for female teaching staff.

### METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the qualitative research approach. It has been argued, in previous studies, that the qualitative research approach involves the researcher socially constructing reality in a natural setting, and is a systematic interactive approach which is best for gathering feelings, attitudes and values, with superior results, because of its multiple realities where each individual is able to produce his/her reality (Magwa and Magwa, 2015; Akkaya, 2020).

Hence, the case study research design was employed to gather qualitative data from 10 purposively selected single-mother lecturers from the School of Education at one university in

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants.

Pseudonym name	Highest degree	Years in HE	Work environment
Ravai	PhD	17	Teaching, research and student affairs
Nyasha	PhD	15	Teaching and research
Rugare	PhD	14	Teaching and research
Ropafadzo	PhD	15	Teaching and research
Rufaro	PhD	14	Teaching and research
Rutendo	PhD	14	Teaching and research
Ruvarashe	PhD	16	Teaching, research and student affairs
Runyararo	PhD	17	Teaching, research and student affairs
Netsai	PhD professor	19	Teaching, research and student affairs
Raviro	PhD	18	Teaching and research

Source: Author

Zimbabwe. In-depth interviews were conducted with the ten participants who were PhD holders, who all volunteered to participate in the study on how they had managed to break the so called “glass ceiling”. The interview with each respondent lasted at least thirty minutes and the interview sessions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms were used for all the participants. The analysis of data was done using thematic coding in line with the research question. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

## FINDINGS

The results of this study are reported as themes and sub-themes. These themes are stated below:

1. Factors that facilitated the breaking of glass ceiling which include attitude, personality, courage and mentorship.
2. Suggestions for breaking the glass ceiling.

### Factors that facilitated the breaking of glass ceiling

The first sub-theme was on attitude. The participants provided several examples of attitudes that they felt contributed to their career success, such as confidence, goal setting, belief in oneself, perseverance, working collaboratively, having a sense of community and the belief that everyone matters.

#### Positive attitudes

It was apparent from the participants that these attitudes were so ingrained into who they are today and who they were before. Some of those sentiments, which were expressed by many of the participants on confidence as a factor that enhances achievement in single mothers, are represented below:

*The first (characteristic) I have to say is confidence. I*

*have to say that you have to believe unequivocally in your ability to be successful and run the family as a single parent.* Nyasha

*You have to have confidence that you're valued as a single parent, and should be valued, and to go into circumstances like these, without allowing them to intimidate you. I think that's important.* Netsai

*I started to be on a lot of university committees, which was very critical, again to have that broader view, and again, since I was naturally someone who would raise their hand and say, I'll do that, I'm over here, volunteering. And you never know how it's going to play out, where there are opportunities... but I am convinced that you do enhance your potential opportunities if you make it clear that you are interested.* Ravai

*I have a lot of things I have achieved on my own and I still have to do one or two more. As a single parent there is nothing that can stop me. The sky is the limit for me.* Ruvarashe

*Some single mothers lock themselves up, maybe due to the views of the society which view them as weak so they think they are not skilled enough themselves. To me, all things and skills can be improved especially in a time we all have advanced technical means.* Raviro

*We need to have faith in ourselves as women. We need to be confident.* Ruvarashe

The vignettes above are some of the pointers towards positive attitudes where single-mother lecturers started involvement in work place issues, environmental issues and policies. Some were very active with a number of women's advocacy initiatives. It shows that they have confidence in themselves.

#### Negative attitudes that spurred participants to excel academically

The participants also expressed that they had some negative attitudes mainly towards the situations they are in or what caused their singleness. They gave their

answers with straight faces and their voices had some bitterness in them.

*I am product of a broken marriage. I was raised by a single mother. To me, history had repeated itself so I did not want to suffer the way my mother suffered. I intend to break the chains in my life by not marrying and staying single for the rest of her life.* Nyasha  
*I was married twice but men are cheats.* Rufaro  
*I think not being married and not having commitments such as looking after a husband means I've been able to focus on my career a lot more than some people.* Revai

Negative attitudes were expressed by those who never got married but have children, the divorced ones and the widows, the majority of whom believed that men are just a hindrance to their progress. Some of the single-mother lecturers expressed their anger with their in-laws, their ex-husbands and men in general who they thought was responsible for the situations they are in. They indicated that they work extra hard in whatever they do, to change their academic status as a way of trying to prove their capabilities to the world in general and to men in particular. As a result, they end up winning doing the seemingly impossible. The bitterness and anger inside them gave them the fuel, positive thinking, extraordinary strength and unlimited hope. The negative attitudes were given as the driving wheels.

### Goal setting

Participants indicated that they set new goals for themselves and their families which they think can only be achieved if they stay single.

*I did my PhD studies alone without him. He couldn't believe that I now hold this qualification. Now I am Dr. Ropafadzo without him.* Ropafadzo  
*My ex-husband was my blocking stone, I would say. I did not have clear directions with him. I think I married a wrong person that's why we divorced. I didn't know what a woman could do for herself or how I could upgrade myself.* Rugare

As educated women, these single-mother lecturers proved their ability to fulfil their goals through the attainment of PhDs and professorship. They were convinced that their personal goals could not have been achieved if they had remarried or were involved in some serious relationships.

### Personality

The second sub-theme was on personality. Some of the characteristics shared under this sub-theme were: being visionary, adaptability, being able to see the big picture, being a good listener, being helpful, having self-control, being persuasive, knowledgeable, communicative, patient,

having charisma, and being credible. On this theme, some of them had this to share:

*You have to be positive in everything you do and plan. You need to prove to the world that you can do it alone. You have to be knowledgeable so you need to research a lot and you have to know the big picture because so many times, people see their own world and only view their own world.* Ropafadzo  
*You need to have enormous strength, but coupled with enormous sense of humour. I am not that loose that's why I had to remain single. Men were afraid of my status.* Runyararo  
*You see most men failed to get along with me because of my PhD. They think that I am a man just like them.* Ravai.  
*I had to control myself and apply some persuasive skills and listening to my mentor as a way of getting her advice.* Netsai  
*Patience helped my communication with my mentor.* Revai

This concept on personality forced most of these single-mother lecturers to remain single. They expressed that the Shona society does not accept women who remarry in most cases and to protect themselves, they have to remain single. They indicated that because of their status, most men are afraid to approach them and, in most cases, the married ones are the suitors.

### Courage

Majority of the participants believe that they got this far in their careers by putting in that extra effort which men and married women may not need to. That view was expressed by two of the participants as follows:

*The most important key to success as a single mother is working hard no matter what others may say because success does not come without effort.* Runyararo  
*A single mother's primary concern should be that of having courage to always be developing herself and nurturing her mind and spirit.* Rutendo

It is evident that single-mother lecturers look at life from a positive, optimistic and self-confidence perspective.

### Mentorship

Participants revealed that mentors, both men and women, can provide critical role modelling. The majority of the participants indicated that they were inspired by their mentors who acted as their role models. The following vignettes express those views:

*But the most important thing was my boss at the time, who was very progressive, supportive, and just a terrific guy. It was great to have him because it was really my mentor who gave me a sense that there was a place at this institution for myself because eehh, I mean I was*

**Table 2.** Suggestions for breaking the glass ceiling.

<b>Suggestions for breaking the glass ceiling</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Having faith in oneself.	10
Being clear on what you want to do.	9
Giving priority to one's own development.	9
Participation in educational networks.	10
The ability to let go of every detail and bitterness.	10
The ability to use multiple coping strategies and adaptability to change	8

Source: Author.

*definitely a social activist. Ropafadzo*

*To be mentored by a female full professor would be ideal for most of us single women because some men tend to take advantage of our situations. After all, we have enough female full professors in the School. Raviro*

*I mean that mentoring is critical because if there's no support for those types of activities such as professional development, or going to trainings where you're learning new skills or doing an internship at someplace eeeh, you might have to get a different job. Rugare*

*The help I got from my mentor was great. It made me who I am today. Netsai*

*I'm mentoring employees as much as I can because I was also mentored, and I can say that they are all benefiting from this relationship. Ravai*

The majority of the participants cited how they were helped by their supervisors. This study revealed that those single-mother lecturers who were able to finish their PhD studies often cited the assistance they got from their mentors.

According to participants, one of the most effective ways of breaking the glass ceiling in education is the availability of mentors and role models. They suggested that by guided by experienced female mentors who are in the same field, supports the rise of women in general and single-mothers in particular who are in the education sector. The supportive colleagues at work were all seen as a blessing.

### **Overcoming obstacles**

Participants in this study were asked to suggest what single working women should do to overcome obstacles in order to break the glass ceiling. Although they felt that it was not an easy task for women, the participants shared the following ideas which are presented in Table 2.

#### **Having faith in oneself and in one's own ability**

Single-mother lecturers pointed out that the biggest concern with women in general is the fact that they keep doubting themselves and what they are able to do. The

lack of acknowledgement, their work from supervisors and others can be used to solidify their confidence so that they can properly do their work and compete with others. This can reduce their doubt, credibility and one's competence on the position one held which one should cherish.

*I just decided that I was going to get higher professional qualifications in order to progress from being a general high school teacher. This was my erosional sacrifice, hard work and determination Raviro*

#### **Being one's own support system and learning to create win-win situations**

The way these single-mother lecturers used to break the glass ceiling while exposed to being scrutinized every time in society and at work, made it difficult for them to do their work. As such they pointed out that a single-mother lecturer needs to have double faith and belief with respect to herself as a human being. She needs double strength and knowledge on how her work has to be done while fulfilling her duties both at home and at work. It is pertinent that she always supports herself as she is the sole decision maker. All the ten participants also stressed the importance of being resilient, recognizing and valuing herself and trusting only herself if she needs to move forward by overcoming the plethora of obstacles. The duties and responsibilities of a single mother need her to be much more aware of what she is entitled to do and a clear understanding of what she is expected to do. All participants indicated that they had to ensure their voices and opinions were put across and given attention they deserved.

#### **Being clear on how one intends to go about in one's career path**

Six participants indicated that there is need for a single woman to combine her objectives and executions of her work. She has to be clear with her career path then be focused to accomplish her aspirations, giving priority to

one's own development.

### Participation in educational networks

According to participants, the participation by women in educational issues is one of the factors that can facilitate the breaking of the glass ceiling.

*Women should not leave each other behind. This is the only way they can make friends and straighten communication between them.* Revai

*I really got help from the workshop I attended. This is when I realized that networking is good.* Raviro

*Women should not be jealous of each other and should not see each other as rivals.* Ropafadzo

The participation of single women in these educational networks was considered as contributing towards their break-through in life. Therefore, according to participants, there is need for women to support each other and build a collaborative network.

## DISCUSSION

This discussion is based on the two themes. Theme consisted of factors that contributed towards breaking of the glass ceiling by our research participants which are attitude, personality, courage and mentorship. Theme two was on suggestions on how other single mothers in academia can excel and fulfil their dreams. The findings showed that women in this study were ambitious and had positive attitudes which contributed towards their success, thereby breaking the glass ceiling. The study established that the single-mother lecturers had all the freedom to make final decisions which could be quickly implemented. These sentiments are echoed in the Africana-Womanism theory, that women are self-namers. It is also noted, from the findings of the current research, that most single-mother lecturers adequately run their homes and that their projects and decisions on career improvements face no obstacles. Our findings are similar to those of Al-Manasra (2013), which confirmed that family obligations do not appear to be a great barrier since Jordanian women in their study were able to combine work and family. Women in Al-Manasra's (2013) study also proved that they had ambition and self-confidence.

Under positive attitudes, participants indicated that there was a smooth flow in single-mother lecturers' ability to break the glass ceiling as PhD holders at university level. This success was viewed as due to the absence of stress from partners' pressure. The current findings refuted those of Kail (2002), who attributed parental stress as inhibiting single parents' home monitoring. The findings in our study revealed that most participants had

all the time, ability, courage, knowledge and power to advance their careers and other personal pursuits (Akkaya, 2020).

Under negative attitudes, it was interesting to note that the findings show that these negative attitudes actually spurred the participants to break the glass ceiling. The bitterness inside them gave them the power to gather strength to soldier on as single-mother lecturers in order to look after the families alone and to reach high academic levels. Whatever they do is as if they are trying to prove to their ex-husbands, families and to the society at large that they are also humans who can excel in life.

Courage was another factor which was regarded as contributing towards hitting the glass ceiling. According to Kapoor et al. (2021), women are not independent but are dependent, sentimental and submissive most of the time. Single-mother lecturers in this study were different since they portrayed a positive self-concept, are independent and productive. To be courageous means having self-confidence where one should stand up to one's belief, being assertive and bold, speaking with conviction, willing to face challenges and communicating effectively (Akkaya, 2020).

On goal setting, participants exhibited strength in planning, communication, human relations skills, and the ability to focus on ends as well as means. The participants' experiences as women and mothers, in addition to their acquired academic skills and human relations skills, made them better home managers and leaders (Harlesden, 1990). This study revealed that the characteristics of successful higher education women (PhD holders) are a result beyond attitude and personality traits and required an action on goal setting in order to advance one's career. This study revealed that in order to step up the ladder in higher education, sometimes one must be willing to move to a new job at their current institution or perhaps move to an entirely different institution (Akkaya, 2020).

This study revealed that there were few challenges encountered by single-mother lecturers along their career journey. Multiple roles (role conflict) are sometimes viewed as an obstacle to advancement for women (Mugove, 2017; Mupfumira, 2017). Role conflict is the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behaviour of a person (Opara et al., 2020). Findings from the study revealed that there were no such role conflicts as single-mother lecturers indicated that they had all their time for both work and family. It was proved in this study that work and life balance might not be taken to be a serious challenge since being a single-mother lecturer with responsibilities was regarded as not having limitations (Al-Manasra, 2013). The barriers cited in other studies for women in higher education, such as salary gaps, comparative merit and promotions, fiscal and social inequalities, institutional sexism and racism, and inclusive and protective memberships, such as the "good old boys' club" and others documented in the

literature (Oakley, 2000; Jackson and O'Callaghan, 2009; Rana and Raju, 2019) were not valid here.

Family constraints when relocating was expected as one of the challenges with women. Women in this study came from different regions in Zimbabwe without a "trailing spouse". The need for geographic mobility in academic careers means that single-mothers often move far away from the extended family members who might otherwise have helped out with the children and home chores. The single-mother lecturers in this study stated that it was rather an advantage for them to work independently without relying on male partners.

This study revealed that having a mentor and professional networking are also important factors for the success of a single-mother lecturer in higher education. Community organizations like universities can establish strong support systems to increase women's visibility. Being involved in community organizations, as stated by Pearson and West (1991), can give women an opportunity to break the glass ceiling. Monkes (1998, cited in Kapoor et al., 2021) state that women can learn and advance themselves more rapidly with a mentor.

Adisa et al. (2020) and Akkaya (2020) suggest that for one to get advancement in life, one needs skills and ability in analyzing oneself, the environment, and the other players. Hence, the current study regards mentoring and networking as external influences that can be used by single women lecturers to be PhD holders. Mentors serve a variety of purposes; therefore, seeking their assistance is a wise career move (Livingston and Cohn, 2010). Almost all of the single-mother lecturers agreed that an increase in the number of women in senior lectureship roles means an increase in role models especially for single-mother lecturers. This is a spirit of sisterhood found in Africana-Womanism.

Therefore, these participants share the belief from Kirmak (2017) that women need to communicate and cooperate with each other for raising social awareness about the need to increase female presence on management boards.

According to Kirmak (2017) and Akkaya (2020), networking is one of the sources for women's progress in career. Akkaya (2020) concludes that women often disregard networks as most women want to rise through the evaluation of what they did, and not through communication. Our findings refuted this view since the study revealed that participants regarded networking as an important aspect that enables single-mother lecturers to break the glass ceiling. Our study findings indicate that participants did not have any problems in finding role models and mentors as revealed by Kirmak (2017) and Akkaya (2020) who state that in management, women are deprived of mentors who can guide and help them, hence it becomes hard for them to rise in career stages. The usefulness of Africana-Womanism and understanding of the theory on the factors that can be used by women to break the glass ceiling were demonstrated in this study.

## Conclusion

Several factors were found to be responsible for the success of the single-mother lecturers' breaking of the glass ceiling in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology. Taking the African-Womanism lens, the study set out to explore the factors that enable single women lecturers to break the glass ceiling at one university in Zimbabwe. A lot of literature is there on the challenges faced by women in management, in different organizations, but very few studies have explored how single-mothers in academia managed to break the glass ceiling. With the orientation to single parenting as socially constituted and being dynamically situated social practice, this study highlighted the importance of courage, goal setting, one's visibility, faith in oneself, networking, ability to let go of every detail and bitterness, giving priority to one's own development and the ability to observe skills of the mentor. Our study makes a strong empirical and theoretical contribution to our understanding of the factors that may facilitate the breaking of the glass ceiling by single women who are university lecturers, as study participants managed to give a name to themselves as family heads with a strong grounding in the Africana-Womanism theory.

## Recommendations

In view of the results of the study, the following recommendations are being made:

- 1) Universities should promote factors which empower single women lecturers through facilitating discussions of identity issues, eliminating the obstacles that may prevent them from advancing, and fostering work environments that allow them to operate collaboratively in order to produce goods and services in line with expectations of Education 5.0.
- 2) Mentorship should be promoted where women are encouraged to present their papers and learn from women professors and doctors.
- 3) Women academics should be encouraged to set their goals clearly and share their experiences since they have the strength and spirit of sisterhood as defined by Africana-Womanism (Msila, 2021).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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