

Demystifying the Attitudes of Small and Medium Enterprises Employers towards Gender Diversity in Namibia

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Abstract: This study explored for the attitudes of small and medium enterprises employers towards gender diversity. The study was conducted through qualitative methods, with data collected from a purposively selected sample drawn from the population of 1238 SMEs operating within the capital city, Windhoek. The sample size was 65 and data were gathered through focus group discussions. Data were analyzed through content analysis conducted manually in order to allow in-depth interaction with data. The study found that many SME employers adopt an indecisive stance toward the implementation of gender diversity. While some SMEs recognize the importance of gender diversity, there is limited indication of formal policy supporting it. Findings also pointed to the absence of understanding and poor training on the value of gender diversity as causes of failure by SMEs to adopt gender diversity. Low leadership commitment to creating diversity and inclusion in the workplace is also a challenge. The findings further show that management's perceptions of gender diversity are not necessarily congruent with the expectations of employees. It has also been found that most SMEs fall behind in embracing realistic approaches to a diverse workplace, primarily because of constrained resources or strategic plans. Further, the research highlights organizational culture as an important predictor of gender diversity attitudes. Employee recruitment and promotion in most SMEs are dictated by social norms and traditional gender roles. To enhance gender diversity in Namibian SMEs, these businesses should have a proper gender diversity policies, offering definite guidelines on recruitment, promotion, and inclusion. The study also recommended diversity audits every year to track progress, inclusion of mandatory gender sensitivity and bias training for employees and management. Training could be performed quarterly using inexpensive workshops or web-based courses, with the impact assessed within a year. SMEs should also set specific objectives for gender diversity, such as having more women in leadership positions. This would allow continuous measurement of progress.

Keywords: Diversity, Gender, Gender Diversity, Leadership Commitment, National Development

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I. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) constitute the cornerstone for Namibia's economic growth, significantly contributing to job creation as well as poverty reduction [1]. Their significance in poverty reduction and employment generation is widely acknowledged [2]. This makes SMEs critical in achievement of national development goals. The Ministry of Industrialization, Trade and SME Development in Namibia describes SMEs in terms of criteria such as number of employees within the organization, their annual turnover, and the amount of investment capital. This aligns with the Namibia SME Policy which classifies small enterprises as those that have between 5 and 50 employees, and medium enterprises as having a total of 200 employees.

Despite their economic significance, gender diversity in the SMEs remain fairly limited [3]. With limited studies addressing the attitudes of SMEs towards gender diversity, it remains unclear as to the specific perspectives of SME owners on gender diversity. Namibian SMEs face challenges in adopting gender-inclusive policies due to traditional beliefs, lack of awareness, and perceived workforce integration difficulties [4]. While research on gender diversity largely focuses on large firms [5, 6], little is known about SME employers' attitudes in Namibia.

This study addressed the gap by examining cultural and socio-economic influences on SME employers' perceptions of gender diversity. Without empirical data, policy efforts may struggle to foster inclusivity. By analyzing these attitudes, the

research informs targeted strategies to promote gender diversity, ensuring fair employment opportunities and a more inclusive SME sector in Namibia. Over the past 10 years, organizations have come under increasing attention to encourage more diverse workforce due to governmental regulations, media pressure and stakeholder influence [5]. As a result, several actions have been taken to encourage gender diversity in various industries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of gender diversity in the workplace refers to the equitable representation of different genders in an organization [5]. Numerous studies emphasize the advantages associated with gender diversity among firms of various sizes [4, 6]. Moreover, it positively impacts companies in terms of creativity and innovation that contributes to companies' performance [7]. SMEs are integral to Africa's economic development, constituting approximately 90% of all businesses in certain regions [8]. In light of this view, an investigation into employer attitudes towards gender diversity in these firms is worthwhile.

The definition of SMEs varies across the different economies and can change depending on parameters set out by the economy [9]. These parameters include the number of employees, yearly revenue, and investment capital. Generally, SMEs have between 5 to 200 employees and can operate in a wide range of sectors, such as retail, manufacturing, and services [1, 8]. SMEs are vital to the promotion of economic growth as well as creation of jobs, and the reduction of poverty [10]. However, SMEs are constrained by challenges such as lack of access to finance, access to markets, growth, education, business skills and support for their role in economic development from being able to put inclusive workplace practices into action, particularly those concerned with gender diversity [11].

Ref [6] ascertain that gender-diverse teams generate more innovation, better problem solving, and improved bottom-line performance. SMEs, irrespective of their size, are not left out of these benefits. Gender diversity has also been associated with greater corporate social responsibility and ethical business conduct, which can enhance the reputation of an SME and stakeholder relationships [12].

Employers have a significant role to developing workplace culture and policy. This is because; their attitudes towards gender diversity powerfully shape recruitment, promotion, and retention practices [13]. There are several factors that influence how employers perceive gender diversity in SMEs, and these include including cultural determinants, perceived costs, and awareness levels [14]. There are traditional gender roles present in most cultures, which are embedded in people's beliefs.

Ref [13] further show that gender diversity promotes better-recruiting practices, worldwide relationships, and a broader understanding of the business world. However, it can be contended that gender diversity can lead to conflict in decision-making and delay the process, making it difficult for businesses to react swiftly to market shocks [14]. This is

because traditional gender roles tend to have men occupy leadership roles and women assume supporting roles [12]. It is these social norms that shape the way employers perceive, and therefore resist, enhancing gender diversity among SMEs. Some SME employers view gender diversity initiatives as expensive and irrelevant in situations where there is limited resource.

Ref [11] established that SMEs have limited financial and structural ability to employ gender diversity initiatives. In most developing economies, SMEs contend with issues of limited access to credit facilities, skills deficiencies, as well as market competition [15], thus making gender diversity a secondary agenda. Education and awareness regarding gender diversity also shape employer attitudes. This indicates that an improvement in gender diversity might result in employee retention as well as financial gains for a business [14, 15]. In many countries, the absence of diversity management training opportunities infers that there is limited awareness among SME employers.

There are many hindrances to the advancement of gender diversity in SMEs, and they include entrenched gender stereotypes that exist among communities, weak legal enforcement, and work-life balance complications [16]. Both explicit and implicit gender discrimination have a profound impact on recruitment and promotional policies in SMEs [17]. Ref [16] reveals that women employees in SMEs tend to encounter discrimination, particularly in sectors that have traditionally been male dominated, such as construction and manufacturing. These biases slow down women's career progression and reduce diversity in the general workforce [17]. While gender equality is supported by labor legislation in most nations, its enforcement is weak in SMEs. Existing labor legislation often prohibits discrimination at the workplace [18] but compliance by SMEs is patchy due to a lack of monitoring and enforcement. The majority of SMEs struggle to provide flexible working conditions that assist workers with caregiving roles [19]. Ref [20] suggests that work-life balance policies such as parental leave and flexible working promote gender diversity. However, the scarcity of resources prevents SMEs from implementing such initiatives.

Different steps can help gender diversity in SMEs, including awareness campaigns, policy enforcement, networking, and flexible work practices [17]. Gender diversity training sessions can help in changing the mindset of employers and fostering inclusive practices within the workplace. SMEs that are provided with diversity training are more inclined to implement gender equality policies [21]. More enforcement of existing labor laws can help improve gender diversity in SMEs. Governments can provide incentives, such as tax deductions or grants, to SMEs adopting gender-inclusive practices [15]. Female leadership mentoring schemes can help break gender stereotypes within SMEs. Research has shown that that women in leadership could facilitate organizational change and diversity [22]. The implementation of flexible work practices that allow gender tolerance can be effective in advancing gender diversity in SMEs. That is, organizations that provide options such as teleworking, part-time employment, or family-friendly

policies establish a conducive environment for a diverse workforce.

Although there has been a body of global research on gender diversity, few studies have investigated SME employers' attitudes towards gender diversity [23]. Earlier studies have concentrated on large firms, and thus we know little about how SMEs view and enact gender diversity [4, 6]. Additionally, earlier studies will typically neglect outstanding socio-cultural and economic forces informing employer attitudes in specific localities [16]. The paper seeks to fill such gaps through an exploration into SME employers' attitudes towards gender diversity, challenges faced, as well as probable means of catalyzing inclusive workplaces. Organizational efficiency is largely dependent on gender diversity, even though SMEs continue to face difficulties in terms of balancing gender presence. The behavior of employers, fueled by cultural attitudes, economic pressures, and unawareness, directly drives gender diversity outcomes [12]. These issues can be tackled by targeted interventions in the form of policy introduction, continuous training of stakeholders, and flexibility in work policies [17, 20]. This study added to the existing knowledge base related to gender diversity among SMEs and provide recommendations to enhance inclusive employment practices.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The study was conducted through qualitative methods, with data collected from a purposively selected sample drawn from the population of 1238 SMEs operating within the capital city, Windhoek. The sample size was 65 and data were gathered through focus group discussions. Data were analyzed through content analysis conducted manually in order to allow in-depth interaction with data.

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study presented some striking findings regarding the attitude of employers toward gender diversity. One of the key findings is that many SME employers adopt an ambivalent stance toward gender diversity. Although there are some who recognize its importance, largely, there is limited indication of formal policy or official campaigns for promoting it. It usually rests on an absence of understanding, poor training, or low leadership commitment to create diversity and inclusion in the workplace. This aligns with Ref [21] who call for training interventions to improve diversity among SMEs.

A further key observation is that management's perceptions of gender diversity are not necessarily congruent with the expectations of employees. Employees appreciate workforce diversity, but they often believe that organizational leadership does not appreciate or actively endorse initiatives seeking to increase diversity. This incongruence creates a discrepancy between the recognition of gender diversity benefits and actual practices in SMEs. Unless management takes active steps, diversity efforts turn out to be superficial or ineffective.

The study also points out that gender diversity is perceived largely to be a boon for business performance. Diversity teams innovate, create, and make improved decisions, as perceived by the majority of SME employees and employers. An equalized workforce also helps in improving customer relations and company reputation. Most SMEs fall behind, however, in embracing realistic approaches to a diverse workplace, primarily because of constrained resources or strategic plans. Further, the research highlights organizational culture as an important predictor of gender diversity attitudes. Employee recruitment and promotion in most SMEs are dictated by social norms and traditional gender roles. This can contribute to implicit biases that discourage equal opportunities for all employees. Eliminating such biases requires organizational cultural change systematically, training, sensitization campaigns, and top management commitment to fostering inclusiveness.

The research concluded by highlighting the necessity of having to implement stronger policies and enforcement mechanisms, which are applied to ensure gender diversity among SMEs. It is interesting to note that commitment to diversity can vary among SMEs, but without formal policies or accountability mechanisms, long-term progress is constrained. Ref [17] also confirm the role of policy frameworks in promoting diversity. Well-defined guidelines, diversity policies, and quantifiable targets can facilitate SMEs in incorporating gender diversity into business strategies. Employers also have to take initiative in making these policies truly functional and not just promises.

In conclusion, while there is an acknowledgment of the importance of gender diversity for Namibian SMEs, there are significant gaps in translating awareness into action. Leadership commitment, corporate culture, policy translation, and employee engagement are some of the challenges, which will need to be overcome to facilitate a more inclusive and diverse business culture. Gender diversity can be leveraged to make its maximum contribution to performance, innovation, and organizational success when it emerges as a strategic priority for SMEs.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that there is disconnect between the recognition of the importance of gender diversity and its practical application among SMEs in Namibian. It also emerged that employers and employees confirm the benefits of gender diversity, which includes enhanced innovation, comprehensive decision-making and improved business performance. However, the actual efforts to promote gender diversity remain limited. This is caused by the lack of leadership commitment, inadequate training, as well as the absence of formal policies on the implementation of gender diversity within SMEs. Shaped by the deeply held traditional gender norms in Namibia, organizational culture further strengthens implicit biases in recruitment processes and promotion. In order to bridge the gap between awareness of gender diversity and effort towards the actualization of inclusivity, stronger policy frameworks must be crafted, targeted training must be conducted, and earnest leadership commitment must be pursued. In the absence of these

interventions, efforts at gender diversity can very well remain symbolic and not truly transformative. Thus, for gender diversity to make significant contributions toward the success of SMEs, there ought to be a deliberate effort to mainstream it into the strategic processes of SMEs. Such efforts need to be augmented with actionable, measurable initiatives that assist in creating an inclusive work culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance gender diversity in Namibian SMEs, businesses should have a proper gender diversity policy, offering definite guidelines on recruitment, promotion, and inclusion, with diversity audits every year to track progress. SMEs also need to include mandatory gender sensitivity and bias training for employees and management, performed quarterly using inexpensive workshops or web-based courses, with the impact assessed within a year. Finally, setting specific objectives for gender diversity, such as having more women in leadership positions, will allow progress to be measured. These suggestions offer a systematic way of moving forward with inclusivity, implicit bias, and ensuring ongoing commitment to diversity, which will eventually result in better innovation, business outcomes, and employee satisfaction.

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