

Wholesale & Retail LEADERSHIP CHAIR

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Shortage of retail management skills among women, especially in rural areas

The South African wholesale and retail industry faces a major challenge in attracting and retaining women for permanent careers, especially for management positions and especially in rural areas. This is important because approximately 51% of the population is female and the retail and wholesale sectors employ an estimated 22% of the national labour force.

In recent research, the Wholesale & Retail Leadership Chair (WRLC) investigated the position of women in the retail sector, especially in rural areas, to suggest strategies to improve their attraction, placement and retention. A qualitative, questionnaire-based survey using purposive sampling gathered data via 20 questionnaires and 20 follow up interviews with women in managerial and supervisory positions in the retail sector. Respondents were aged between 35 and 51, with between 7 and 34 years' retail experience across large, medium and small businesses.

The research produced the following findings. Few rural women occupy management positions, and women are still discriminated against when it comes to promotion to management positions. Women earn less than men in retail, even though they are employed in large numbers. Rural women are disadvantaged by a lack of training and experience when management positions become available. Not being fluent in business languages (English and Afrikaans) is a barrier to promotion, as are poor communication skills, and this affects their self-confidence. Training to prepare women for senior and management positions in retail is lacking or inadequate.

Traditional female roles and stereotypes tend to influence women's perceptions of their abilities, and undermine their potential, including considering applying for management positions. Tradition and culture demand that women should care for their families first, with career aspirations taking second place. The lack of female role models and mentors contributes to women accepting the status quo. The employment of women in permanent positions is affected by the casualization of labour in the retail sector. The study found that women are managers in small businesses, but medium and large businesses are still male dominated.

The research revealed that eliminating discrimination against females and promoting equity in the workplace could increase productivity per worker by 25 - 40%, and gave rise to the following recommendations. The Wholesale & Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) should consider introducing programmes focused on developing rural women to occupy retail management positions, overcome language barriers, and improve communication skills. The retail sector, in collaboration with the W&RSETA, should devise a training strategy to advance the transformation and empowerment of rural women. The retail sector should consider cultural and traditional demands affecting rural women, and policies need to be put in place to recognize their norms and values, and adapt Eurocentric rules to allow for traditional rules. The retail sector and the W&RSETA should consider introducing programmes for mentoring rural women for prospective promotional positions, and incorporate succession plans that are monitored and evaluated.

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