Managing Intersectionality for Sustainable Work: Cracking the Glass Cultural Ceiling

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Abstract:

A focus on the experience of culturally diverse leaders has been slow and the intersecting impact of gender and cultural diversity sees culturally diverse women notably under-represented in Australian leadership ranks as they experience a double jeopardy, or 'cement' ceiling. This paper contributes to addressing the dearth of Australian research by providing evidence from a rigorous empirical study, based on interview, focus group and survey data coupled with an examination of national and international primary and secondary source material. Due to space constraints the main feature of this paper is a presentation of the empirical findings with a focus on the barriers experienced by culturally diverse female aspiring leaders.

Key words: Cultural diversity, Women, Leaders, Australian organizations

Introduction   and   Overview:

In spite of almost five decades of Australia's multicultural policy and a country which boasts one of the

most culturally and linguistically diverse populations (ABS, 2017), this is not reflected in the executive

teams and boards of Australian public, private and not-for-profit organisations with the vast majority

of board and senior leadership positions held by Anglo-Celtic men. As noted in research by the

Australian Human Rights Commission, in ASX200 companies, over 75% of CEOS are of Anglo-Celtic

heritage; 18% have European heritage; 5% are from a non-European background and no CEOS have

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage (AHRC 2016). Similar findings were also reflected in the

leadership ranks of the Federal and state parliaments, ministries of governments in the states and

federally, in most public service roles and the leadership of Australian universities (Australian Human

Rights Commission, 2016). The follow up report by the AHRC (2018) recently revealed that the senior

leadership suite is dominated by particular groups with up to 97 percent of the nearly 2,500 executives

surveyed for the purposes of the report identifying as having Anglo-Celtic and European backgrounds.

Adding to this work, research by the Diversity Council Australia (DCA) shows the striking intersecting

interplay of gender and ethnicity, resulting in what Beale (1969) called a 'double jeopardy'. Some five

decades after this term was coined, these intransigent barriers into leadership for culturally diverse

women continue, with forecasts showing that if company directors in ASX-listed companies were 100

people, 2 would be culturally and linguistically diverse women; 6 would be Anglo Celtic women; 26 would be culturally and linguistically diverse men and 78 would be Anglo Celtic men (DCA, 2017). The dismal under representation of culturally diverse women in leadership positions displayed in the available data resulted in two key questions which guided our study. First, *why do so few culturally diverse females reach top leadership positions in Australian organisations?* And second, *what can Australian organisations do to better recognise the skill and ambition of culturally diverse female talent?*

Our work is informed by a context-specific analysis and features a multi-method approach to addressing the neglect of culturally diverse women in leadership positions. Notably, the treatment and experience of culturally and linguistically diverse men and women workers has been largely ignored in the diversity management scholarship and as a corollary, in policies and initiatives (Azmat et. al., 2014; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Author, 2013). To illustrate, Syed and Kramar (2010: 104) note that 'even in best practice organisations, equal opportunity programs tend to have a narrow focus, prioritising women, harassment, caring responsibilities and disability ahead of religion, nationality and race (2010: 102). Similarly, Bell et. al., (2009:178) in their study on migrant workers in the US highlight the invisibility of immigrants in the diversity literature. Finally, Kamenou and Fearfull (2006: 159) argue that: 'HRM has largely been silent with regard to the issues constantly faced by ethnic minorities at work. It ignores social groups and how cultural and religious aspects can affect perceptions of ethnic minority groups within organisations, thus having a negative effect on their career opportunities and experiences' (see also Alcazar et. al., 2013; Azmat et. al., 2014; Benschop, 2001; Hartel, 2004; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009).

In sum, in terms of the literature covering the leadership progression of culturally diverse men and women, it is safe to say that it is spread across various polls including, sociology, organisational studies and human resource management. A variety of different terms for cultural diversity are also employed with race, ethnicity and minorities featuring more regularly than the Australian coined term: 'cultural diversity'. With the largest pool of research emerging from the US and UK, this research has a narrow concentration on specific cultural groups, with what is often a focus on the experience of those

identifying with African American, Hispanic, and to a lesser extent, Asian cultural backgrounds (e.g. McCarty Killan et al., 2005). Very few studies examine a broader range of cultural backgrounds when looking at minority representation in leadership. This is problematic given the different cultural landscape of Australian society. Issues also exist with the range of barriers examined, with a limited amount of studies looking at the double bind that culturally diverse women experience.

In addition to attempting to address the scarce discussion around the experience of ethnic minority men and women workers, the extant literature also notes that there are two interconnected forces at play including perceptual and systemic barriers which must be overcome to gain access to leadership positions. In triangulating our data analysis we have gone some way to: (i) shed light on the perceptual and systemic barriers impeding culturally diverse women from gaining access to leadership positions and (ii) address the void in Australian scholarship. Most importantly we deal with one of the most marginalised groups of workers seeking to access leadership in Australian organisations: culturally diverse women.

Methodology
While drawing on survey data, this study complements this with the narratives of culturally diverse women, engaging them in a deep dive into their experience in accessing leadership positions. Importantly, we bridge the quantitative and qualitative divide by drawing on and conducting an analysis of both sets of data in order to build a robust and rigorous illustration of the experience of culturally diverse women in accessing and in gaining leadership positions.

As we see it, the quantitative and qualitative silos, which see data and analysis sliced along an objective/subjective, static/dynamic, mechanistic/relational plane where context plays a central or peripheral role is indeed simplistic and artificial. Hanson (2008: 97) captures the limitations of the strict dichotomy between the two forms of data collection and analysis, arguing that:

> Most of the arguments for one side or the other are based on assumptions about what one side thinks the other side is doing, rather than what the other side is doing. This has been analogous to the process of social construction of "other," something based on what it is not rather than what it is, and with greater homogeneity that actually exists within the "other."

For the purposes of this study we overcome this divide by drawing on a multi-method approach. Our evidence gathering involved several phases. First, we conducted an extensive review of international and national research to understand the barriers (perceptual and systemic) to greater leadership representation for culturally diverse women, including whether (or not) the intersecting interplay of gender and culture presents a magnified barrier. Evidence collected from the primary and secondary source analysis was drawn on to develop the on-line survey, as well as to inform questions for the focus groups and interviews. Importantly, we located the construction of our questions administered in the survey, interviews and focus groups within a (country) specific context emphasising the centrality of pre-existing structures and the policies and processes that shape, consolidate and reproduce the contextual dynamics (van Dijk and van Engen, 2012: 78-79).

In the process of designing the focus group, interview and on-line survey questions, a broad body of literature and secondary documentation was reviewed; Census surveys from around the world were consulted; and, industry and academic expertise was drawn on through the establishment of a project reference group, which met fortnightly/monthly via phone conference over a nine month period. The frequent discussions with the project reference group ensured an iterative approach to the development of the interview/survey and focus group questions and to the analysis of the findings. In terms of the shaping of the questions, our iterative process allowed us to identify and respond to the limitations identified in other projects of a similar type.

There are several limitations we sought to overcome. First, we identified that there was a notable over-reliance on approaches that conceptualise (cultural) diversity as discrete, fixed demographic characteristics such as for instance, country of birth, religion and language spoken. Such an approach means that there was a failure to recognise the significance of (cultural) identity (Chrobot-Mason, 2004; Galvin, 2006; Johns et. al. 2012; Linnehan et. al. 2006; Nkomo & Cox, 1996): that is, that combination of ascribed and self-selected identity characteristics (Jenkins, 2004). Second, there was little recognition of multiple and intersecting dimensions of cultural diversity when measuring cultural background

(Bondi, 1993; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Browne and Misra, 2003, Kirton, 2010; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Triandafyllidou and Wodack). Third, there was a lack of engagement with global experience as a measure of cultural identity and diversity (Tung, 1993). And finally, existing approaches were insufficiently responsive to the way (cultural) diversity is shaped by the national context (Jones, et al. 2000; Konrad, et al. 2006). Importantly, insights from this process were incorporated into the design of each of our evidence-building threads: interviews, focus groups and an on-line survey which were all informed by a broad and multi-layered definition of culturally diversity, which is detailed further on.

Survey

For the survey respondents, we requested they indicate their country of birth as well as their cultural identity, with respondents being able to mark up to two cultural identities to which they felt they belonged. A definition of cultural identity was provided, as follows: *"Your cultural/ethnic identity is the cultural/ethnic group to which you feel you belong. This identity may be linked to your country of birth or that of your parents, grandparents or ancestors or it may be different. For example, it may be your partner's ancestry or it may be the country or countries you have spent a great amount of time or you feel more closely tied to."* In short, the survey recognised that an employees' cultural identity may be informed by multiple rather than only one prevailing ethnicity, and as such we sought to collect data on up to two different cultural/ethnic groups that an employee may identify with. This approach to measuring cultural background makes data analysis more complicated as it requires analysing multiple cultural identity responses. However, it respects the fact that as many as 30% of Australian workers identify with more than one cultural background and as such they can find it difficult to specify just one cultural identity, ethnicity, or cultural background in surveys (DCA, 2011). Moreover, allowing people to describe their cultural background in more than one way (for instance Australian-Chinese rather than just Australian) also enables their response to capture not just how *they* identify but also how *others* may perceive them to identify.

The online survey was conducted to provide female leaders and emerging leaders from a diversity of cultural backgrounds with the opportunity to offer their insights into perceived barriers and enablers of

their careers. Accordingly, the questions were structured around four key themes, including: (i) Career Aspirations; (ii) Career Experiences; (iii) Career Intentions; and (iv) Demographic Information.

The survey was administered to female leaders and emerging female leaders in a selection of Diversity Council Australia (DCA) member organisations, representing a range of industry sectors. Notably, *'Emerging leaders'* was determined by the participating organisations administering the survey and was not predefined. This allowed for some flexibility in the determination of an 'emerging' leader with some located in lower levels in the organisation yet able to provide important insights. The sample included both 'culturally diverse' and non-culturally diverse female participants as we were keen to investigate whether there were statistically significant different responses between these two employee groups. Findings are based on the responses from 366 female leaders and aspiring leaders who completed the survey.

When reporting on survey findings, 'culturally diverse' refers to any women who identified in the survey as being only from a non-Main English Speaking Country cultural background. Of note, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics these are countries other than Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States of America. This definition recognises Australia's history of British colonisation, so culturally diverse includes people with European, Asian, African, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander cultural backgrounds. Our definition did include Indigenous women as culturally diverse. This was purposeful and done in order to respect Indigenous Australians' unique position as First Nations people.

Of the 366 respondents, 198 identified as being only from a Main English Speaking Country Cultural background and 96 identified as being only from a non-Main English Speaking Country cultural background. The remaining 67 respondents identified with both MESC and non-MESC cultural backgrounds, while five did not wish to identify their cultural identity. Importantly, we categorised our groups as culturally diverse and non-culturally diverse women, rather than providing information on particular employee segments within this: such as for instance, Asian, South East Asian or South Asian,

Chinese identifying women etc. This type of more fine-grained analysis was not possible due to sample size constraints (see also Authors, 2016).

Focus Groups and Interviews

In addition to the on-line survey, focus groups and interviews were undertaken to build a deep understanding of the barriers to and enablers for culturally diverse women progressing into leadership, and what actions organisations can take to address the underrepresentation of culturally diverse females in leadership ranks. The focus groups included 54 culturally diverse female leaders and emerging leaders from a range of organisations, industry sectors, organisational levels, and cultural backgrounds across Melbourne and Sydney.

Participants were invited through the DCA's member email distribution list. The focus groups were conducted at a DCA member organisation who was willing to host the event and took 2 hours. The scope of the project and the anticipated was explained and conversation flowed freely between the participants. We noted that anything that was shared would not go beyond the safe space of the room in which the focus group was taking place. The women shared personal stories which indicated that while these women did not know each other prior to this event, there was a feeling of trust and comfort in conveying their experiences.

In addition to the focus groups, we also conducted 15 indepth individual interviews with culturally diverse women who were in high-profile very senior roles (e.g. Board Directors, CEOs, C-Suite) to explore in greater depth the career experiences of successful culturally diverse female leaders in Australia. Interviewees represented a broad range of cultural backgrounds, organisations, and industry sectors and were contacted through the DCA. The interviews were conducted by phone and took between one to one and a half hours. As with the focus groups the elaboration of deep personal experiences highlighted the importance of conveying this for the purposes of the study. Anonymity was reinforced to the interview participants.

We took an identity-based broad approach to defining 'culturally diverse' when inviting focus group participants and Interviewees to participate in the project. Specifically, we invited them to participate if they were a "female leader who identifies as being from a culturally diverse background" and noted that "for this project we are taking a broad definition of culturally diverse which refers to anyone with *non-Anglo cultural origins"*. We defined culturally diverse as including people with European, Asian, African, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander cultural backgrounds. Focus groups and interviews were structured around four main questions: (i) what has been your experience accessing and being in leadership roles as a culturally diverse female?; (ii) as a culturally diverse woman in leadership, what were/are some of the key enablers to your progression into leadership roles?; (iii) as a culturally diverse woman in leadership, what were/ are some of the barriers that slowed down or prevented your career progression?; (iv) what could organisations do that is different to current approaches to ensure culturally diverse women who aspire to leadership can access these roles?

Thematic analysis was conducted on each of the focus groups and interviews. Findings were then triangulated by reviewing focus group, interview, and survey data to identify key themes and reviewed in light of quantitative trends. In addition to identifying targeted barriers our evidence also featured solutions to addressing the barriers, however space constraints mitigate against presenting these and the focus of the project findings is placed firmly on the barriers identified.

Project Findings
Overall, we found that our respondents were ambitious, capable, and resilient and as such were well placed to contribute to their own and their organisation's success into the future. For instance, 84% of the culturally diverse respondents planned to advance to a very senior role and for 91% of them, working in a job that offered them the ability to enter leadership positions was extremely or very important. In terms of their skills and capabilities, two thirds (66%) of the culturally diverse female talent spoke a language other than English when at home, and over a third (37%) had a bi/multicultural identity, in which they identify with more than one cultural background and so are able to communicate or 'broker' across cultural contexts. Resilience featured as an important characteristic in accessing senior leadership

positions. For instance, the respondents noted that their personal resilience had been key to them retaining their leadership aspirations in the face of the career barriers or locks they had experienced.

In contrast to this illustration, we also found that Australian organisations could better value and leverage the ambitions and capabilities of culturally diverse women. A large majority of the research respondents revealed that they felt invisible, overlooked and undervalued when it comes to leadership opportunities, while others felt they were regarded as 'high risk' leadership contenders. For instance, only 15% of the research participants strongly agreed that their organisation took advantage of workforce diversity to better service clients or access new markets. Extending on this point, while 88% of the respondents noted that they planned to advance to a very senior role, only 1 in 10 strongly agreed that their leadership traits were recognised or that their opinions were valued and respected. Finally, one in four of the project respondents (26%) agreed that cultural barriers in the workplace had caused them to scale back at work: that is, reduce their ambitions, work fewer hours, not work as hard, and/or consider quitting; and 28% stated it was likely they would seek a job with another employer within the next year.

Our analysis revealed six barriers and we devised six enablers or six lock and keys as we branded them. Each of these falls into the category of perceptual and/or systemic forces which impede access to leadership. As noted, due to space constraints, the following presents the locks by way of highlighting the findings.

Bias and Stereotyping

Stereotyping and bias were consistently ranked as the strongest talent lock to culturally diverse women making it into the C-suite with only one in five of our culturally diverse respondents noting their workplace was free of cultural diversity or gender based biases and stereotypes.

Figure 1: Bias Indicators for Culturally Diverse v Non-Culturally Diverse Women

Only 12% of culturally diverse women strongly agreed that they had the same opportunities in their workplace as anyone else with commensurate ability and experience. Overwhelmingly, respondents noted that leaders, colleagues, and clients often stereotyped them, making incorrect assumptions about

them based on their gender and cultural background. This perceptual short cut they said reinforced and reproduced bias, meaning they were less likely to be considered as leadership material. The most common stereotypes made about them were that, as culturally diverse women they must lack English literacy skills and strategic ability and be "shrinking violets". Finally, respondents noted that there was an assumption that because they had a particular cultural background they must be an expert in that culture/ethnicity and fluently speak the relevant language.

In addition to short cuts about one's cultural competence, there were also assumptions made about cultural background highlighting the simplistic ideas surrounding cultural background. For instance, respondents noted that their cultural identity was based largely on their physical appearance. To illustrate, one respondent noted that she was consistently assumed to be Indian when in fact her grandparents came to Australia from Pakistan and she was a third generation Australian who identifies primarily as Australian. Adding to this there was an assumption that one's identity is fixed. That is, that a woman's cultural identity does not change in different contexts. As one Australian Born Chinese project respondent noted, she may actually feel Australian when interacting with her overseas-born colleagues, yet Chinese when at home with her (Chinese) parents.

Divisions in Driving Change

Based on the frequency with which the issue was raised by the respondents, emergent divisions in the process of creating more diverse and inclusive workplaces ranked as the second strongest talent lock or barrier. The majority of the respondents we spoke to relayed the resentment they had encountered from men or women from Anglo-Celtic cultural backgrounds who assumed that they had been given 'special treatment' and attained their leadership role only because of their gender or cultural background rather than their contribution to their organisation, that is a merit based trajectory. Paradoxically, they noted that being 'rolled' out as the 'poster girl' of cultural diversity meant that they were tasked with creating cultural change and breaking down barriers for emerging culturally diverse women leaders. As aptly captured by one of the respondents, "You have this very small number of culturally diverse female staff trying to engage and influence everyone, and address fears about difference, and encourage leaders to take a risk on the unfamiliar – there's this view that 'You're the one who stands to benefit so you get out there and do it."

Lack of Relationship Capital

A lack of relationship capital in the form of sponsorship, mentoring, and networking was consistently cited by culturally diverse women as a key talent lock preventing them from progressing into leadership positions. For instance, one in four (26%) culturally diverse female leaders agreed their cultural background negatively influenced the amount of relationship capital they had access to. A similar amount (28%) agreed their gender negatively influenced their access to relationship capital. Only roughly one in seven (15%) culturally diverse female talent strongly agreed they had access to professional networks, and 21% felt included by others in social activities in their workplace. Finally, culturally diverse women were more likely to have access to a mentor to give advice and feedback (30%) than a sponsor to help them win crucial assignments and promotions (17%) (Leonard, Mehra, & Katerberg, 2008).

Figure 2: Impact of Cultural Background on Relationship Capital for Culturally Diverse Women v non-Culturally Diverse Women

Masculine Western Leadership Model

Culturally diverse female talent reported that leadership models used for assessing emerging leaders in Australian organisations were inherently biased towards more masculine Western or 'Anglo' leadership styles. According to respondents, this was expressed to them both explicitly and implicitly. For instance, in terms of explicit messages, one respondent noted: "*I was told 'Look around you and see how everyone else looks – you'll never be anyone other than a coordinator'*". In terms of implicit messages another respondent claimed: "*There is this subtle expectation around leadership because of the visual cues you get about who leads this organisation – not looking or leading like that person has an impact.*"

Culturally diverse women described the male Western leadership model as being characterised by particular characteristics including: extroversion, self-promotion, gravitas and the ability to work 'full-time face-time', all of which mitigated against the career progression of culturally diverse women leaders. The following table captures the leadership style of culturally diverse women versus non-culturally diverse women (Hoyt & Simon, 2016) .

Figure 3: Leadership Style of Culturally Diverse Women v Non-Culturally Diverse Women

Lack   of   flexibility

Culturally diverse women spoke of the challenges of performance being assessed on the basis of the number of hours worked in the office/on-site rather than productivity, that is, a full time/ face time mentality. Participants indicated leaders were (implicitly) required to work full-time in the office/on-site – a requirement which played into the hands of people with no care-giving responsibilities or interests outside of work. As such the structural bias was clear. Our findings indicated that: accessing flexible work was extremely important for 61% of culturally diverse women, yet only 32% strongly agreed that they felt free to speak up about flexibility needs at work. The lack of genuine support for

and engagement with flexibility was discussed by many of the culturally diverse women who participated in the study. This was evident in the stigma associated with flexible work, in which flexible workers were seen as less hard working and less committed to their careers and their organisations. As captured by one of the respondents: "Leaders do not always 'walk the talk' – they keep talking about wellness but are perfectly aware that they and their staff work 65 hours a week for months, and are they're ok with that."

Accountability

Culturally diverse women commented that in many cases little more than "lip service" was paid to D&I, such that for many leaders it became a "tick and flick" exercise. As noted by one of the respondents: "Many leaders do just enough to meet the KPI – for instance that 100% of their team have been through unconscious bias training – and are then shocked when their people leader feedback says that culturally diverse women are frustrated in their careers." According to the culturally diverse women we talked with, the way to address the culture of disinterest in and lip service toward the career progression of culturally diverse women was to make leaders accountable for delivering on D&I. It was such a process of transparency and accountability that would address the systemic and perceptual barriers creating impediments to senior leadership positions for culturally diverse women. To jump start the process of radical change, culturally diverse female participants identified targets as an important enabler. They noted targets provided an incentive for leaders to challenge their mindset that culturally diverse women were 'high risk' leadership appointments. Of the merit in setting targets, one of the respondents commented that: "No culturally diverse woman wants to be promoted because of a quota but we won't get there because of merit because a white bloke from Riverview looks better than a Muslim woman from Lakemba." Overwhelmingly there was a chorus of response that Australian organisations needed to start 'counting culture' – in their workforce and their markets. With no reporting mechanism currently in place in Australia which compels organisations to track the career progress of culturally diverse women (and men), respondents noted that this needs to be overturned.

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, research on the experience of culturally diverse women in accessing leadership positions remains fragmented and small within an Australian context. More importantly very few studies take an exploratory approach to the underrepresentation of cultural diversity women in senior leadership positions. This exploratory study reveals that culturally diverse women leaders are ambitious, resilient and capable yet they remain undervalued, underleveraged and ready to move on. In response to these findings we identified six locks and six keys. This paper features insights into the systemic and perceptual barriers gathered through various modes of data, including interviews, focus groups and survey data. Importantly, the data also revealed important practical solutions to respond to these barriers which are stymieing the advancement of culturally diverse women leaders, providing lessons for scholars and practitioners. Due to space contraints our paper was limited to a presentation of the barriers.

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Figures:
Figure 1: Bias Indicators for Culturally Diverse v Non-Culturally Diverse Women
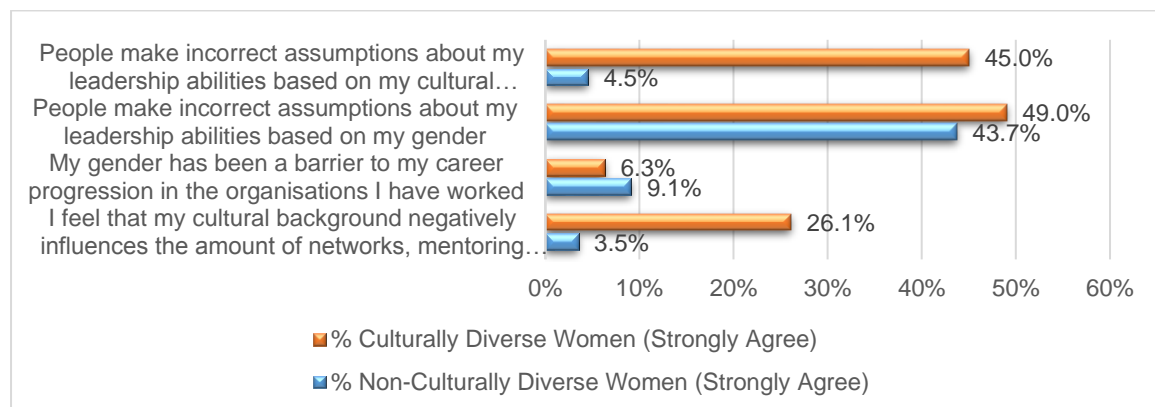
Figure 2: Impact of Cultural Background on Relationship Capital for Culturally Diverse Women v Non-Culturally Diverse Women
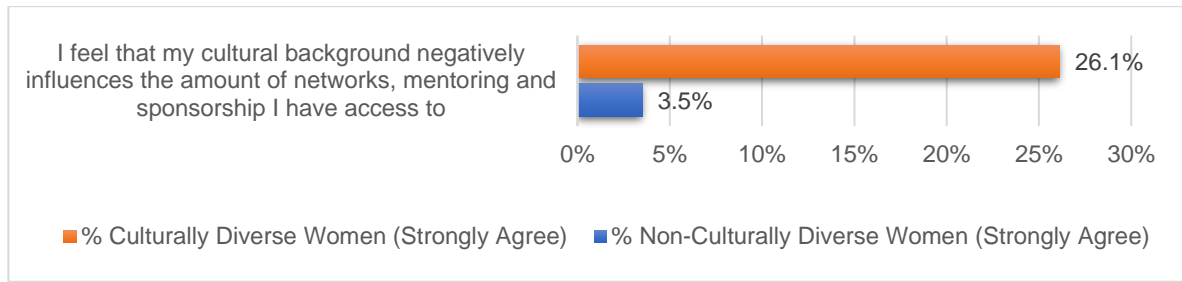

Figure 3: Leadership Style of Culturally Diverse Women v Non-Culturally Diverse Women