

# Exploring Small Business Owners' Perceptions of Equitable Workplace Practices in a Selected Area within Gauteng

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## Abstract

The UN Agenda 2030 sustainability goals 5 and 10 and the South African Labour Law prioritise gender equality and equity in the workplace. The absence of equitable workplace practices in South Africa is often assumed in small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which denies employees basic rights, respect, dignity, and social justice. This study explored small business owners' perceptions of equitable workplace practices within a selected area in Gauteng. An interpretivist philosophy and a qualitative cross-sectional research design were employed. Non-probability, purposive, and convenient sampling techniques were used to select the sample group, of which ten small business owners voluntarily participated. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data, data transcripts were thematically analysed, and ethical conduct was observed. Findings show that small business owners in the catering and accommodation industry know about employment equity and requisite practices in the workplace. Unfortunately, numerous challenges hinder them from implementing equitable workplace practices as required by especially SA labour law. These challenges include focusing on business profitability and sustainability and not on people, struggling with gender roles and capabilities, lacking adequate resources and limited in-house expertise. Most participants felt ill-prepared to implement equitable workplace practices and feared disputes. Small business owners expressed a critical need for specific training and development in employment equity practices. Study limitations and future research are also outlined.

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# 1. Introduction

The absence of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is the failure to provide employees with basic rights, respect, dignity, and social justice in the workplace (Raimi *et al.*, 2022:1). This has an impact on employees on various levels, and may result in disputes and demoralisation. Various scholars note that equity and equality are integral parts of the current workplace and are essential for businesses to thrive (McCoy, 2021:154; Westover, 2021:26). Thus, business owners and leaders need to be deliberate in ensuring that diversity, equity and inclusion tripods are fully implemented to create a space where all employees have a sense of belonging.

This research aimed to explore business owners' perceptions regarding their role in implementing equitable workplace practices per the various existing international frameworks, Acts, and declarations, for example, the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 Sustainable Developing Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2016), the Africa Union (AU) 2063 Agenda (AU, 2015), the South African Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 (*Employment Equity Act*, 1998), and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (*Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act*, 2000). The research aimed to contribute to the discourse on SMEs and managerial preparedness to deal with equity in South Africa. The problem statement and rationale are outlined below, with a focus on why it is important that workplace equity research be conducted in the context of South African SMEs.

## 1.1 Problem investigated

Studies that explored issues of equity and equitable workplace practices within developing countries concerning SMEs are limited (Chinomana, 2013:57). Despite an exhaustive search within the various databases, e.g., of North-West University (NWU) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ), few studies were found that focused on SMEs and equitable workplace practices in a developing country context such as South Africa. Chinomana (2016:230) and Gartland *et al.* (2019:9) note that most research on equitable workplace practices focused on large corporates and developed countries. In addition, while global communities and various countries have effective policies and frameworks that promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace, many organisations still struggle to adhere to these (McCoy, 2021:155). Numerous scholars highlight that employees' perception of equity deserves more research attention and empirical examination to aid the comprehensive implementation of measures to ensure equity (Chinomana, 2016:230).

The problem this study seeks to address is the lack of knowledge on how SMEs, especially small-business owners in a developing country context such as South Africa, perceive equitable employment workplace practices and their role in implementing these practices, as more research is required in this domain.

## **1.2 Research questions**

### **Primary research question:**

What are SME business owners' perceptions of and role in implementing equitable workplace practices in a developing country?

### **Secondary research questions:**

1. How aware are small business owners of the employment equity requirements (as set out by ILO, UN Agenda 2030, and South Africa's Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000?)
2. What practices are employed by SME business owners to ensure equitable workplaces?
3. What role can SME business owners play in creating equitable workplace practices?

## **2. Literature Review**

SMEs in various countries are regarded as the engine and focal point of economic growth due to the role they play in society and social and economic development (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:57; Chinomana & Dhuruo, 2016:78). Chinomana and Dhuruo (2016:77) stipulate that employees are valuable assets which play a critical role in the business and its sustained existence. Therefore, for SMEs to remain the engine of economic growth, employees must be valued. Pradhan (2017:44) notes that unfair and inequitable practices within SME workplaces are a worldwide phenomenon. These practices lead to disputes and industrial unrest. As a start, it is important that there is a literature gap concerning issues of equity and fairness in SME workspaces (Johnson, 2022:18).

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework- Justice judgement theory**

Justice judgement theory highlights that individuals care about being treated fairly and equally. The theory relates to both distribution and the procedures followed. The distribution rule is based on the belief that everything should be distributed fairly based on criteria. The procedural rule states that everything should be done according to certain procedures (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:58). According to Chinomana and Chinomana (2013:58), justice judgement theory "assumes that an individual's perception of fairness is based on justice rules". This relates to the fact that everything is based on the rule of justice, which considers the fair distribution and procedures followed.

Justice theory includes three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Raimi *et al.*, (2022:6) and Chinomana and Chinomana (2013:58) state that distributive justice is a moral principle whereby companies are obligated to share and distribute resources and opportunities equally and equitably, based on employees' contribution. As cited by Raimi *et al.*, (2022:6), Colquitt states: "Procedural justice is a moral principle that obligates organisations to use the fair procedure to determine how to appropriate and distribute resources and opportunities to all organisational members". Lastly, interactional justice has two aspects, interpersonal and informational justice. Both focus on employees being treated with dignity, respect, honour, and politeness when procedures and policies are implemented. Informational justice concerns how employees are provided with information (Raimi *et al.*, 2022:6).

## **2.2 The nature of SMEs in South Africa**

Chinomona (2016:231) states that depending on the country, SMEs are defined based on criteria related to the number of employees, total net assets/sales, and investment level. Gartland *et al.*, (2019:9) note that 99% of European enterprises are classified as SMEs, creating 66% of employment in the labour market. In some African countries, an SME is classified as such if it has a turnover below R12 499 800.00; however, in South Africa, the classification is outlined by the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC).

In South Africa, the National Small Business Act 102 of 1996 defines a "small business" as "a separate and distinct business entity, including 35 cooperative enterprises and non-governmental organisations, managed by one owner or more, including its branches or subsidiaries, if any, is predominantly carried on in any sector or subsector of the economy" (Bureau for Economic Research [BER], 2016:5). The National Small Business Act 102 of 1996 stipulates that SMEs range from micro- to medium-sized family enterprises that satisfy the criteria. In addition, a report by the DTIC in 2008, as cited by the BER (2016:5), states that SMEs include formally registered, informal, and non-VAT-registered enterprises. Lastly, small businesses include street trading, home-based business, and businesses less likely to employ personnel.

SMEs are deemed to contribute to countries' gross domestic income (GDI) and gross domestic product (GDP). Chinomona (2016:230) describes SMEs as the primary engines driving economic growth and significantly contributing to overall employment. Despite being contributors to economic drive, SMEs are faced with a lack of resources and numerous challenges that hinder maximum growth and their implementation of certain policies that promote equity and non-discrimination (Chinomona, 2016:230; Hlebela, 2020:25; Seseni & Mbohwa, 2018:2572; Chinomana & Dhuruo, 2016:77; Hollenstein, 2005:431).

Unlike big businesses and corporates, SMEs face challenges that continuously impede their growth (Chinomona & Dhuruo, 2016:78). Hollenstein (2005:431) notes that SMEs experience many resource

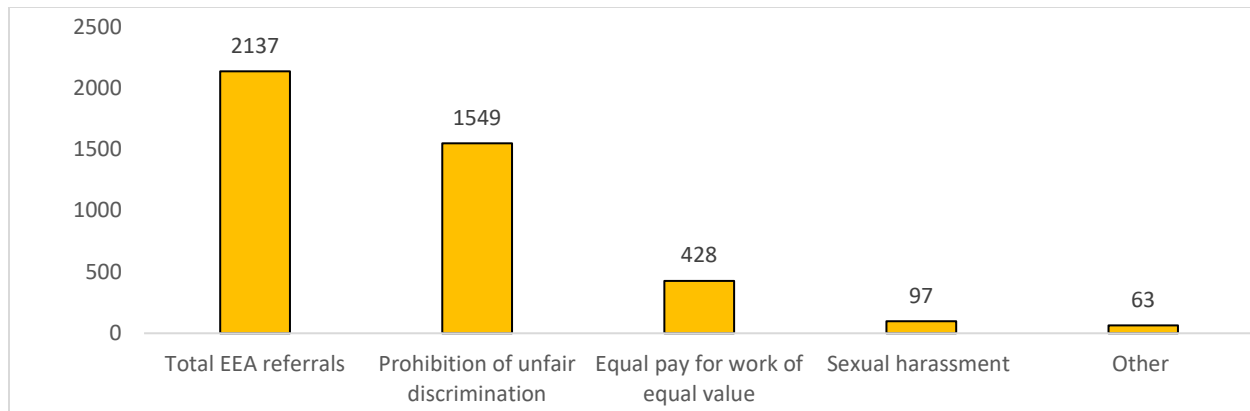
constraints concerning finance, human resources, and management, amongst others. SMEs lack funding because “most funding institutions are sceptical about financing Small and Medium Enterprises” (Seseni & Mbohwa, 2018:2575). In addition, most SMEs have limited access to finance and credit (BER, 2016:7). Some challenges highlighted around Latin American SMEs include the lack of knowledge, training, and technology to assist these entities in completing projects (Mendoza *et al.*, 2020). Hlebel (2020:25), Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2572), Chinomona (2016:231), and the BER (2016:10) state that SMEs in South Africa are faced with similar challenges, which limit their growth. Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2572) found that the lack of highly skilled employees and the owners’ lack of skills and resources are the main constraints.

Lagabrielle *et al.*, (2021:3) and the BER (2016:9) highlight the lack of in-house expertise contributing to SMEs failing to implement employment procedures and policies. Most SMEs do not have formalised operations; they lack infrastructure, have few organisational procedures, and tend to implement short-term strategies (Ericson *et al.*, 2020; Seseni & Mbohwa 2018:2576; Lagabrielle *et al.*, 2021:2; BER, 2016:5). Therefore, insufficient economic resources impede SMEs’ growth and their response to social and relational work issues (Lagabrielle *et al.*, 2021:2). Furthermore, SMEs are encumbered with onerous labour laws. While these laws are meant to act as a regulatory tool to create fairness within the workplace, small businesses struggle to afford compliance and ultimately lay off workers (BER, 2016:8). Overall, the challenges SMEs face have a damaging effect on their survival and growth thereof.

Cant and Wild, as cited by Nieuwenhuizen (2019:668), state that the South African government uses legislation such as the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 to support and guide businesses in their operations. However, the same policies are seen as a hindrance to business success. Nieuwenhuizen (2019:666) notes that the existing regulatory bodies and legislation are a challenge for most small businesses, making start-up businesses unsustainable. It has been suggested that the government reduce regulatory constraints preventing SMEs from growing (Nieuwenhuizen, 2019:670).

### **2.3 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging**

El-Amin (2022:1) and Nwahanye and Baninla (2021:80) posit that diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging improve organisational performance. When workplace equity rules are violated, it harms employees’ organisational commitment (Chinomana & Dhuruo, 2016:90). Thus, business owners must remove barriers that hinder equity and consistently implement equitable workplace practices. The cases outlined below illustrate that equity and inclusion have not yet been achieved in the South African workplace. Such cases are often referred to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) for arbitration. Graph 1 details the type of discrimination and the number of cases for each that were referred to the CCMA by the Commission for Employment Equity (CCE) from March 2020 to February 2021.



Graph 1: Cases and ground of cases referred to the CCMA from March 2020 to February 2021

Source: CEE (2021:12)

## 2.4 Equity and equality

Equality means sameness — every individual gets the same thing (Daza *et al.*, 2021:3). Equity is confused with equal pay for equal work, yet it goes beyond this notion (McCoy, 2021:153). Equity refers to equality in outcomes —all employees are on the same footing. Employment equity and equality are integral to the success of a business (McCoy, 2021:154; Westover, 2021:26). When employees are treated equitably and fairly and feel a sense of belonging in a company, it positively impacts their productivity. Westover’s (2021:26) study, based in the USA, showed that a sense of belonging contributed to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days. The result was that a single company saved more than US\$52 million annually (Westover, 2021:26). However, despite the need to implement equitable practices within the workplace, some organisations do not understand their importance until it is tied to profit and reputation (Fletcher & Halter, 2020:30). Raimi *et al.*, (2022:1) highlights that the absence of the tripod of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace means the denial of rights and social justice and leads to a lack of human dignity.

Equity, equality, and inequality can be measured in various ways, such as equal opportunities in education and employment or income distribution (Riddell *et al.*, 2009:778; Johnson, 2022:21). Various SMEs in Europe studied the underlying issues that contributed to inequalities. Such inequalities can be seen in automation replacing low-skilled employees versus skilled individuals (Riddell *et al.*, 2009:782). Chinomana and Chinomana (2013:57) looked at how perceptions of equity and commitment affect business turnover in multiple ways; the findings highlighted that those perceptions of unfair treatment negatively affected the organisation’s output. The World Economic Forum (2020:1) also highlights the importance of having policies and practices that ensure inclusion, equity, and fair access to opportunities within the workplace.

Equality is the end goal of effective diversity, equity, and inclusion programmes. In addition, as cited by Raimi *et al.*, (2022:5), Hagman stipulates that equity practices need to accommodate equality dimensions such as access and achievement-defined access to equal tools of trade. Kinicki and Kreitner, as cited by Chinomona and Dhuruo (2016:80), define equity as a perception that individuals are being treated fairly in various spaces, including the fairness of job outcomes. Chin and Chien, as cited by Bernstein *et al.*, (2019:396), state that equity is the “absence of systemic disparities between groups with different levels of underlying social advantages/disadvantages that is wealth, power or prestige”. Daza *et al.*, (2021:3), Fox (2022:27), and Owa (2022:28) note that equity means fairness, which means that everyone should have access to the same opportunities.

Bernstein *et al.*, (2019:395) note that “optimal allocation also provides equity, serving the ends of social justice and good business ethics and producing effective incentives for social development”. Thus, it is evident that businesses should seek to eradicate all unfair and unjust practices within the workplace. Furthermore, workplace organisational politics have negative consequences for overall business outcomes. Work politics are known to breed negative perceptions concerning equity (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:57). Unfortunately, organisational politics goes against the spirit of justice theory, which notes that the perception of fairness is based on justice rules.

Conversely, equality means sameness; thus, every individual gets the same thing (Daza *et al.*, 2021:3). Gender equality and equity remain a challenge in various societal spaces. Despite the efforts made by corporates to achieve balance, there is a long road ahead that still needs to be travelled to achieve the transformation. Scholars highlight that women are still segregated in society and the workplace and are usually excluded from senior and decision-making positions (Gartland *et al.*, 2019:9). According to Hoyt and Murphy, as cited by Gartland *et al.* (2019:9), women are faced with stereotyping that continues to negate their investment in education and efforts to achieve career progress. Gender discrimination is further evident in the gender pay gap (Westover, 2021:27). Although numerous companies have gender-related equality initiatives, they lack strategies to direct critical imperatives in achieving gender equity and equality (Fletcher & Halter, 2020:30).

### **1.5 Business owner’s role/ Recommendations to improve equitable work practices**

Various studies provide recommendations that business leaders and managers should implement to ensure equitable practices at work. Business owners and managers must create a participative and cooperative environment amongst staff members to ensure that individuals benefit from equity, leading to organisational commitment (Chinomona, 2016:237). In addition, business owners are encouraged to diversify incentives such as salary increments, promotions, and performance bonuses as a way to promote equity within their business (Chinomona, 2016:237; Chinomana & Dhuruo, 2016:77).

Policies within the workplace are yet another vital tool that should be designed and implemented to address workplace equity, diversity, and non-discrimination practices (McCoy, 2021:156). In addition, even though policies are in place, businesses must ensure equality and fairness in recruitment and promotion (McCoy, 2021:156). According to McCoy (2021:170), although workplaces offer training to employees concerning diversity, inclusions, and anti-harassment, most of the training is offered during the first week of orientation. Organisations should offer continuous training workshops to address cultural competence, unconscious bias, civility, and workplace sensitivity (McCoy, 2021:170; Bohonos & Sisco, 2021:95). Business leaders and owners must create safe environments to allow trust and openness and ensure respect, which will encourage employees to share their ideas (Westover, 2021:25).

Business owners and leaders must take note of the HR practitioners' role in creating fair and equitable workspaces (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:64). El-Amin (2022:2) states that HR functions should be held accountable for not implementing equitable workplace practices. Chinomana and Dhuruo (2016:78) note that if HR issues are neglected, employees may feel insecure, further reducing their perceived equity levels. SMEs struggle to employ best practices in HR management (Pradhan, 2017:45), which requires attention. Therefore, SMEs should capacitate HR functions within their business. In addition, business leaders and owners are encouraged to promote increased cooperation and team spirit amongst employees to create an inclusive and equitable environment for all (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:64).

Business leaders or owners should pay special attention to how low equity levels, low organisational commitment and organisational behaviours affect their business. Every business owner must be sensitive to and acquaint themselves with workplace equity, fairness, and justice and adopt these in practice (Chinomana & Dhuruo, 2016:91). Daza *et al.*, (2021:4), Owa (2022:38), and El-Amin (2022:3) recommend the following practices: No-tolerance policy to hostile work environments, establish a feeling of belonging, fairness to all employees and offer equal growth opportunities, promote and communicate diversity, inclusion, and equity at all levels of the organisation.

## **1.6 Effects of inequitable and unfair workplaces**

Inequitable workplace practices have numerous consequences for the staff and how companies excel in the long run. Firstly, due to the unfair and unjust perceptions experienced by employees results in staff members being unlikely to stay in such an organisation permanently (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:58). In addition, organisational politics that are perceived to be unfair and unjust result in employees withdrawing physically or psychologically from their work, resulting in a resignation (Chinomana & Chinomana, 2013:58). Chinomana and Dhuruo (2016:81) adds that whenever employees experience a ratio of unequal, unfair practices and under-rewarded, that results in tension and leads to negative consequences that affect



the functioning of the business. Pradhan (2017:44) stipulates that unfair and inequalities treatment results in industrial unrest and affect workplace harmony, similar to what has been outlined by other scholars.

It is evident that inequitable, unfair, and hostile workplaces negatively impact various levels. El-Amin (2022:1) states that hostile workplaces negatively affect profitability and organisational culture. Furthermore, Fox (2022:24) and Owa (2022:29) posit that workplaces that implement diverse and equitable workplaces reap improved organisational performance. Bonazzo and Wong, as cited by Raimi *et al.*, (2022:2), state that “workplaces without equity create a breeding ground for three hydra monsters which results, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination”. Therefore, business owners and leaders should be mindful of such effects on their businesses.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research paradigm/philosophy**

The interpretivist paradigm was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand people`s experiences (Wagner *et al.*, 2012:56). Ormston *et al.*, as cited by O`Reilly and Kiyimba (2015:12), explain that interpretivism “emphasises the importance of interpretation as well as observation in attempts to understand the social world”.

#### **3.2 Research Approach and Design**

An inductive qualitative approach ensuring an in-depth exploration of the experiences and views of participants was followed (Bryman *et al.*, 2014:41; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:181). The choice of a qualitative approach was appropriate, as the present researchers sought to explore SME business owners` perceptions and managerial roles in implementing equitable workplace practices. The research design was qualitative cross-sectional; thus, data were collected at a single point in time. Furthermore, the strategy allows the researcher to be descriptive or interpretative (Fouche *et al.*, 2021:303).

#### **3.3 Population and sample**

The research population was located within Gauteng. A non-probability, convenience and purposive sampling method was utilised since it allowed the researcher to recruit participants when they are found with a direct purpose (Jackson, 2015:121; Bryman *et al.*, 2014:185). A total of 10 interviews were successfully conducted by volunteering small business owners in the hospitality industry, when data saturation was observed.

### 3.4 Data collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via an online platform - Microsoft Teams. An interview guide was used, containing semi-structured and open-ended questions, to guide the interviews and ensure the discussions remained relevant to the topic under study (Jackson, 2015:105). The interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed for analysis.

### 3.5 Data coding and analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, which involves a “general approach that involves identifying themes or patterns in data” (Wagner *et al.*, 2012:231). Furthermore, the tool chosen was flexible and allowed the researcher to focus on identifying and analysing themes (Bryman *et al.*, 2014:350). The transcripts were coded manually, following the steps recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018:194).

## 4. Results and Findings

Several themes and sub-themes emerged from the data analysis of the interview transcripts, keeping the primary research question in mind. The primary research question was: *What are SME Business owners' perceptions of and role in implementing equitable workplace practices in a developing country context?*

### 4.1 The themes and sub-themes identified are presented and discussed below.

Each theme and sub-themes are discussed together with supporting quotes from the transcripts and then related to existing literature. Table 1 below lists the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

**Table 1: Key themes and sub-themes**

<b>EMERGING KEY THEMES</b>	<b>SUB-THEME</b>
<b>1. Defining and understanding the concept of equity and equitable workplace practices</b>	a. Equity as fairness b. Equal opportunities
<b>2. Implementation of equitable workplace practices and preparedness</b>	a. Mechanisms to implement equity b. Lack of adequate skills to implement equity
<b>3. Challenges hindering the implementation of equitable workplace practices</b>	a. Focus on profitability and business sustainability b. Gender roles and capabilities c. Lack of adequate resources
<b>4. Knowledge of Acts, policies, and frameworks, and contribution to regional labour bodies</b>	a. Lack of awareness regarding Acts and policies b. Lack of contribution towards international and regional labour structures
<b>5. Business owner's role and responsibilities</b>	a. Promote equity b. Empower employees

#### **4.1.1 Defining and understanding the concept of equity and equitable workplace practices**

When the participants were asked to outline their understanding of equity within their business and workplace, numerous responses were provided, resulting in the themes outlined below. Seven participants outlined that they perceived equity as fairness, and five participants outlined that they perceived equity as equal opportunities.

##### **Sub-theme 2a: Equity as fairness**

The majority of participants outlined that they understood equity within the workplace as an element of fairness that is due to all employees, irrespective of who they are and where they came from. It is evident that participants were aware of what it means to be equitable in treating their employees and ensuring that all staff members are treated fairly. The finding is supported by the following verbatim quotations from participants' interview transcripts.

“My understanding of equity in our business is about fairness for all and not having to look at issues of gender or race, but treating everyone in a fair manner” (Participant 3).

“In my understanding, equity means that everyone needs to be treated with the same amount of fairness. And there has to be consistency in how the human resources policies and procedures, for instance, get applied across the board” (Participant 4).

“I believe it speaks more about fairness and understanding that each person is an individual, has their own needs and capabilities and need to be accommodated” (Participant 10).

Chinomona and Dhuruo (2016:80) and Daza *et al.*, (2021:3) note that equity means that all individuals within the workplace environment are treated with fairness. It is evident that the manager-owners of organisations under study had an idea of what equity means at a high level. They noted that equity means the absence of systemic disparities between social groups, such as gender and race, which is aligned with the literature (Bernstein *et al.*, 2019:396).

##### **Sub-theme 2b: Equal opportunities**

Apart from equity being defined as fairness, five participants added that equity, for them, meant giving equal opportunities to all employees in the workplace. Furthermore, it was outlined that equal opportunities meant paying special attention to previously disadvantaged groups in ensuring equal opportunities. The following *quotations support the finding*.

“I have a feeling that equity means giving equal opportunities to people of different races, and that, for me, would be equity” (Participant 1).

“Equity includes giving each and everyone the same opportunity in the same environment, so that nobody feels jeopardised, despite their roles at an entry-level or as a senior person” (Participant 3).

“Equity, for me, in summary, equity is giving opportunities to previously unprivileged people. It means having processes and policies that ensure everyone is given equal opportunities” (Participant 5).

Participants indicated that equity entails affording everyone the same opportunity in the workplace environment, a view that is supported by Fox (2022:27) and Owa (2022:28). In addition, Chin and Chien, as cited by Bernstein *et al.*, (2019:396), support the idea that there is a need to take special note of previously underprivileged groups in addressing disparities. This requires that business owners be aware of historic disparities that continue to hinder the provision of equal opportunities and that they implement redress processes. However, they noted that others should not be disadvantaged in promoting equity.

#### **4.1.2 Implementation of equitable workplace practices and preparedness**

Participants were asked to describe the mechanisms they utilised to promote equity in their workplace. Furthermore, they were asked whether they were sufficiently prepared to respond to and implement equitable work practices. The emergent sub-themes are outlined below. Six participants stated that they had some mechanisms in place to implement equity. Eight participants felt that they lacked the skills to implement equitable workplace practices.

##### **Sub-theme 2a: Mechanisms to implement equity**

Business owners should employ mechanisms and procedures to ensure that their work environment is equitable. When participants were asked to share some of the mechanisms and procedures, they used to promote equity, the majority mentioned that they had various mechanisms in place. Some of the mechanisms mentioned were the use of Acts and policies, open communication, intentional recruitment, and the use of independent companies to monitor their equity practices. However, a few participants mentioned that they did not have any specific mechanism or formal procedures besides treating their staff members as family members, which was influenced by the size of the business. The following quotes support this sub-theme.

“My mechanism includes incorporating policy, open communication, and providing some coaching. Unfortunately, it does bring about a little bit more strain towards me as an employer, but I do try to offer those services through policy. (Participant 10).

“One critical mechanism we have in place is a labour lawyer on retainer. So, this labour lawyer is consulted almost every second day on how to go about a certain issue concerning the workplace.

In addition, we also have another company on a retainer that provides various services such as training, monitoring and evaluating employment equity (EE). Once a year, the contracted company reports to the Department [of Labour] on our behalf as a business” (Participant 4).

“Applying the sort of basic conditions of employment to make sure that everyone is treated fairly. If you put in more hours, you will be paid more” (Participant 6).

Although some participants did not have formalised mechanisms and procedures in place, strategies were utilised to promote a sense of belonging and encourage fairness. The literature illustrates that implementable policies are the cornerstone in promoting social justice and creating stability, industry harmony, and peaceful co-existence and that governance legislation should be applied to all employees fairly (Owa, 2022:39). In this regard, Daza *et al.*, (2021:5) note that business owners must communicate with their staff concerning issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at various levels, so that individuals understand the practices.

### **Sub-theme 2b: Lack of adequate skills to implement equity**

Business owners who wish to implement and promote equity within their organisation may require the skills of an HR practitioner. One sub-theme that emerged was *the lack of adequate skills and preparedness to implement equitable workplace practices*. When participants were asked whether they felt they were adequately prepared to respond to and implement equitable practices, the majority indicated that they did not feel adequately prepared. Some participants tried to apply the knowledge they had gathered throughout their life. This sub-theme is supported by the quotations below.

“No, I do not think I am adequately prepared. I am not even knowledgeable about what equity requirements are in the workplace.” (Participant 7).

“The simple answer is no. Definitely not prepared.” (Participant 5).

“I am not prepared and fully knowledgeable. Where I am now, getting some support actually to implement more equitable work practices would come in handy” (Participant 4).

The findings show that participants are not well prepared to implement equitable workplace practices. Numerous scholars have highlighted that most small businesses face challenges that hinder them from fully implementing fair and equitable practices. Mendoza *et al.*, (2020) posit that most business owners lack knowledge and training on various imperatives concerning business and staffing. Lagabrielle *et al.*, (2021:3) and the BER (2016:9) note that the lack of in-house expertise in this domain greatly impacts organisations’ progression.

### **4.1.3 Challenges hindering the implementation of equitable workplace practices**

Small businesses face numerous challenges that hinder the implementation of equitable workplace practices. Six participants noted that they are focused on profitability and business sustainability. Five participants stated that gender roles and capabilities hindered them from implementing equitable workplace practices. Six participants noted that inadequate resources limited the implementation of equitable workplace practices.

#### **Sub-theme 3a: Focus on profitability and business sustainability**

Small businesses aim to make a profit, become sustainable, and later compete with major corporations. However, such a profit mindset may become the ultimate goal, to the exclusion of all else. When participants were asked to highlight some of the limiting issues hindering them from implementing equitable practices, they indicated the goal of being profitable and sustainable. Most participants mentioned that their major concern was making money; thus, equity issues were not seen as a priority. Supporting quotations are provided below.

“SMEs are struggling to make their own profit for survival. So, it is so difficult that you really need to look at the bigger picture. All you want is to have your profit so that your business can be sustainable” (Participant 3).

“To be quite honest, it is mainly when you are at a point where you are now comparing productivity and profitability. Whether you should hire a certain type of individuals or whether you should focus on productivity cost, and I am only a start-up, so I’m very new to the business; thus, my focus is to make money” (Participant 7).

“I think it is one of those common challenges that one experience in small businesses-it is all about getting out there and making money to sustain the business.” (Participant 6).

Due to the ultimate goal being to make a profit and sustain the business, the majority of business owners lose track of implementing equitable workplace practices. They aim to make money first and make the business sustainable. They indicated that they would worry about compliance issues later. Ericson *et al.*, (2020), Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2576), Lagabrielle *et al.*, (2021:2), and the BER (2016:5) note that a lack of infrastructure and insufficient economic resources hinder SMEs from fully implementing certain strategies, such as major corporations would do. Furthermore, SME owners find it difficult to get financial assistance and credit from banks, which prohibits them from implementing projects per the global and national labour frameworks (BER, 2016:7).

### **Sub-theme 3b: Gender roles and capabilities**

Participants noted difficulties concerning gender roles and capabilities. This was seen as a major limiting theme since business owners were caught between a rock and a hard place concerning employing a certain gender over the other. This sub-theme is closely linked to profitability and business sustainability, as participants indicated that they have to choose between promoting equity and access for previously disadvantaged groups, such as women, and profit. Most participants perceived men as stronger than women and indicated that they thus prefer to employ men if the job requires physical strength. Refer to below for the direct participant's quotations.

“Starting with gender equality in my personnel, business, and management, I did not have the chance to implement that because of the nature of the business that I am in. I strongly feel that women were very disadvantaged, even in my employment” (Participant 3).

“I am limited by the nature of the job that we do. So, I have mentioned to you that we have multiple businesses. So, in other forms of businesses that we do, it is easy; you can prioritise and put women first. But we also have labour-intensive functions in the business. So, with regards to those, it really becomes challenging for women to cope with the long hours and with the hard work, so, automatically, we gravitate towards taking men for that kind of job” (Participant 5).

“We wish to implement equity like it is expected, but we fail at some point because, for example, we have more male employees than female. It is because most of our females, they cannot cope, they can't manage with the type of work that we do” (Participant 9).

Although most participants indicated that they would like to implement equitable practices and promote equity, especially regarding gender, they felt that their businesses require physical capabilities typically possessed by men. However, every SME business has a moral and legal obligation to ensure that all employees, irrespective of race, gender, age, or disability, have equal access to opportunities (World Economic Forum 2020:2; Raimi *et al.*, 2022:3). This is further supported by the various South African Acts in place such as the Employment Equity Act and regulations, Act 55 of 1998, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 1997, which obligate business owners to eliminate employment barriers that affect individuals from designated groups.

According to Hoyt and Murphy, as cited by Gartland *et al.* (2019:9), women are faced with stereotype threats that continue to hamper their career progress, evident in the gender pay gap and underrepresentation (Westover, 2021:27). Even though numerous companies have a gender-related initiative, they lack strategies to achieve critical imperatives in achieving gender equity and equality (Fletcher & Halter,

2020:30). Unfortunately, SMEs under the study do not have sufficient financial resources to eliminate the various barriers to achieving equity and inclusion, a finding that is supported by literature on SMEs (Lagabrielle *et al.*, 2021:2; BER, 2016:5). Unless government puts stricter measures in place to regulate compliance with equity legislation by SMEs, these enterprises will remain untransformed.

### **Sub-theme 3c: Lack of adequate resources**

A lack of resources was identified as a challenge and limiting factor in implementing equitable work practices, which is the main reason why SMEs fail. Most participants indicated that the lack of financing, which then leads to the absence of an HR practitioner, negatively impacts the implementation of equitable workplace practices. This is highlighted through direct quotations from the participants.

“I think, mainly, it will be finance. The company has to get to the point where, you know, that there is enough finance that is dedicated to training individuals” (Participant 7).

“There is something that we are working on, and that needs money. I think that the key resource is money to enable us to access a better space to work in, so that we can ensure that everyone is well accommodated and has access to everything they need” (Participant 10).

“I am comprehending that I would need to have someone that is probably an HR person that understands everything HR-related, because I struggled a lot. I mean, the majority of our employees are unionised. HR, so definitely, to answer your question, I would like to see the business at a stage where we have a fully functioning HR department that will then develop those policies that we need for the business, including those equity policies that we can then adhere to.” (Participant 5).

The majority of the participants indicated that inadequate financial resources prevent them from fully implementing equitable workplace practices, despite knowing that they have a responsibility to do so. The BER (2016:7) notes that SMEs have limited access to financial resources, which has a devastating impact on their operations. Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2575) note that this inadequate funding is due to funding institutions being sceptical of financing SMEs due to these enterprises' high failure rate. Therefore, this becomes a major issue, despite business owners wanting to do more for their employees. Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2572), Lagabrielle *et al.* (2021:3), and the BER (2016:9) found that the lack of highly skilled employees and in-house HR expertise contributes to SMEs not adhering to legal processes and implementing equitable practices.



#### **4.1.4 Knowledge of Acts, policies, frameworks and contribution to international and regional labour bodies**

Acts, policies, and frameworks guide SME owners in ensuring workplace equity and healthy working environments. Participants were asked to indicate the Acts and policies they adhered to in their enterprises. Seven participants indicated that they were not knowledgeable regarding Acts and policies, and seven participants did not know how their SME contributed to international and regional structures advocating equity.

##### **Sub-theme 4a: Lack of awareness regarding Acts and policies**

The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not adhering to any Acts or policies with regard to equitable workplace practices. A few indicated that they adhered to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (RSA, 1997). The majority indicated that they are not knowledgeable regarding the Acts, policies, and frameworks they need to comply with regarding employment equity and related matters.

“I do not know what the policies are. We actually do not know anything about it. So, that is the answer I need to give you” (Participant 1).

“Our company, at the moment, does not really have policies on equity, and for that reason, we are not complying with equity policies, and I do not think we are also expected to comply with those policies and Acts” (Participant 7).

“I do not have a specific policy in place to respond to issues of equity within the workplace” (Participant 9).

The findings outline that the majority of participants do not think they are complying with existing Acts, policies, and frameworks with regard to equitable workplace practices. Some participants were not even aware of the legislation and the need to comply. Hlebelá (2020:25), Seseni and Mbohwa (2018:2572), Chinomona (2016:231), and the BER (2016:10) note that business owners’ lack of knowledge and training hampers their compliance with legislation. Despite multiple regulatory mandates, participants indicated that they do not think they need to comply with such Acts, as their enterprises are small. The Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998:29 stipulates that, should entities be found to not comply, the Director-General can enforce measures to ensure that the business complies before the matter is escalated to the Labour Court.

##### **Sub-theme 4b: Lack of contribution towards international and regional structures**

When participants were asked to outline whether their business was contributing towards the international (ILO, SDG 2030), regional (AU Agenda 2063), and national frameworks developed to address equity issues, the majority were not aware of the existence of such existing bodies or frameworks. Despite the

business owners contributing to such international, regional and national frameworks, they still do not have any knowledge regarding their contribution. The participant's direct quotations are outlined below.

“To be quite honest, I do not think my organisation is contributing towards any of these bodies, your SDG 2030 and AU mainly, because we are a small business and, right now, we are just focusing on creating a sustainable business” (Participant 7).

“No, I do not think I am doing that. I do not think I have reached that level of me qualifying to contribute. My business has not reached that level as much as I wish to grow it and then be able to contribute to regional, national and global” (Participant 9).

“I am not sure whether my business is contributing or not, but I also do not know anything about the SDGs and AU things” (Participant 8).

The research findings outline that most participants did not know of the existence of the various bodies that promote social justice and equity in the workplace. Small businesses are already contributing somewhat to the various bodies; unfortunately, due to the lack of knowledge concerning these bodies and their mandates, they feel that their businesses are not at a level where they feel they are contributing effectively. Yet again, Lagabrielle *et al.* (2021:3) and the BER (2016:9) also note the lack of understanding of compliance of SMEs and their failure to commit to the SDGs and comply with international (ILO, SDG 2030), regional (AU Agenda 2063), and national legislation regarding equity and non-discriminatory practices.

## **5. Conclusion on Key Findings**

The study has achieved the primary and secondary objectives. The findings highlight SME business owners' perceptions regarding equitable workplace practices. Firstly, most participants highlighted that equity was seen as fairness and affording all employees equal opportunities. In addition, the participants outlined a need to take note of previously disadvantaged socially constructed groups, such as women, and ensure that they are given equal access.

Secondly, regarding complying with the regulatory mandates of international and regional bodies, the findings highlight that most participants are unaware of the various Acts and frameworks that require them to implement equitable work practices. Some participants felt they were not complying with the statutory regulations, while others were not aware of these regulations. In addition, despite SMEs contributing towards international and regional bodies and frameworks such as (ILO, SDGs 2030, AU 2063, etc.) the majority of participants did not think their business was contributing anything to such platforms. Participants were also unaware of international and regional regulatory bodies' guidelines on equity or the SDGs. They are, therefore, not knowledgeable regarding their mandates to promote access, inclusion, and equity for all. For the few participants who were knowledgeable about a few bodies and frameworks, this

was influenced by either their educational background in Business or HR or their work experience, which was in line with such regulatory bodies.

Thirdly, concerning implementing workplace equity practices and preparedness, most participants indicated that they utilised various methods or mechanisms, ranging from policies and communication to fair procedures during recruitment. Most of the business owners noted that they felt they were not adequately prepared or skilled to implement equitable workplace practices; thus, it hinders them from fully responding to issues of equity within their business as much as they would like.

Most participants stated that they were focused entirely on generating a profit and ensuring that their business was sustainable; thus, issues of equity and equitable workplace practices were not a priority. Furthermore, despite the participants being aware that they are supposed to promote gender equity, the majority indicated that they preferred to employ men due to the nature of their business. In addition, the majority of participants highlighted the lack of adequate resources, such as financing and infrastructure, as yet another limitation in implementing equitable workplace practices. Therefore, their major focus was to ensure they generate profit and sustain their business without prioritising other related mandates like fairness and equity.

Lastly, the majority of participants felt that they had an obligation and responsibility to ensure that they put in place measures to implement equitable practices within their businesses. Furthermore, some participants felt that it was their responsibility to empower their employees through skills training and to afford their employees a space where they feel empowered to talk about issues regarding equity and discrimination. Some participants indicated that, despite resource limitations, some of the required activities were not currently given attention, but they felt a need to start introducing policies and procedures to promote equity.

## **6. Managerial Implications**

SME business owners should note that while business profitability and sustainability are critical, employers should also create a workplace that considers employees and how they are treated and affords a sense of belonging. Business owners should prioritise equity and equitable workplace practices and procedures despite their limited resources and challenges. This will require SME business owners to commit to creating fair and inclusive spaces for all their employees. Furthermore, business owners have to take responsibility for educating themselves and seek assistance through networks or organisations that promote equity and social justice in the workplace. In addition, business owners should seek guidance from experts in the field.

*Business level:* Business owners need to be informed about equity and equitable workplace practices and policies and the importance of compliance.

*Governmental support:* It is evident through the findings that the majority of participants are not exposed to workplace practices that promote equity as required by the Acts, such as EE. Therefore, the government should ensure that they provide business owners with training on inclusive and equitable workplace practices and compliance with existing regulations. However, business owners should explore implementation methods that are cost-effective or available free of charge.

## **7. Limitations and Future Research**

The current study has some limitations. The small sample could have impacted the richness of the data and, therefore, the study's findings. This is a qualitative study, and the findings cannot be generalised to the population. Although the research study is being conducted in a selected area of Gauteng, the data findings cannot be generalised or applied to the entire region of Gauteng and the rest of SA. In addition, some participants may have provided socially desirable answers, without them actually implementing it, as they might fear possible retribution due to legislative requirements.

The recommendations for future studies are as follows:

- Explore the perceptions of employees or workers concerning workplace equity within SMEs.
- Investigate how the government could assist SME owners in implementing equitable workplace practices in their businesses.
- Compare how SME owners in rural and urban areas understand and implement equity in their enterprises.

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