



## 1. Introduction

Despite progress in recent decades to bring about gender equality in the workplace, Parker (2015) highlighted that women continue to bear a heavier burden when it comes to balancing work and family. Many researchers across the world have tried to figure out why this is so, and in many instances, they have come up with little being “*motherhood and glass ceiling*” to be a significant contributor to women chartered accountants' underrepresentation at the partnership level (Klaile, 2013; Cimirotic *et al.*, 2017). Several scholars from around the world have identified that women chartered accountants showed more preferences towards family, females took a significantly larger share of household and childcare duties, and were more likely to face a temporary career slowdown after giving birth to children (Dambrin and Lambert, 2016).

Krabia-Kapardis and Zopiatis (2019) voiced arguments against motherhood being a significant contributor to the lowly representation of female Chartered Accountants (CAs) in senior management. The authors argued that the prohibiting factor creating the barrier was not only motherhood, but the cultural attitudes and expectations of men imposed on mothers, degree of stress faced by women and the glass ceiling concept. In an effort to reconcile the breadwinner and the role of the homemaker, women are faced with high job demands and time constraints (Krabia-Kapardis and Zopiatis, 2019).

The underrepresentation of women in senior management roles is a global problem as shown by figures recorded in many countries. In the year 2013, females made up 10.3% of the board of directors in 67 countries (Aquilera and Lorenz, 2014). In 2016 females made upto 17% of the executive committee and 32% of the corporate board of corporations in western Europe's major markets (Devillard *et al.*, 2016). According to the 2017 Grant Thornton International Business Report, 34% of the 5500 companies surveyed in 36 economies had no female in senior management positions (Grant Thornton, 2017). According to Groenewald (2019), gender and society have argued that in most countries women live in a male-dominated society, characterized by a range of social attitudes and practices aimed at confining them to an inferior socioeconomic condition, dependent on the male for her welfare. As reported in Ernest and Young's (2021) report, it was shown that out of 830 new partners only 34% were women CAs and this was the only highest number recorded ever compared to the previous years.

In view of the underrepresentation of females in the accounting profession, barriers to their progress in the profession have been conducted to identify obstacles to their advancement in the profession. According to Balgiu (2012), males perceived that females lack technical abilities, set their goals too low, do not take risks, and have low self-confidence and ambitions. The gender inequality in audit companies has also drawn a lot of scrutiny and critique in the literature, as has their failure to attract women to higher positions. Despite the fact that more women graduate from accounting schools each year than men, research has shown for decades that women are underrepresented in auditing (Gammie *et al.*, 2017), and the percentage of female audit partners remains low. Female auditors may be able to

offer a better quality audit than male auditors, in their experiments (Yang and Mai, 2018). Iman et al., (2019) established that female auditors were more thorough in their information collection, have a lower risk tolerance, and were more self-sufficient. Iman et al., (2019); Shi Dan and Li Wei (2012) agreed that because of the unique features of women, they would increase audit accuracy with a strong positive association for high-growth companies. There have been few studies that used an exploratory qualitative approach to investigate the living experiences of female CAs underrepresentation and the interacting effects of gender on audit quality, particularly in the Zimbabwean context and this validates the interests of the researcher.

The representation of women CAs in senior management positions, in general, remains inadequate (Grant Thornton, 2017). In the late 1980s, Mrs. Rachel Kupara became the Zimbabwean first female CA. Since then, the number of women qualifying as CAs has increased exponentially per year, but surveys continue to show an underrepresentation of women in managerial roles in the audit profession. Thus, the issue of why women chartered accountants leave public accounting firms prior to achieving partnership status remains unanswered. Furthermore, Kornberg, Carter, and Ross-Smith cited in Ursullah (2017) pointed out that typically females in their late twenties or early thirties opt out of the audit firms and this calls out for interdepartmental collaboration research to help us better understand the phenomena. In further studies, Iman et al. (2019) have concluded that women's audit engagements have a positive and significant relationship with audit quality in high-growth firms. On the contrary, Hossain et al. (2016) also argued that women audit partners were correlated with lower audit quality and detect more possible misstatements but analysed misstatements less accurately than males. In order to properly define and appreciate the determinants of women audit managers' voluntary attrition in audit firms, a more in-depth interpretative analysis is required.

## **Research objectives**

The study examined the importance of the interacting effects of auditor gender on audit quality and the under-representation of women CAs using the Zimbabwean context. Specifically the study sought to;

- a. To determine the effect of gender on audit quality
- b. To examine the obstacles that prevent female accountants from reaching partnership positions in Zimbabwe accounting firms
- c. To determine the reasons women chartered accountants leave public accounting firms prior to achieving partnership status

## **2. Literature review**

The study was guided by theories that include the lending credibility theory, theory of inspired confidence, and agency theory. According to Limperg (1920) lending credibility theory, the audit's primary purpose is to bring credibility to financial statements. The

service that auditors offer to the clients, in this opinion, is credible. Audited financial statements provide users more confidence in the reports provided by management (Ittonen, 2010). The enhanced credibility has various advantages for stakeholders, with the most common advantage being that the reliability of investment decisions improves as they are made on credible facts (Matsikidze *et al.*, 2020). Mgbame *et al.* (2012) posited that financial reporting credibility is partially reflected in clients' confidence in audited financial reports, audit quality is an essential factor in strengthening the firm's credibility to clients of accounting information.

With reference to the theory of inspired confidence, the market for audit services is a direct result of third parties (a firm's involved parties) involvement in the company (Limperg, 1920). In exchange for their contributions to the business, these parties seek responsibility from management (Ittonen 2010). Financial results are issued on a regular basis to ensure accountability. However, since the information supplied by management could be skewed and third parties have no clear way of monitoring the information, an investigation is needed to ensure its authenticity (Matsikidze *et al.* 2020). Ittonen (2010) explains that the auditor should still try to satisfy the public's expectations when it comes to audit assurance. In the light of far-reaching financial statement's credibility and accountability, the theory of inspired confidence and credibility fails to explain gender impact on audit quality in audit firms.

Agency theory on the other hand seeks to define an arrangement in which one person (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent) (Limperg, 1920). Furthermore, as attitudes toward risk differ significantly, it is concerned with addressing conflicts in relation to conflict of interests and risk sharing (Ittonen, 2010). Conflict of interest in accounting and auditing generally leads to contradictions between partners' and managers' objectives in audit firms (ICAEW, 2010). A firm is seen as the result of relationships in which many parties contribute to the firm in some way. Not only for the benefit of third parties but also for the benefit of management, a reputable auditor is named. It's worth noting that while the agency theory explains the relationship between partners and managers, it falls short of explaining the obstacles and gender in managerial positions.

## **2.1. Impact of gender on audit quality.**

This section aims to analyse whether female audit engagement partners have better audit efficiency than male audit engagement partners. Iman *et al.* (2019) have concluded that women's audit engagements have a positive and significant relationship with audit quality in high-growth firms. This implies that audit quality is higher in high-growth firms audited by women chartered accountants partners (Iman *et al.*, 2019). In some research it was pointed out that women's engagements restrict benefit management for clients, thus rising audit quality (Ittonen *et al.*, 2013). Gammie (2013) went further to explain that it was due to the reason that female audit partners are effective and more reliable in dealing with various audit activities which demand considerable effort in terms of auditing in high-growth firms which are considerably more competitive. In agreement with other authors, Matias (2014)

supported that the gender of the auditor has a substantial impact on audit quality. It was further explained that more specifically, empirical investigations show that female auditors' client's firms report a greater amount of income-dropping accruals, revealing that female auditors are more cautious than their male colleagues.

It was also argued that female auditors have better audit efficiency and they are less likely to jeopardize their independence and are more risk averse (Hardies *et al.*, 2016). Hotteginde *et al.* (2016) also agreed with (Hardies *et al.* 2016) that male auditors are more prone to participate in behavior that harms the profession's reputation, whereas women are more likely to commit disciplinary violations relating to audit quality. Chung *et al.* cited in Yang *et al.* (2018) found out that in a more dynamic audit engagement, women audit partners handled information more effectively than male audit partners. Montenegro and Bras (2011), found out that a predominant presence of women (CPAs) in partnership positions in audit firms is correlated with higher audit quality. Gomaa *et al.* (2011) in the same line of thinking argued that financial reporting quality is greater for firms audited by audit firms with a larger percentage of female CPAs in partner positions, and greater participation of women CPAs in partner structure, the better the audit quality improvement.

On contrary, in some research, it was confirmed that women's audit engagements in Big 4 accounting firms also have a negative and substantial relationship with audit quality in high-growth firms Huang *et al.* (2015). In the same line of thinking Yang *et al.* (2018), found out that the audit efficiency of male auditors outperforms that of female auditors. However, if the client changed earnings downward, indicating a lower audit risk for the auditor, the audit quality of women auditors is slightly lower than that of male auditors (Yang *et al.*, 2018). Hossain *et al.* (2016) suggested that women audit partners are correlated with lower audit quality and detect more possible misstatements but analyse misstatements less accurately than males. This was a result of (Yang *et al.*, 2018) women auditors are more often likely to compromise audit principles potentially resulting in lower audit quality as a result of higher women empathy with the clients. Karnawati *et al.* (2020) also argued that audit knowledge has an effect on audit quality, however professional experience and gender have no effect on audit quality

According to (Jonnerged *et al.*, 2010) research, women are far less acquainted with the commercial aspects of auditing than males. It was also found out female and male auditors put differing levels of effort into their engagements leading to, many clients rejecting to be audited by women, according to research and the client being used as a rhetorical instrument to explain various aspects of corporate procedures (Anderson-Gough *et al.* and Kornberg *et al.* cited in Montenegro and Bras, 2015). Audit quality improvement practices (Stafsudd, 2010), may be less common among female auditors (false sign-off, reduction of work below what would be considered reasonable, failure to pursue a questionable item, and superficial review of clients' documents). Likewise, Stafsudd (2010) explained that female auditors, according to newly accredited Swedish auditors, are more vigilant, accept responsibility for finishing duties, and display modesty as well as sensitivity. A number of

traditional masculine performances could help to improve audit efficiency, male (female) auditors' ability to spot possible misstatements can be enhanced by the traditional correlation of mathematics with males (Stafsudd, 2010).

As noted by Yang *et al.* (2018) clients' earnings are balanced upward, men and women have got the same audit quality and when clients modified earnings for reduced audit risk for auditors, it was found that female auditor's quality will be slightly lower than that of male auditors. Lee *et al.* (2019) the lead audit partner's expertise is favorably related to the client's board of directors' experience, higher audit fees are favorably correlated with female and more seasoned audit partners in terms of audit quality. Furthermore, Dan and Wei (2016) explained that female auditors demand a higher fee than male auditors since they are risk averse than male auditors, therefore they will devote more time and effort to the audit project for which they are accountable. Hence, the audit quality does not improve, but the audit fees, which are based on time and labor, rise. Additionally, Mgbame *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that there is a considerable variation in risk aversion amongst men and women auditors. It was further concluded that after adjusting for the auditor's age and rank, it was found that gender variations in audit quality declined dramatically or were even eliminated when the auditors' age surpassed 45 years and/or their position was a manager or above (Yang *et al.*, 2018).

## **2.2 Obstacles preventing Zimbabwean women chartered accountants from reaching partner level.**

Many female accountants typically have professional work experience after graduation in order to achieve an ideal place in their career but, under the control of both internal (in the profession) and external (in life) unfavorable circumstances, the application of their future ability would fail, and they would be unable to use their abilities to advance in the career (Zarei *et al.*, 2021). The low representation of females can be regarded as paradoxical, given that women are now more educated than men and constitute a plurality at universities (Penttila, 2016). Several studies have been conducted in the accounting profession to investigate the relatively low number of women in the professional accounting industry who have advanced in their careers and positions (Kornberg and Ross-Smith, 2010; Dambrin and Lambert, 2008).

**Motherhood and its impact on career advancement:** There are two definitions of motherhood: the physical sense of raising a baby (motherhood) and the sense of being a mother (parenthood), with the latter covering the social aspects of the position. Klaile (2013) concludes that having children and working full-time can be a difficult challenge. Mourlang (2018) also went further to conclude that women chartered accountants show more preference towards family, having children does not significantly alter women chartered accountants' goals however females bear a considerably greater share of family and parenting responsibilities and are more likely to experience a transient work slowdown after having children. As outlined by (Lewis and Humbert, 2010), the ideal employee is therefore considered to be an individual who is always available while society's

responsibility regarding children and other care roles are deemed to be activities that occur outside of the boundaries of the organisation. This viewpoint obviously disadvantages women chartered accountants who are committed to their families, usually mothers, with the woman's family commitments seeming to conflict with her professional dedication (Lewis and Humbert, 2010).

In support of motherhood, women now leave professional public accounting firms to seek more interesting work as opposed to obtaining more flexibility in their choices (Gammie, 2013). They claim that motherhood is the impediment (contributing) factor to this phenomenon by being a mother raises hurdles during pregnancy by delaying a promotion, suppressing bonuses, and replacement of the client portfolio Abdullatif and Rasha (2014). According to the same writers, as women accountants become mothers, they strive to create strategies to "optimize the amount and efficiency of their working time and family time" by making decisions. Windsor and Auyenung as cited by Krambia-Kapardis and Zopiatis (2019) asserted that "gender and parental status do matter for promotion to partner level". Zarei *et al.* (2021) state that it is hard to separate parenthood from the aspects of career advancement, as it is obviously intertwined with society's expectations of mothers, especially working mothers in terms of stereotyped ability to commit to work and the organization and the ability to work the required hours. In the same line of thinking, in the effort of achieving the latter (Haynes, 2017) posits that there are tensions and choices in managing the interface between work and life as there are two separate spaces and relations whereas they are incommensurably intertwined in the modern family life and organization. Career success was still based on the male career model that largely ignores the impact of household duties, marriage, pregnancy, and children (Walsh, 2011).

**Marital status-Glass ceiling:** Emiroglu *et al.* (2015) argued that married people were more committed to the organization for which they work than unmarried people. However, women who are married tend to get themselves influenced by their spouse's views and because of this, they don't perceive the glass ceiling (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) conclude that if the glass ceiling exists in their organisations, they do not consider it as such, but it makes them more eager to excel and becomes a driving force rather than a daunting one. Having a family and trying to set a positive example for their children, as well as having the freedom to arrange their schedule as they see fit, is what drives women to want to start a company (Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

Furthermore, Krambia-Kapardis and Zotopias (2019) argued that women who were not married, on the other hand, were more likely to attribute the difficulty of climbing the hierarchical ladder to the glass ceiling, skewed and organized based influences, which causes them to believe that they are not appropriate to be a partner, that they lack the requisite collection of skills. Zarei *et al.* (2021) confirmed that married women argued that their job has an impact on their personal family relationships and decisions of being a parent. Zarei *et al.*, (2021) findings confirmed that married women had difficulties in managing dual roles and maintaining work-life balance after getting married. As a result, women's initial intentions to continue working will change as they get married and start

their own families as they faced an array of demands they had yet to handle (Zarei *et al.*, 2021).

**Discrimination:** Jakobsh (2013) discovered that female accountants are less capable of coping with occupational pressures, thus less able in protecting specific interests, compared to their male colleagues. Undoubtedly, females are discriminated against more as explained in (Masson *et al.*, 2013) as a result; females who are involved in childcare were penalized by a lower probability of promotion. Ursullah (2017) posited that when a pregnancy becomes public it was not often seen favourably, particularly if it occurred during the peak season, women begun to be overlooked, and their value and existence steadily diminish in order to lessen the influence of their exit. In certain instances, their portfolios were taken and redistributed on schedule, and when they recover, they are assigned low-priority clients in order to lessen the effect of their inability to give their work their full attention (Atena and Tirin-Tudor, 2019). Furthermore, (Zhao and Lord, 2016) also argued that Chinese women auditors who were mothers were discriminated against by not being granted equal opportunities for advancement and not being respected after taking maternity leave.

Women Matter (2013) report showed that more women than men are penalized by the “anytime performance model”. Respondents in (Women Matter, 2013) believe that an executive career requires “anytime” availability, a job mode that necessitates putting one’s personal and family life on hold. Clearly, time that is spent by females in unpaid work is a critical issue that prevents them from advancing their careers (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). Maupin (2013) in agreement with the latter place the cultural problem in a certain light, explaining that the inability of women to achieve upper management roles is due to the women themselves. That describes the childhood, disposition, and comprehension of human nature.

These female socialization patterns prohibit women from developing skills and behavioral characteristics that are conducive to their performance at the highest level of management (Maupin, 2013). As a result, they are less likely to excel for a variety of factors, including their educational background, prestigious status, and high salary. As explained to other researchers, (Kumra, 2010) explains that women themselves start to choose a different career path in the hopes of finding a better balance between their personal and professional lives which is causing disruption and alienation from the path toward partnership and career advancement. Jakobsh (2013) sexual harassment intimidates and demoralizes women, as well as creates a climate of secrecy because many women believe that exposing sexual harassment will jeopardize their employment. Smuts (2018) concluded that women in the public accounting industry have a better view of their working atmosphere, but women's contribution to gaining relationship status in the profession is smaller than men's.

### **2.3 Reasons, why women chartered accountants, leave public accounting firms prior to achieving partner status.**

In general, some women chartered accountants just choose to opt-out of public accounting



firms prior to achieving partner status as a result of hidden agendas that are going to be explored in this part. Wilson-Taylor Associates cited in Franzel (2014) discovered that rising women disappear from the partnership pipelines of accounting firms, and many women opt out of public accounting firms to pursue other careers in industry and entrepreneurship. The absence of stated desire to become a partner and frustrations with the intrinsic and monetary value of services delivered by public accounting firms (Wallace, 2009), and lower career aspirations (Brown, 2010) resulted in women chartered accountants leaving the firm. According to further studies made in literature (Arford and Bennett, 2012) believed that there are three reasons why women lag behind men in terms of progression women are less compatible due to cultural barriers, specifically lack of role models, their responsibilities outside work and lack of mentoring. Research has also identified a number of reasons that contribute to women chartered accountants leaving public accounting firms prior achieving partner status, including motherhood (Klaile, 2013), long working hours (Gammie, 2007) and gender discrimination (Zhao and Lord, 2016).

Given that women are typically responsible for the majority of childcare and domestic duties, in addition to their work pressures, job overload and long hours often have a detrimental effect on the retention of female CAs (Jones, 2018). The impact of workload and long working hours is so onerous and pervasive on female audit managers (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2016). As a result, women choose to opt out of the top, prioritizing and balancing their lifestyles in a different manner to men (Gammie, 2013), and look for flexible work arrangements that do support working mothers seeking advancement (Brown, 2010). Zarei *et al.*, (2021) posit that most women prefer to work in the educational part because of the flexible hours, and they broadly obtain almost no desire to work in the audit profession. The long working hours experienced in auditing firms conclude as the primary issue affecting the career vision of women in the audit profession. In the same line of thinking, when female accountants become mothers, they start to accommodate their identity roles and some may start to compromise to flexible working hours (Hynes, 2011).

#### **2.4 Covid-19 impact on working mothers.**

Women in the Workplace (2020) explains that women also suffered as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, particularly women of color were more likely to be laid off or furloughed by putting their careers on hold and jeopardizing their financial stability. The pandemic intensified the difficulties that women currently faced, working mothers have always worked a double shift putting in a full day of work followed by hours spent caring for their children and completing household chores ,now that the support that made this possible, including school and nursery have been upended (Women in the workplace, 2020). It was found that one in three mothers have considered opting out or downshifting their careers because of the pandemic, COVID-19 (Women in the Workplace, 2020) leaving audit firms at risk of losing female leadership.

## **2.5 Gender discrimination in audit firms.**

Gender inequality and opportunities for women to advance to high level positions in audit firms is a large topic of attention. Despite the passage of numerous gender-related laws around the world, as well as the formation of numerous organizations dedicated to women's rights in the workplace, the implementation of such laws has been constrained, even in more developed countries (Women in workplace, 2016). Kornberg *et al.* (2010) argued that the auditing career has been stereotyped as having many male traits and has hence been dominated by men for many years. Kornberg *et al.* (2010) went on further to explain that this could result in a lack of fit for females auditors impeding their path to audit partners. Huang *et al.* (2015) research on gender discrimination in audit firms and concluded that female audit partners have considerably lower audit fees than male auditors.

It was also found out that men will bring themselves forward for new opportunities even though they are not eligible, and women have a tendency to wait until they can check any box (Grant-Thornton, 2017). In Ursullah (2017) research shows that women's advancement was mainly hampered by gender discrimination. Sometimes the firm's clients discriminate against female accountants because they are perceived as less dynamic and physically and mentally weaker than their male counter parts (Krabia-Kapardis and Zotopias, 2019). Peebles *et al.*, (2017) established that discrimination toward women was founded on the assumption that women are supposed to be responsible for all family responsibilities, irrespective of working outside the home. In line with Garcia Lara *et al.* (2017), the question emerges as to whether this is not the result of a gender bias, working with a woman can dissolve the stereotyping issue and thereby increase the likelihood of hiring another woman as an engagement partner leading to no connection between audit quality and the gender of the audit partner. Kornberg *et al.* (2010) confirmed that for several years, the auditing profession has been dominated by men and it is stereotyped as a profession with male characteristics. It was further explained that it lead to a lack of fit for women auditors, obstructing their journey to become an audit partner.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The research was designed to examine women's leadership and audit quality, obstacles faced by women chartered accountants in attaining partner posts. An interpretivist research design was adopted in this study. The study also utilised a case study of one of the Big Four audit firms operating in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research approach was adopted where interviews were administered to a sample of 20 employees of the audit firm, who included managers and audit partners.

## **4. Summary of Major Research Findings**

The focus of the study was to examine the impact of gender on audit quality and to determine the obstacles that hinder women from in attaining partner level. The following findings were established.

#### **4.1 Impact of gender on audit quality**

The following findings were established pertaining to the impact of gender on audit quality.

##### *Theme 1: Women were more focused and thorough in their work*

The majority of the respondents agreed that gender has an impact on audit quality due to the fact that women were considered more thorough and in their work than men resulting in a better audit quality. One respondent went further to support this thinking by explaining that deadlines were easily met in that environment, however the knowledge and skills possessed by the auditors whether be female or male seem to be on the same level. Basing on a 16.67% response, it was highlighted that gender plays a vital role on audit quality as women are more focused on goal and timelines than man. It was further explained that men perceive and react to pressure leading to different audit quality result.

##### *Theme 2: Women auditors uncovered more possible misstatements during audit*

According to the information from interviews, women auditors uncover more possible misstatements than male auditor, however they assess the misstatements in a less correct manner. Some respondents argued that women auditors were more risk averse unlike male auditors, hence it was possible that women auditors may establish a lower materiality threshold and examine bigger samples than male auditors, resulting in a higher number of significant misstatement found and disclosed by women auditors.

##### *Theme 3: Use of International Standards on Auditing*

However 22.2% of the respondents strongly disagreed that gender has an impact on audit as it is governed mainly by audit standards (ISAs) and this does not have anything to do with gender but rather how knowledgeable one is with ISAs and IFRS. It was also pointed out that women leadership has no impact on audit quality since it is purely down to the type of the person that is the partner on audit, whether they are very focused on detail or not. In the same vein Karnawati (2020) pointed out that a person with more substantial experience has more items stored in his/ her mind and can acquire a strong grasp of events regardless of gender. If the auditor understands the profession effectively, he or she will be able to carry out audit work appropriately.

##### *Theme 4: Experience and competence*

It was further established that gender has got no impact on audit quality but rather a matter of experience, competence and skills that one has got. About 16.67% of the respondents concurred that gender has no impact as audit quality is based on audit procedures that are followed by every auditor regardless of gender type. One of the interviewees claimed that gender has no bearing on audit quality as auditing was guided by auditing standards.

#### **4.2 Obstacles faced by women chartered accountants in attaining partner level.**

The following were cited as the major obstacles faced by women in attaining partner level.

##### *Theme 1: Motherhood and Maternity*

One of the respondents explained that motherhood lead to more time off work and therefore delayed promotions to top management. One responded went further to explain that as a result of motherhood, women tend to be discriminated in achieving partner posts or top managerial positions. This was also supported by the statistics that the respondent has been exposed too in the firm where 70% men filled up management positions.

The study established that women take time off work due to maternity related leave and they tend to lose out on work related experience which then tends to disadvantage them on promotions when assessed against their male compatriots. One participant argued that, “*on returning to work after maternity leave women will tend to get less tasking assignments as to provide them with a good work-life balance and to enable them sufficient time to attend to their new born babies*”. Alternatively, research findings show that their male colleagues will then get exposure to more tasking or challenging assignments which demand overtime, and this then prejudices some females when their work experience /exposure is assessed against their male colleagues

### *Theme 2: Marital status*

Respondents also highlighted that marital status acted as a major obstacle as some women might be influenced by their spouse’s perspectives in relation to the accounting work demands. Two respondents also concurred that some of their spouses have a strong traditional background and believed that women were not supposed to occupy better positions in the firm than them as a result of various traditional reasons which act as glass ceiling when their spouse is to disagree with the idea of advancing their career. Respondents explained that for the unmarried, it was easier to reach glass ceiling as long they are determined and focused as they are, to a lesser extent, not affected by their spouse’s perspective.

### *Theme 3: Long working hours*

In some view 22.22% responded explained that long working hours was a major stumbling block on women CAs in career advancement leading to under representation of women at managerial positions. Unlike men, many women concurred that working long hours and overtime till late hours was really a hustle for them. As a result of failing to work long hours as required of them sometimes acted as a major stumbling block. Traditionally it was explained that if they decide to work long hours they will be viewed differently by the community as losing their feminine and going against the norms of caring for their family. It was worth noting that one respondent went further to explain that, generally there has been a culture that men do better when it comes to top management positions so even women do better is less considered for appraisal. Respondents have alluded that as the COVID-19 pandemic has advanced, their work hours and stress have grown, and working mothers are routinely working at night to keep up which is now making it impossible to advance their careers as there is no enough time for study as also explained in (Women in the Workplace, 2019).

## 5. Research-based conclusions

The quality of an auditor's opinion, which might be characterized in terms of significant misstatement detection and reporting, is dependent on specific auditor attributes such as critical thinking skills, risk profile, and independence from the client. From the research findings, it was however noted that gender also plays a critical role in audit quality and has a bearing impact on the auditor's opinion. The study's findings show that women CAs are associated with higher audit quality as it was argued that women are more thorough with their work and very focused on detail, unlike men. It was also noted that women auditors uncover more possible misstatements than male auditors, in contrary it was also worth noting that audit quality is not impacted by gender as it is governed mainly by audit standards (ISAs) and this does not have anything to do with gender but rather how knowledgeable one is with ISAs and IFRS.

According to the findings, there is a considerable underrepresentation of women CAs at the managerial level in Zimbabwe audit firms evidenced by a 20% representation of women CAs at the partner level. From a finding of 66.67%, it was strongly agreed that motherhood, work-life balance, and family responsibilities were the biggest restricting barriers, with women positioned as sole carers, a role that interferes with career advancement. It was shown that women typically underachieved owing to family responsibilities and motherhood, primarily during pregnancy and birth.

## 6. Recommendations

The study recommends that audit firms should improve their planning in a way that there is gender balance amongst audit team members assigned on an engagement as this was found to improve audit quality, where auditors of the opposite sex are working together. Comprehensively, audit firms should measure performance based on competence, experience, and knowledge rather than gender and age. Audit firms should design processes that enable females who have maternity-related obligations to still gain similar exposure to that of their male compatriots. If possible, simulation programs can be designed to enable women to fast track or catch up on lost experience whilst away from work. Conducting mental awareness programs is also the key to helping deal with work stress at the workplace. The firms should give better incentives in balance with efforts being put in and opportunities for staff to remain with the firm. The audit firms can further award equal opportunities for women to run bigger engagements regardless of their marital status or personal lives. In addition, audit firms should contemplate shifting away from basing their promotions solely on financial criteria, which may reduce the likelihood of women rising to the top. Some non-financial variables, such as training to establish a talent pool and financial planning, are also crucial for the sustainability of audit firms. Firms should also consider charting a clear career path for their women personnel with the goal of obtaining partnership.

## 7. Areas for further research

The study focused on the impact of gender on audit quality and the under-representation of women CAs at managerial positions. Further studies should aim to build on each of the findings aforementioned by increasing the library of world literature, both between and within developing and industrialized countries. Secondly, other studies may look at nations that have implemented methods to minimize gender prejudice and evaluate what effect this has on a firm's performance.

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