

# Dealing with Guilt and Shame After Breaking the Glass Ceiling

## The Case of South African Executive Women

The modern woman's dream of success inevitably, these days, often include a powerful/influential, high-paying job with economic success; she is also a loving wife/partner who takes care of all her partner's needs and takes care of the home; she is the wonderful nurturing mother who regularly cooks healthy meals and does homework with the children; she is fit/healthy and exudes positive energy; the list goes on. But sadly, for many women, this will always remain a dream – hard choices and sacrifices often have to be made, where success in some aspects of life may mean lesser success, or even failure, in the other aspects.



There has been much debate as well as different perspectives within literature on the subjects of 'shame' and 'guilt' and, how shame differs from guilt (Ausubel, 1955; Lewis, 1971; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Jacoby, 1994; Tangney & Fischer, 1995; Benetti-McQuoid & Bursik, 2005). Additionally, the overlap of these emotions as a result of the similarities in the situations within which they occur, often leads to these terms being used interchangeably (Jacoby, 1994). For the purposes of this research, we will first briefly define 'guilt' and 'shame'.

'Guilt' has to do with ethical and moral principles ('socialization'; 'should have';

'obligation') whose fulfilment is generally good, but the feeling of guilt usually is experienced as an unpleasant emotion, sometimes unhealthy emotion (Dryden, 1994), when a moral/societal standard has been violated or a crime has been committed (Benetti-McQuoid & Bursik, 2005). This feeling is directed outward at a particular behaviour committed by the individual, whereas 'shame' is defined as an unpleasant, sometimes debilitating, emotion accompanied by a negative evaluation of oneself, characterized by an internal self-doubt and chastisement (Kubany & Watson, 2003; Jacoby, 1994) – and ultimately affecting the well-being of an individual. From

Freud's perspective, guilt is neurotic, destructive, largely unconscious, and irrational. The guilty individual withdraws socially, ruminating over transgressions, castigating the self for real or imagined shortcomings (Tangney & Fischer, 1995).

Guilt is an important mechanism through which an individual becomes socialized in his or her culture. It serves as a moral compass and fosters responsibility, reducing aggression, and encouraging cooperation among group members while ensuring the survival of the individual in the group (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). It is an important instrument for cultural survival, an important 'watchdog' within each individual, serving to keep his or her behavior in line with the moral values of the society within which s/he lives (Ausubel, 1955). Dryden (1994) made a distinction between episodic guilt and existential guilt. Episodic guilt is triggered by an event that leads one to believe that one has either broken or failed to live up to a moral code or ethical standard, on the one hand, and have inflicted interpersonal damage on the other. Existential guilt stems from an enduring belief that one is bad, and the enduring self-judgement is that of an immoral self. Unlike episodic guilt, this guilt is not triggered by an event, it is always there.

Shame, on the other hand, is a 'social emotion' and intricately linked to 'social context', 'self-worth' and 'well-being', occurring either when others are present or when the presence of others is in the forefront of an individual's mind, even when reflecting alone on something the individual has done. It manifests as feelings of inferiority, humiliation, shyness, inhibition and embarrassment. Lewis (1971:30) stated that "the experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of the evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of the negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus". The affected

person, though, is not always aware that these different feelings are variations of shame, or that it involves the real or perceived respect an individual enjoys in the eyes of others. Lewis (1971:30) further postulates that in the emotion of shame, the 'bad behavior' is not taken as a local transgression that requires reparation or apology, but that the objectionable behavior is seen as a reflection of a defective self. Tangney (1995) argues that in a prototypical experience of shame, the self as a person is the primary objective. Feelings of shame involve a painful negative scrutiny of the self – a feeling that "I am unworthy, incompetent or bad".

In Hultberg's (1988: 118) view, there are two forms of shame that are very different in nature and have opposing functions. One form serves as social adaptation, and the other as personal integrity; one guarantees adherence to social norms and the other protects the individual from the collective. Jacoby (1994:22) argued that "between the two lies a potential for conflict that is inherent in the nature of the human species". He further contended that shame plays a critical role in the mediation of interpersonal closeness and distance, "gauging my feelings about how close I can get and want some to come", it is also about "how others will respect my self-esteem ... if I decide to reveal the naked truth of who I am". Dryden, (1994) made a distinction between episodic shame and existential shame as follows: episodic shame is concerned with one revealing an inadequacy or inferiority in public, while existential shame is concerned with an enduring belief about oneself as being defective, inadequate and inferior to others.

In summary, shame and guilt differ (and overlap) along five constructs:

- ◆ That shame is, as opposed to guilt, a social emotion;
- ◆ Shame is distinctively related to the entire self, guilt is tied to some specific behavior;

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- ◆ Shame is linked with ideals, whereas guilt concerns prohibitions
- ◆ Guilt and shame are internal affective states that often arise from similar situations, but have different effects on the individual; and
- ◆ Shame is oriented towards the self, while guilt is oriented towards others (Teroni & Deonna, 2008; Jacoby, 1994; Ferguson & Stegge, 1995).

The traditional view of guilt reflects a tendency to feel bad about transgressions because they violate one's own internalized standards, and shame as the inclination to feel bad about transgressions when caught by someone (Benedict, 1946; Erikson, 1963; Buss, 1980; Hogan & Cheek, 1983). The modern approach, supported by other theorists such as Lewis (1971, 1987), Barret and Campos (1987) and Wurmser (1987), argues for shame even being experienced when no one else is physically present. Jacoby (1994: 2) added that "one can also be ashamed of one's own badness" (but what makes the feeling of shame unique is that it is not always a reaction to unethical behavior). Each of us has within ourselves a partially conscious image of the way we want to be seen, the so-called 'ego-ideal'. The higher this ego-ideal's demands are for perfection, the easier it will be to fall into feelings of inferiority and shame. For instance, membership into a certain race or family can provoke a sense of inferiority (Ferguson & Stegge, 1995).

### Guilt and Shame in the Context of Executive Women

Women are subject to competing demands, must adopt competing standpoints and move between them as circumstances require them to play a range of roles. This is particularly true

when women have domestic or other social responsibilities, but the social construction of gendered situations means that even for women who are exclusively committed to their careers there is a disjunction between imagery and expectations (Hopfl & Matlal, 2007:203). These sometimes unreasonable societal and cultural expectations/prescriptions within which women play a range of roles (gendered self-concepts and schemas) can be a fertile ground for guilt and shame to crop up (Thomson & Walker, 1989). Guilt can stem from the uncritical acceptance of standards (Dryden, 1994) and traditional practices (April & Shockley, 2007) passed down from generation to generation that may no longer be applicable to modern day living. As more and more women move into the corporate world, these expectations/prescriptions have to a large extent remained the same and dictate, for instance, what reasonable time management and work-life balance for women should be, the level of acceptable family engagement for executive women, as well as the level of reasonable sacrifice required of women who aspire to the highest echelons of corporate life – all of which could ultimately trigger guilt and shame emotions and behaviors in women.

#### Relationship Guilt

"Feeling guilty over a partner's distress when the cause is unclear may therefore be endemic to close relationships. I call it 'relationship guilt' because it is generated more by the relationship than by a particular act" (Hoffman, 2000:176). Generally, people feel guilty when they benefit inequitably at a partner's expense or inflict harm, loss, distress, disappointment, or other misfortune on a significant other person (Baumeister,

Stillwell & Heatherton, 1995). A study conducted by Baumeister, Stillwell and Heatherton (1995) asked adults to describe their most recent instance in which they felt guilty; the category with the largest response was neglecting a relationship partner and another was failing to live up to an interpersonal obligation. Hoffman (2000) asserted that this could be due to the fact that close relationships provide endless opportunities for hurting one's partner which also results in creating opportunities for experiencing transgression guilt. These transgressions may include: "mundane unintended slights, thoughtless remarks, or forgotten appointments to more serious betrayals of confidence, bald-faced lies, and crushing infidelities" (Tangney & Fischer, 1995:134). However, close relationships can also provide opportunities for blaming oneself, even when innocent. The reason could be that relationship partners tend to become so reliant on each other that their feelings and moods depend heavily on the other's feelings and moods, as well as actions. It is, therefore, conceivable that when one's partner is sad or unhappy and the cause is unclear, one blames oneself and feels guilty for the partner's unhappy state (Hoffman, 2000).

#### Responsibility Guilt

Being responsible for others goes with age and maturity, but often comes at a price of feeling guilty. In certain jobs where one is responsible for others' lives, guilt can be especially acute when things go wrong (Hoffman, 2000). One can feel responsibility guilt over accidentally harming others even if one tried to avoid the accident. This is even when logic says that one is not to be blamed, and witnesses say it was not the victim's fault (Hoffman,

2000). According to Dryden (1994) having a sense of excessive responsibility occurs when one believes that s/he absolutely should be able to control events with which s/he is involved. Thomson and Walker (1989:860) described the traditional images of motherhood (child needs, partner/husband relationship, home 'duties' – planning, organizing, delegating, scheduling, involvement) as well as fatherhood (breadwinner, strength, discipline, distance) as strongly embedded in our shared ideals, standards, beliefs, and expectations on men and women as parents, which are supposed to be accompanied by instinctual feelings of joy and patience. However, joy and patience often go with equal measures of stress and fear of societal disapproval for working and not playing traditional family roles, and are experienced as impossible and archaic cultural standards for many and, for woman in particular, can often be the primary sources of guilt and shame.

### Guilt over Affluence

Guilt over affluence, or class guilt, emerges when one becomes aware of the difference between one's advantaged life and the meagre existence of others. Hoffman (2000) illustrates this guilt by describing the shock of 1960's civil rights activists in the US who were highly empathetic and sympathetic when they witnessed that the benefits that they had experienced had not been extended to others, and became aware of the discrepancies between their good lives and the misery that many others experienced in their lives. In South Africa, the impact of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and Employment Equity (EE) policies have resulted in the emergence and growth of a Black middle class and the growth

of women executives in corporate South Africa. Women who have benefited from these policies are likely to experience guilt over their newfound affluence, especially if it came at the expense of others' misery and/or despite the hard work and equal sacrifices of others. This may be, particularly, true for black women who benefit from these policies on the grounds of both race and gender. Guilt over affluence can be a more potent motive than transgression guilt – and it may require continued activity to alleviate human suffering or continuous beneficence of the common good, on the part of the individual, rather than a discrete act of restitution. As is the case with bystander guilt, if the individual does nothing to benefit others and remains disengaged from those who appear less fortunate, the individual will be found to feel more guilty, will blame others who are 'less than' or 'victims', will engage in conscious and unconscious cognitive restructuring to justify inaction, will deny and even justify his/her affluence (I have worked hard for what I have) in order to overcome the inevitable guilt.

### Guilt over Achievement

'Social comparison' is often used to evaluate one's performance in the absence of objective standards. Hoffman (2000:183) illustrates social comparison by way of an example of a talented child, which draws a picture that attracts adult attention and wins praises and hugs. The child starts feeling guilty about its high performance relative to other children, as the child perceives his/her success as being responsible for the lowering of his/her peers' self-esteem – this is dependent on the child's ability to empathize with his/her peers. Achievements may also result in vicarious pride ("one of us made

it") rather than guilt, which is more likely in societies that value collective achievement rather than individual success.

### Survivor Guilt

This type of guilt can occur in two distinct situations: firstly, where an individual witnesses traumatic death or injury of someone else, while the individual himself/herself remains unharmed. The guilt is compounded by the conflicting emotions of joy at surviving, and sorrow for the dead. Dryden (1994:68) claims that this guilt is related to the belief that the world should not be unfair as to allow one to survive while other people perish; secondly, where an individual feels guilt over surviving a disadvantaged background. An individual, who feels that he/she has done better than other family members, may feel guilty over having more than his/her fair share and having taken the excess portion from others in the process (Hoffman, 2000:189). This kind of guilt may hold true for women who grew up in disadvantaged backgrounds but have "made it out" or survived their backgrounds.

### Shame and its Manifestations

Some researchers have suggested different situational factors that contribute to gender-related patterns in self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame. Lewis (1992), for example, found that men were most apt to feel shame in situations involving task failure and sexual potency, whereas women were more likely to experience shame about physical attractiveness and failure in relationships. Morrison (1989) maintained that shame in women tends to revolve around relational failures, whereas for men shame is likely to be



linked to failures in instrumental achievement, a pattern that mirrors each sex's stereotyped role norms. Middleton-Moz (1990) goes further by claiming that humans are even ashamed of their shame, making it a difficult emotion to communicate about.

### The Grandiose Self and Shame

Jacoby (1994:44) emphasized that shame can also stem from “the grandiose self’s demand for perfection, which results in a devastating critique of one’s own shortcomings”. Arterburn and Neal (1997) contended that shame has the ability to leave us believing and feeling incompetent, not good enough, damaged, dirty, stupid, ugly, worthless, bad, disgusting, weak, unworthy, undeserving and inadequate. They further argue that one may act in ways that either proves or disproves these beliefs. They claim that some of the manifestations to disprove these beliefs are: being driven to succeed, an overarching need for control, perfectionism and excessive responsibility. On the other hand, individuals are sometimes driven to prove these beliefs through behaviors such as substance abuse, addictions, compulsions, promiscuity and breaking the law.

### Loss of Dignity and Shame

In Jacoby’s (1994) view, dignity, particularly the loss of dignity, promotes feelings of shame. Jacoby (1994:25) argued that our personal dignity consists of our self-worth and our sense of everything we feel belongs to us, our marriage partner, family, clan, religion and nation – what Dryden (1997) refers to as our reference group. Maintaining this dignity is at the core of what upholds our self-representation. Jacoby (1994) conceded that the definition of what is ‘dignified’

is unique and varies across different societies, families and individuals. However, when our dignity is lost, which is usually as a result of self-judgement based on an unquestioned value system that one has, shame is sure to follow. Poulson (2000) described some of the negative consequences of shame as depression, violence, marital quarrels, and even contended that workaholicism can be a possible manifestation of bypassed shame. Violence as a result of shaming, lying and dissembling to avoid negative consequences and to maintain a self-image are also named as consequences of shame (Poulson, 2000).

Jacoby (1994:91) contended that “in spite of the considerable progress in the struggle for equality and autonomy for women, a patriarchal spectre continues to exert its power – only valuing a woman if she has a man at her side. As much as anywhere, this spectre is powerfully at work in the psyches of women themselves”. Jacoby (1994:91) added that, while both single men and women do suffer from loneliness, men are not usually prone to the shame reaction displayed by women. A single woman may feel incomplete and assume that everyone thinks that she is incapable of finding a man, that she was passed over and scorned, which may lead to feelings of disgrace from being unloved.

### Variations of Shame

The discussion of shame and its manifestations would not be complete without discussing what Jacoby (1994: viii) refers to as the “variations of shame” – these include feelings of inferiority, humiliation, shyness, inhibition and embarrassment. The inferiority complex has a strong susceptibility to shame, where there is an eagerness to achieve

personal importance or an “over-compensation” as a reaction to the shame that one feels about one’s inferiority. Jacoby (1994) described the basic reactions to inferiority as:

- ♦ Withdrawing from human contact to hide behind a persona, or by creating a facade;
- ♦ Telling everyone about one’s weaknesses, whether they want to hear about it or not – as a form of defence to lessen the opportunity for others to attack; and
- ♦ The need for constant self-control and self-surveillance, as ways to prevent one from being seen with warts and all. Excessive self-surveillance causes inhibition which can lead to shame.

Contrary to the feeling of inferiority, embarrassment and humiliation are shame reactions that are based on behavior that is not within one’s control. A conflict that lies beneath one’s feeling of embarrassment may be to wish to reveal certain aspects of oneself but, on the other hand, feel inhibited by the shame-anxiety that one’s wish might be understood as a desire for self-revelation or exhibitionism. Humiliation, on the other hand, is more acute than embarrassment, where one imagines others’ views of one with pure contempt, superficially disguised as pity (Jacoby, 1994:69). Jacoby also postulated that feelings of humiliation and shame may also stem from excessive vulnerability.

### Association Shame

Association shame describes the shame related to letting down one’s own reference group, and having brought them into disrepute through one’s behavior. Dryden (1997:12) describes a reference group as “people with whom you closely identify”. Alternatively, one

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may feel ashamed not from one's own behavior, but by the behavior of a member of one's reference group. Clearly then, not only can shame wound the self, but also an ethnic group or minority group within a dominant culture or even an entire nation. Any disenfranchised, discriminated-against or persecuted minority will experience the shame of inferiority and the humiliation of being an outcast. Racial, ethnic, and religious group tensions are inevitable consequences of that shame (Kaufman, 1989:7). Executive women, as a reference group, may experience association shame as a result of being minorities at an executive level within the corporate world. Heller (2003) argued that being different or looking different to others can also be considered shameful. She also argued that shame can also regulate ambition, which can be triggered by the failure to live up to expectations, i.e., fulfilling the traditional role.

### Research Methodology

This research was exploratory and qualitative in nature. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with executive women, who were either founders of their companies or held executive positions in the public or private sector, to understand their experiences, feelings and, past and present behavior, which may have evoked guilt and shame on the choices that they have made, both in their private lives and within the workplace, to become successful. The aim of the research was to gain an understanding on the lived-experiences, perceptions and perspectives of executive women from an insider's perspective. Thematic analysis was used, hence, necessitating a more interpretative

approach. The transcribed interviews were analyzed and coded into themes or patterns that emerged from the transcriptions, using Atlas.ti.

### Research Analysis and Findings

#### Relationship Guilt

- ◆ Being an executive often means long working hours with limited time for family and social activities. Do executive women feel guilty about not spending enough time with their significant others?

The individual codes that were associated with this family code were: time away from the loved ones, sacrifice, compromise, and quality of relationship. Having to cancel a predetermined obligation, or engagement, as a result of working late seemed to elicit the most guilt. Additionally, what came across strongly from the interviews was the guilt felt from neglecting a husband, or partner, as a result of work-related activities. Respondent 13 claimed to have often experienced this guilt, where her husband booked dinner and went to restaurants: "...many a times, and sat and ate his meal and finished his meal, and would have to take my meal home" because she just could not get away from work. She felt quite guilty about the fact that her husband had to explain to others why he was there all alone and why his wife could not make it to dinner, which was all quite embarrassing for him. "I feel guilty when he is embarrassed, that I put him through that. It's like you're implying that work comes first, and he comes second" (P13-13:1 (20:20)).

Respondent 8 admitted that when: "... we first got married and were younger, I used to feel a lot of guilt about being

away from home and working until late in the night". She felt guilty because this largely upset her husband but, as she says, "Now that we are older and more settled, he's become less insecure" (P8-8:8 (40:40); 8:10 (56:56)). She said that she presently no longer felt guilty about it because she knew that he understood that it had to be done. As a couple that had committed their lives to ensuring a democratic and better-functioning South Africa, they were conscious of some of sacrifices that needed to be made, one of which was not always being able to get home early.

Respondent 1 spoke of a "... very difficult transition, because I think again, what I've noticed and what I was saying ... probably, if we exert firmly, but calmly, to our partners before we get married [about] what matters most to us, it would be much better because then we gain our own confidence and ... then command the respect, because we first respect ourselves and communicate [our needs], but we are so eager to be in this institution [of marriage] that we don't communicate what we need" (P1: 1:25 (227:227)).

Respondent 2 recalled a sudden business trip that she had to take to London, which made her realize, just how unequal the playing fields were between men and women in the workplace. Her male colleague just called home and arranged to have his bag packed for him by his wife, and no further questions were asked. While she had to first negotiate with her husband and convince him that she honestly did not know about the trip before, and that it was not a "dodgy trip" with a colleague. Her guilt emanated from making her husband feel bad, or neglected, by her having to be away from home, and the worry that he would think that the trip was not innocent and only work-related.

Respondent 5 stated that her trips, and time away from home, were often public because of the nature of her position in the government, but, she still found that when she had to be away from home it did still make her feel guilty. This guilt was also compounded by the fact that her husband also had a senior position, which kept him equally busy. She additionally spoke of being so busy, and so tired, at the end of a working day, that her husband and she did not even have time to check in with one another and find out how the other was doing, and thus were unprepared to really listen to each other.

Respondent 13 referred to the ‘sacrifice’, as the general “quality of life in the house, [as] you can’t really do things that you [are] supposed to be doing together” (P13-13:10(28:28)). For single women, it was the whole idea of having to give up on stable relationships to pursue careers that brought about guilt.

Respondent 7 stated that “some relationships have suffered because of my career” (P2-2:3 (65:66)). “We’re humans and, as human beings, we all want to love and to be loved” (P2-2:25(570:570)). Her profound statement points to the underlying guilt that the women feel, i.e., they are often able to rationalize why they make the decisions that they make but, in the end, it is this need to love and be loved that makes them feel guilty – in the very least, being perceived as choosing work over relationships.

Respondent 13 also spoke of women who earned more than their husbands, and the guilt that they felt over being the primary breadwinners. Additionally, the partners’ insecurity and eventual resentment led to a guilt feeling.

### Responsibility Guilt

♦ The responsibility of domestic duties is largely shouldered by women, irrespective of whether they are employed or not. In addition to the domestic responsibility, women executives have the added responsibility of successfully managing the organizations within which they work. Are these roles a source of internal conflict and guilt for the executive women?

Within the family code “responsibility guilt” the individual codes that were prominent were: letting others care for my children, organizational expectations versus familial expectations, in-law dynamic, cultural transition on roles, and delayed start of a family. Two aspects of responsibility guilt emerged from the interviews with women. On the one hand was the guilt around family responsibilities and, on the other, was guilt around responsibilities at work.

### Family Responsibilities

For executive women who were mothers, the guilt around being away from home and children seemed to feature quite prominently. This guilt largely stemmed from the worry that the children could feel unloved and neglected by their mothers – specifically, worrying that the children would feel less loved by their busy mothers who were often away. The mothers seemed to be wrestling with the tension between being able to provide for their children’s education and lifestyle, versus spending time with them and providing support on-demand. However, it appeared as if these feelings of guilt, about coming home late and not spending time with their children, seem to reduce as the children got older (Respondent 8). For executives with younger children,

being away from home was a constant source of guilt. Respondent 6 claimed: “As far as children are concerned, I think the quality of my relationship with them is good, but I do wish I had even more time to be with them and to indulge them. I think that would make me a lot happier.” (P5-5:39 (130:130))

Of particular interest was the guilt that executive women felt on leaving their children with a childminder or nanny. While the women were grateful to these women who looked after their home and children, there was often a fear of potential abuse, or neglect, by the nanny while the mother was away, as well as the values and cognitive perspectives that were being taught to their children by someone other than themselves.

Respondent 6 described times when she was away from home, and she started imagining her children not being picked up from school and left there alone, which led her to feel guilty when she was away from home. She was also worried that her children would not be taken care of in a satisfactory manner by others, and admitted to the anxiety and apprehension she felt around others caring for her children. She realized and accepted that she needed help to take care of her children, but was worried about their (childminder, nanny) ability to do it with the care which she would exert or according to her acceptable standards. She also acknowledged the self-blame and guilt when, on such occasions, the childminder did not care for her children according to her expectations. “When they start doing things their own way that’s when I feel: ‘Why are you so busy? Why do you have to be so busy that someone else has got to take care of your kids?’ I’m definitely a bit of a control freak there, because I do tend to want people



to do things in more or less the way that I would do them” (P6:17 (150:150); 5:18 (150:151)).

Similar feelings were expressed by Respondent 1 who stated that she had learnt to trust others with her children, but also conceded that: “Yes, I’m attached and I probably care more, but at the same time ... as long as I’ve given the parameters and the guidelines around the ‘Do’s’ and the ‘Don’ts’ with my child, I’m able to just let go. My husband finds it very difficult, and some people think I’m less kind [or that] I’m less caring of my kids. I don’t think so. I’ve stopped feeling guilty about that” (P1-1:16(205:205)).

Conversely, some mothers spoke of the guilt around resenting their nannies for bonding so well with their children. This guilt seemed to stem from them feeling guilty about something that was good. These mothers were grateful to the nannies for taking care of their children so well, particularly when their kids were younger, but the resentment came from watching their children bond with these women rather than with them, resulting in guilt.

Respondent 10 stated: “You employ people who are capable of looking after your children because that’s what you want, but you do develop feelings of resentment when your children develop a very strong bond with them”. This guilt was heightened during the younger years of the children, because the nanny got to experience and witness “... the developmental things that you miss out on, and the children form a very strong attachment. While you are eternally grateful to them for doing a great job, and for loving your children and looking after your children, one can’t help but feel some resentment” (Respondent 10).

Another form of guilt stemmed from being, and being assumed to be, the primary caregiver, and not being able to play that role to one’s, and others’, mental constructs of that role. Married women executives, in particular, reported the guilt of not being around to take care of the home and spending quality time with the family (their perceived role). This included not being around to do the homework, or not cooking dinner regularly for the family. This form of guilt seemed to be exacerbated by the partner or husband’s expectations from “a married woman” and, in the case of our research sample, more pronounced in partners/husbands of Black women executives. The women we interviewed attributed this to the strong traditional, cultural expectations on Black women that still existed within the community.

Respondent 1 asserted that “... it doesn’t matter how emancipated you can be as a woman, it doesn’t matter how much of the Western culture you may [adopt], along the lines of living [a life] that is emancipated or liberated, the guilt is [there] and it comes from within ... the natural instinct of being a mother that says: I’m the one who has to be taking the leadership of nurturing the family” (P1-15:9(87:87)).

Respondent 5 was of the opinion that it was the different roles that women had to play, from social and genetic perspectives, which limited their ability to progress into more executive positions. She claimed that when faced with the choice of either being a mother and caregiver on the one hand, and career woman on the other hand, women will most of the time choose children, as a result of their unselfish, maternal sense of responsibility that comes from having carried them for nine months and being

responsible for their wellbeing. She described it as a responsibility that you will have for the rest of your life: “... you know it lands at your doorstep more than anyone else’s doorstep, so what do you do?” She describes her most intolerable level of guilt as one that would come from feeling like she “... did things which were at the expense of [my] children”. The idea of being a ‘selfish’ mother” (P5-7:9(222:222)).

According to Respondent 4, being a mother and wife, who is also an executive, is a choice, and one that requires a fine balancing act – while never quite being fully balanced. However, this balance of priorities needed to be constantly revisited, she claimed. The guilt, in her opinion, came “... from feeling as if one did not have the option to revisit the balance” (P4-6:2 (53:53)).

### Work Responsibilities

Most executive positions are demanding and require really long hours in the office from those who occupy these positions. Executive women with family responsibilities reported guilt around having to leave the office early in order to attend to family-related responsibilities. There’s always this gnawing feeling that others may think that you’re not committed to your work (Respondent 9).

Respondent 12 spoke of her assumption of the constant concern at the back of everyone’s mind about executive women and decisions to start a family:

- ♦ “Is that person going to need to have children? What are we going to do? How do we ensure consistency and continuity [when they do decide to have children]” (P12-12:5(22:22))? The concerns about women’s

biological decisions often plague the women themselves, and constitute a continuous source of guilt for them with respect to when they make that decision, and when they do decide to leave senior positions (if only for a while) to raise their children.

Respondent 10 maintained that there was guilt from both sides: "... guilt that you're not spending time with your children and that you're not devoting enough in the office as your male counterparts (P10:2 (23:23)). But, she also admitted that she (personally) needed the mental stimulation of the job and pressure. "For me, staying at home all the time also wouldn't have satisfied me intellectually" (P10:4 (33:33)).

Respondent 4, whose husband is a stay-at-home dad (the only one out of all the women interviewed) did not believe in, what she termed, 'supermoms': "It's not possible to have it all, so you do make choices and sometimes those choices are not easy choices... I'm deeply respectful of anybody who feels that they can do it. I can't" (P4-6:8 (53:53)).

Overall, the women did not feel like it was their fault when things did not go according to plan in their work teams. They generally believed that it was the leader's responsibility, and when not in that role, they did not feel the need to be taking excessive responsibilities for events that they could not control in the workplace. There's too much responsibility in my life to still have the inclination, or energy, to pick up after someone incompetent or assume duties that are not in my defined function (Respondent 7).

### Guilt over Affluence

More and more South African women are moving into executive positions today. This, along with the status, also brings wealth.

- ◆ Do South African executive women feel like they deserve this wealth or do they feel guilty over their affluence?

Within the family code "guilt over affluence", the individual codes that were prominent were: financial assistance to others, downplaying affluence, competence, price to pay and measure of success.

Self-perceptions tend to play a role in how people perceive their affluence and the associated monetary compensation that they think they deserve. People who perceive themselves as unworthy of certain levels of compensation, or affluence within a particular social setting, are most likely to feel guilty about receiving this (and particularly so for South Africans who have just emerged from Apartheid in which certain people/races and genders were structurally kept in poverty and out of economic power through law and socially constructed truisms within society). It was against this backdrop that the researchers were curious about whether this form of wealth, which was often new for many of the executive women, elicited any guilt feelings for them.

Respondent 10 could identify with this form of guilt: "I think a lot of people have worked very hard in life and don't have what I have... but I do feel that there are other people who have really worked very hard in their lives and are really far less fortunate than I am" (P10:11(91:91)). Respondent 8 recalls a time in her life when she did downplay affluence, and was uncomfortable about giving more money to the church as part of her tithe because she did not want to appear more affluent than her fellow worshippers. As the years went by, it dawned on her that downplaying her affluence did not help as other people already had a perception

of how much she earned, and perceived her as affluent. It was at this moment of realization that she decided to stop downplaying her affluence. However, she admits to having wrestled with the guilt for a long time (P8: 8:13 (78:78)).

Similarly, the enactment of economic equalization legislation in South Africa, such as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) that provide for the economic, and therefore social, advancement of women and Black people in the country, have positively contributed to the growth of executive positions held by women. In many instances, these policies have given opportunities to a lot of women to acquire wealth, and social status, that they did not have before. If executive women perceive their roles as forms of tokenism that is not deserved or earned (either due to lack of experience or technical know-how) feelings of guilt are likely to emanate. In Eagly & Carli's (2007) view, reducing tokenism will legitimize women's contributions. Rightfully or wrongfully, a perception exists in South Africa among certain sections of the society that women are not hired on the basis of their capabilities and credentials as leaders, but rather due to the need to fill quotas. This scepticism from others often contributes to the undermining of the women by their colleagues or those that they lead, which leads to further self-doubt (and erosion of self-worth) and guilt as to whether they are really qualified to do the work. This self-doubt can be detrimental to the performance, productivity and emotional and physical well-being of women, thereby further leading to self-fulfilling prophecies regarding their capabilities. Most of the women we interviewed had heard cases where employment equity policies had

been abused, although none of them were of the opinion that their companies were involved in this. Respondent 4 stated: “Well, I suppose that’s true in some companies. Certainly not true here and I certainly don’t think I was hired as a token, or to fit a target”. She was of the opinion that having more executive women in the team was useful in attracting other senior women, “... as it allows them to see the organization as one that values the contribution of women” (P4-6:9 (1453:145)).

All women, except one, felt that they deserved their compensation, or more. While this seems to suggest that executive women do not feel guilty over their affluence, some discussions seemed to suggest that, at some level, women do not understand their full worth or are afraid to ask for what they think they are worth. This reluctance from women to ask for more money, or lack of courage to confront their bosses about compensation, seemed to suggest that either they did not fully believe that their contributions were worthy of that compensation, which could lead to guilt if one asked for that money (or maybe a case of generalized guilt around all things relating to money within a workplace setting), or they felt guilty about their roles against the prevailing social backdrop and, therefore, would not even consider broaching the issue with their superiors. So not asking for more money could be a form of guilt-avoidance, or perceived engendering of further guilt, on their part. On the other hand, it is possible that women ask for, or settle for, less money as a way of ensuring that “less is expected of them”, so as to protect themselves against not being able to meet the expectations of others and partake in activities which could be seen as

detracting from their work productivity, e.g., Respondent 9 suggested that it was “... the ‘price to pay’ for being a mother and needing to rush off quickly to tend to family emergencies, or needing to take time off when pregnant, and a host of other perceived women-specific, but work-detracting, responsibilities”. In this sense, women are chastising themselves financially for the guilt they feel, and perceive others to feel, about these issues.

Respondent 1 was of the similar opinion as Respondent 9: “... those are the things that stand in the way of a woman when an opportunity is available, but then fears: ‘Will I be able to live up to this job?’, not because of her capabilities, but because of her capacity” (P1-1:31 (391:391)).

Respondent 8 was of the view that “... generally women don’t ask [for more]. Women don’t know how much they are worth, and even if they know, they don’t communicate this” (P8-8:12 (74:74)). This view was supported by Respondent 2, who as a Board Member and attends numerous Remuneration Committees, commented that: “... women tend to ask for less money when negotiating packages ... men are a lot bolder about what their worth is in comparison to women. We [women] have a tendency to kind of give that power over to the employer, and say: ‘No, you decide’” (P4-4:36 (265:265)).

Respondent 10 admitted to the guilt she felt over her remuneration, but added that “when I look at my male counterparts’ salaries, it goes away very quickly” (P-10:14(67:67), largely because she was earning less than what they did. For her, as she pointed out later, this particular guilt emanated from realizing just how fortunate she was to have a job that paid so well in comparison to what other people earned, so asking for more may have

appeared selfish and unappreciative. However, the guilt was often lessened through the realization and personal reminding of the fact that her male colleagues and peers were earning more than her for similar job roles.

### Guilt over Achievement

♦ With South African women achieving professional acclaim like never before, do they feel like they deserve their achievements or does this make them feel guilty?

Within the family code “guilt over achievement”, the individual codes that were prominent were: high expectations of others (social pressure), internal pressure, adjustment of self and emasculation of partners.

Achievement, within the South African context and many other contexts, is often linked to affluence. As a result of economically- and socially-correcting affirmative action policies in the country (and women, Black and White, form part of the affirmed groups), many women, today, are in positions of power and are achieving great heights. Many executive women respondents, and particularly from the Black African community, were “firsts” in their families: the first to get a tertiary education, the first to attain management roles in organizations, and the first to be earning substantial amounts of money. This usually brought a lot of pride for the families and the communities that they hailed from. However, it also presented challenges for the executive women when they had to interact with some of the community members. A lot of the time this required them to downplay their achievements, essentially trying not to make “others feel small” around them. Respondent 7 stated that “... I feel particularly guilty

when visiting friends or attending functions in my old neighbourhood. The same [applies to] when I visit family members who are not that well-off ... which is the majority of my family. Since moving into business, I have moved out of my old neighbourhood and into an affluent, and previously White-only, neighbourhood. And you don't want to be talking about the happenings in the new neighbourhood to family members, about holidays they can never take or even dress in a way that says 'I am better than you' ... so I downplay my wealth, as much as I can. I know it's inauthentic, but I do feel that some form of empathy is required".

Respondent 9 was of the opinion that it was arrogant to "show yourself up. There are a lot of women who haven't got, and so to make yourself stand out against other women ... it makes you appear that you are trying to be exclusive, and women are a lot more exclusive than inclusive. I don't want to appear to be above the rest".

Literature also highlights the fact that complaining, by high-achieving guilty-feeling individuals, is used as a way to reduce the effects of their success on their peers' self-esteem. These individuals also take extraordinary measures to not appear different or better than others (especially in highly communal societies such as in South Africa). The respondents all commented on ways in which they downplayed their achievements, e.g., willingly sharing their disappointments with others as, Respondent 2 asserts, "... makes me 'normal' in the eyes of others". Respondent 8 stated that she did not really brag about her achievements, if anything, she complained about her responsibilities.

Additionally, these achievements also created pressures for the women to

constantly "achieve" in the eyes of the community and their work colleagues (social pressure). Respondent 9 mentioned that she "... could not be seen to be failing or not cutting it, as I was carrying the hopes and future opportunities of women who were still to get to my position, or similar executive positions. If I fail, they will say: 'You see, we tried one of these females ... even a highly educated one, and she can't cut it. How are the others going to cut it?'

For Respondent 8, her achievements did not elicit any guilt for her. As a Black woman, and a human rights activist lawyer during the Apartheid era, she saw her achievements as "... a triumph over what Apartheid was trying to do to us". However, she admitted that, "in addition to passion and ambition, the fear of failure is also what drives me to achieve more (P8-8:15 (82:82))." The very real, or imagined, internal fear of failing, because an individual is carrying the hopes of many, results in serious stress and potential damage to the overall well-being of the individual (internal pressure) – since, as our respondents pointed out, if they were unable to maintain the expected standards or expectations that accompanied their achievement, they would walk away feeling enormously guilty and even shameful, especially since many of their roles were so high-profile and public.

Respondent 13 described this as individual, family and social pressure to continuously succeed. A responsibility, she claimed, that came with her achievement, to show other younger women that it was indeed worth it to get to the top, and that all the sacrifices along the way were indeed worth it in the end. "I see myself as a role model and many kids in the family are looking up to me" (P13-13:2 (68:68); 13:15

(70:70)). Respondent 2 declared: "I guess [I feel] exposed and pressurized" because there are "certain expectations that come with achieving" (P2-4:38 (287:287)).

Some of our women respondents have expressed reluctance to achieve more than their husbands, being fearful of emasculating their husbands. This was also true in their reflections about affluence, so some of them have taken to "... shy away from sharing my achievements with my partner, because I don't want to make him feel small". This adjustment-of-self within a public sphere highlights the institutional and structural discrimination that women still face today – much of which often goes unnoticed by men and, when made explicit, is rationalized away by men due to their claims that equality legislation and equal opportunities have raised women to social and economic levels equal to them, or even to higher levels.

While none of the respondents spoke of this in their work lives, they certainly related to the idea of women generally being "modest to avoid being labelled as wearing the pants in the home". Making one's partner feel emasculated or hurt can lead to guilt. While this guilt does not lead to women deciding not to achieve, it certainly makes them less willing to share their achievements with their partners to avoid making them feel emasculated.

Respondent 5 contended that "... when you're in a situation where you do the high-pressured job and your husband is doing like less of a high-pressured job, you can't talk about it ... [it is] like you're making yourself more important".

### Survivor Guilt

- ◆ How do women who have made it out of their disadvantaged

backgrounds feel about their success when in the company of their families, friends and communities who have not made it?

Within the family code “survivor guilt”, the individual codes that were prominent were: keeping old friendships that do not work anymore, deserved success, community obligations and minority in the workplace.

Respondent 13 maintained that her experiences and interactions with women who grew up in disadvantaged communities “revealed one of their biggest challenges ... the obligations and pressure to help out everyone from the community”. The women’s forum discussions that she would hold, as part of her role as HR Executive, would often reveal the pressure felt from having to pay back for “being raised by the whole village [a Black African notion], and not just one’s biological parents, and the contributions of the community [however big or small] ... usually brings with it some expectations to help the village when one starts earning the big bucks”. She referred to this as a “concept of your money is our money” (P13-13:3(56:56)).

Respondent 7 relates to this expectation and pressure: I said to them, ‘You know, I’m not an ATM’ ... the people just expect money when they see you (P7-2:11 (229:230)). Additionally, when the woman gets married the ‘same expectations tend to arise from the new family’ (P13-13:3(56:56)). This is particularly true in African communities that tend to be collectivistic in nature. Fifty percent of our respondents reported that they felt that it was their responsibility to help out their families when they were in emotional distress, rather than financial distress, but felt very little guilt over this.

Overall, the women felt very little guilt with respect to their success and surviving a disadvantaged background, either because they believed that they personally had worked very hard for it or that they did not feel as if anyone else significantly contributed to their success to an extent where those people could rightfully claim some part in their success.

Respondent 8 certainly did not view supporting a family as payback, as she believed that “if one gives with guilt, you sometimes give when it is not deserved” (P8-8:16(106:106)).

Many of our respondents commented on the subjective sense of closeness and togetherness with their current, and mainly previous, social milieus, and the related levels of guilt associated with such social networks. Respondent 2, for instance, admitted that her journey had been an evolutionary process, through which she had not always been guilt-free. “At the beginning, I did feel kind of guilty, because I felt that maybe I was being elitist ... I thought that it would be possible to still be the same kind of buddies, but I struggled with that, because the conversation was limited and we had changed a lot. Once you’ve spoken about all the people that you know together, the things that you used to do, there’s nothing else to talk about and I think one has to face that reality”. For her it was only once when she accepted that she had changed and that “the friendship does not work anymore, that the guilt went away” (P2-4:40 (361:361)).

### Shame and its Manifestations

◆ Are executive women ashamed of their success? Is their motivation for success driven by the need to prove to themselves, and those around them, of their capabilities? Do

executive women have an underlying need to disprove that they are inferior by over-achieving?

Within the family code “shame and its manifestations”, the individual codes that were prominent were: authenticity, avoiding those who are overly critical and judgemental, challenged commitment and capability, challenging mental models, feelings of inferiority, and regret.

Shame is a fascinating emotion that carries a lot of negativity. It is not easy to talk about or admit to, essentially because “people are ashamed of their shame” (Middleton-Moz, 1990:xi). Jacoby (1994:77) states that “it is as if a certain taboo were attached to those words” – words such as ‘shame’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘inhibition’. Because shame is linked to how one views the self, there is a tendency to not admit one’s own shame because it is painful to do so. In many cases, one would try to avoid this shame (shame-avoidance techniques). These may include: avoiding people who are overly critical of one, acting or behaving “tougher” than what one really is (i.e., I have to be “militant” to be taken seriously around here), and avoiding situations that can potentially reveal one’s weaknesses – this could include withdrawal or detachment.

Shame tends to lead to people seeing themselves as “... small when compared to others” (Respondent 13). Inferiority complex is described as a variation of shame that causes us to compare ourselves to others whom we often view as superior to us in some form or other. In many cultures the girl child is often viewed as inferior to the boy child in terms of her capabilities and abilities. In many cases this often brings feelings of unworthiness and self-doubt to the girl child. None of our research respondents consciously believed that they were



inferior in any way to men, but they could articulate the disparities that existed between them and their male counterparts. All of the respondents admitted to the fact that the playing fields in the workplace are still not levelled, and that women were still in the minority in these executive positions.

Respondent 8 verbalized the following: "I think men, generally, are very prejudicial and very condescending towards the women at executive level. Women need to, as it were, earn their stripes more than men do". "Even talking to my international counterparts, it's just the way the world of workers developed, it's always been a man's world ... so if women make choices to go [and] carve careers, it is that much more difficult. You are a minority, [and] all minorities, I suppose ... do feel excluded in a number of respects" (P8-8:2(14:14); 8:3(16:16)).

At some unconscious level, women, as workplace minorities, do experience self-doubt that is often rooted in an inferiority complex. Respondent 5 argued that this was also why women were often not as demanding at work: "... what else would explain why women are getting paid less than men for the same job. There's a lot more of a tendency, we have a tendency of seeing ourselves as smaller, less than men who seem to be socialized to just always expect more. They are the "Why-notters", whereas women are "Why must I?", "Why do I?" (P5-7:2 (38:38)).

### Shame-anxiety to Live Up to Expectations

The respondents spoke of chasing the dream of being a good wife, mother and executive. Often, these roles came with a lot of expectations both from the women themselves and society, and an expectation that they would be perfect

in all of these roles. Failure or even the fear of failure to show up as perfect and/or competent in all of these roles can lead to feelings of self-disappointment, regret and shame within women.

Respondent 2, who is a wife with no children, admitted to having "lost a lot in terms of quality marriage and lost the opportunity to be a mother". She added that "... we would spend the rest of our lives just chasing that dream. For me, it's just an elusive [dream] ... for all intent and purposes. She acknowledged that "... there are many women who are very successful executives, and they are wives, and they are mothers, and all of these things – I haven't been able to do all of that. I've had the marriages, I've had great career opportunities, whatever, but I haven't been able to put it altogether and I don't know whether it's because I've tried to perfect each and every one of them. I don't know, but I think one of the things that I've learnt is that you definitely can't do it on your own. If you are married, then you need to have a husband who is going to be supportive and understanding. I think for me, my weaknesses has been in trying to be the wife who can do everything ... the most perfect wife and executive as well" (P2-4:11(102:102); 4:14(110:110)).

The executive women, who were mothers and wives/partners and often felt extreme guilty for not being at home, may have also been experiencing shame. The ideas of "I am a bad mother", and "my children have turned out badly in life because I am a bad mother", tend to carry extreme guilt and result in shame for them, especially in familial and social settings.

Respondent 6 admitted to feeling terrible and helpless when she had to be away from home and her children: "You're

imagining them sitting there and all on their own, and you just feel guilty about that and you just feel ... I'm such a terrible mother', or you feel helpless" (P6-5:15 146:146)).

Respondent 13, who is now re-married and has single-handedly raised her new adult children, candidly discussed some of her feelings of regret: "If I had put more efforts in raising my children differently, [things could have turned out differently], but then you feel you have no choice. Yes, we have lost out on some opportunities [of being closer], [and] we would not have problems ... but then we could have been in a shack and been very intimate". Respondent 13 spoke of guilt and shameful feelings for not being around for her children: "It is really bad because you know, if there is a school function and your kids are always coming with other kids, it's just like they are orphans" (P13-13:5 (80:80); 13:11 (32:32)).

Upon reflection, Respondent 10 admitted to the stress of the trade-offs and giving up her own relationship and marriage: "I think I am very much child-orientated. So I think with the focus on my children, when I am not focusing on work ... [which] didn't leave me enough time to work on our relationship" (P10-10:3 (29:29)).

Executive women who are type-A personalities and who want to succeed at everything that they do, may be susceptible to shame because often, their work and being seen to be more than capable in their work are very important parts of their self-identity, who they think they are, and who they wish to project for others to see. So when they get it wrong, or do not succeed, a deep sense of failure is internalized and could manifest as shameful thoughts and/or shameful behavior.

Respondent 7 was of the view that “... generally, as a woman, the first thing that people [notice] is your femininity, and there’s an assumption of what you can do ... your capabilities ... so you find that you have to behave like someone you are not for them to take you seriously” (P7-2:1 (33:33)).

### Role Confusion: Wife or Executive?

Respondent 13 described the dilemma or dual roles that women often have to play between their domestic and work lives: “When women are at work they are expected to assume a certain role, and when they go home they are expected to change the way they behave”. She described this as a real problem: “For the whole day you are used to instructing and leading, and at home you have to assume the role of a subservient person” (P13-13:6(12:12)). Her comment leads to a deeper question relating to both what society, as well as women themselves, views as ‘a good wife/partner’. The respondents, particularly the Black African respondents in our research, echoed this sentiment of ‘modern Black African men’ who “want to brag about their successful executive wives, but when you get home you are expected to be a [traditional] African woman” which, among other things, raises concern about domestication and subservient expectations.

Respondent 7 declared that, in relationships, “I think men are proud to show you off, to say: ‘My girlfriend is an investment banker’ and all of that ... but you come home, and you’re an African woman. I think that even they are struggling with that space ... Because sometimes you think, ‘Okay, he’s also a Banker, a liberal thinker’, but no, he’s still very traditional” (P7-2:6(115:115); 2:7 (123:123)).

This view was also supported by Respondent 2 who spoke of the expectations that men have, and which are often not spoken about until you get married. “The women often assume that the man is a debonair guy, until you get married. All of a sudden there’s this expectation ... and there’s definitely more expectation for [Black] African women ... For me, as a [Black] African woman, that was also the expectation! I was always also trying, with my in-laws, to show them that: ‘Yes, I know I’ve got this job, but I am also very respectful of our traditions and customs’ ... and I think sometimes I would overcompensate, because you’re trying to show that you’re an ordinary woman as well. But, I think sometimes we overdo it” (P2-4:45(126:126); 4:22 (130:130)).

Respondent 5 argued that it is the roles that women have been socialized to fulfil, that often lead them into the superwoman trap which, in her opinion, was just not an unattainable balance. The journey to the top requires more and more sacrifices of family and personal life for the woman. This often creates tensions that eventually become unbearable for women and usually lead them to make tough choices regarding their careers and/or family/personal life. For her, the reasons that women often cite for making this choice are different to the actual reasons which are often deeper and unconscious: “... most of us have never sat down and consciously explained why we’re not doing it [not taking up more senior roles] and it looks like it’s because the workplace [has] a glass ceiling ... you think about it today ... Geez, if you’re a woman, you [supposed to be able to] get anywhere (P5-7:10 (201:201)). Her view also highlights the tension of choice between marriage and

motherhood, and career and work, as well as the internal shame surrounding such choice.

Respondent 1 was of the opinion that this went to the heart of the kinds of relations that women end up having with others, i.e., with the emancipation of women “... we got lost in the art of being assertive and so we brought in aggression ... [but] then we were over-criticized for that. We have now gone [in] the opposite direction, where we now allow others to walk all over us, so that I’m not seen to be horrible. You start lowering ... I won’t say, ‘your standards’, but you [start] giving up things that matter to you. So it’s a very fine line” (P1-1:26 (247:247)).

At the heart of all these stories seems to be the harsh self-judgement of women in trying to fulfil all these individually- and socially-ascribed roles.

### Boys-Club Member

Senior positions often come with social activities that give the executives opportunities to network and advance corporate or political aspirations and objectives within the workplace. Some of these activities in South Africa have tended to be very male-oriented and included fishing, hunting, 4X4/SUV expeditions, attending rugby games, and in some cases even visiting strip clubs. These activities can lead to women feeling offended, as well as isolated, making it very difficult to authentically ‘play the game’. This often requires that women make choices with respect to either joining the boys-club and seeking to bring changes from within (‘activist self’; ‘change agent’), joining and accepting the status quo (‘suppression of self’) or to remain isolated and excluded (‘intact self’) – all three of which requires a form of personal resilience on the part of the woman, and

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can lead to subtle and overt forms of shame in the woman.

Respondent 9 was of the opinion that being an executive woman required her to be very thick-skinned. “I think it requires you to take on a personality trait that you do not like, and it goes against your authenticity”. In her opinion, the corporate environment often did put people’s integrity to “... the test, and women very seldom are prepared to challenge their own integrity. It often requires one to ask deeper questions like: ‘Am I being authentic, and if I am not, can I sustain it?’” (P9-9:6 (17:17); 9:9 (17:17)). “The corporate environment tends to be more supportive to male behavior than it is to women. It’s easier for men. I think because there are fewer

physically is required on the part of the woman”, and “... which is not sustainable if it is not supported, and so they [many women] choose to opt out” (9-9:11 (15:15)). Choosing to opt out almost always leads to some form of shame for the woman: shame for not taking on the patriarchal system, shame for not being able to be of service to the ‘greater sisterhood’ (i.e., inability to prepare more inclusive workplaces for future generations of women), shame for giving up, shame related to disappointment in self (and the compromised life), as well as shame for ‘admitting’ to some weakness and failure as a woman.

Respondent 10 stated: “I’m going to sound like a real feminist here, but I don’t mean it like that. I think that women

there. I also feel a bit of resentment because, when it’s necessary, I do put in longer hours and I think that needs to be taken into account more” (10-10:9(57:57)).

### Association Shame

Within the family code “association shame” the individual codes that were prominent were: earning the approval of others, expecting more from other women, prejudice and resistance, queen bee syndrome, self-sacrifice, as well as support for other women.

The queen bee syndrome is a classical example of association shame for women. The queen bee can be described as an executive woman who is unhelpful to other women, partly because of a desire to remain unique in an organization and

## Association shame is often the shame of minorities or those with an inferiority complex

women, there is less of a supportive environment at work for women to succeed in, whereas there’s a naturally supportive environment for men to succeed in” (P9-9:10 (19:19)). In her opinion, women almost always have to work harder to achieve similar success to men, which often translates into having to give up something else, i.e., choosing work over hobbies, health, family, spiritual practices and something else. For women, that something else more often than not means ‘the domestic space’, be it children, enhancing her marriage/partnership, running a home, seeing to parents (both partners parents) – this is often what they have to give up to succeed.

Referring to the necessary resilience, Respondent 9 claimed that “... an enormous amount of personal reserve – emotionally, spiritually, mentally and

have too much going on in their lives that they need to sort out and balance [in order] to play the game, and I think that men are still better at advancing themselves in those situations ... the work situation ... like, pushing themselves to whatever. [Be]cause a women, at the back of her mind, has always got everything else that she has to do and going on around her because, generally and in my experience, childcare and everything else are still very much predominantly a woman’s role” (10-10:10(65:65)).

Respondent 10 intimated at the angst-induced workspace and accompanying hypersensitivity that women often feel, spoke of the guilt and shame related to perception of others’ criticism in the workplace, “... even when they really aren’t ... a lot of this is brought on by one’s own perception of things that aren’t necessarily

partly because she deems other women not fit to meet the very high standards she subconsciously holds, and is most prevalent in work environments where access to opportunities are limited (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007).

Respondent 4 referred to this phenomenon, stating that queen bees were “... women who are dancing on glasses with their stiletto heels” (P4-6:10 (45:45)). The underlying feeling was one incorporating feelings of inferiority as a result of intimidation by other women, the degradation of the queen bee’s “specialness”, no longer being the only female to have access to the “boys club”, the showing up of “weaker qualities” in the other women that were successfully overcome or masked by the queen bee, and dispersion of attention away from the queen bee.

Respondent 10 insisted that “... sometimes the rationale for keeping other women out is to ensure that they do not reveal the ‘naked truth’ about me, or ‘us’”. Shame, as a result of being let down by your reference group, is often caused by an individual feeling that someone else will embarrass or bring disrepute to the reference group, especially in cases where that individual has worked hard to disprove any misconceptions that may have been held previously (April, Dreyer & Blass, 2007).

Association shame is often the shame of minorities or those with an inferiority complex. Respondent 9 described this, in a corporate environment, as “... a stiletto ceiling from women that are at the top [and] do not help you up the ladder. And

other women, although their assistance should not be exclusive to women or to the detriment of men.

Respondent 4 contended that there were “... some women who find it much more tricky to progress up career ladders and that people like me, who don’t find it difficult to progress up career ladders and have generally been very lucky to find good mentors, have to remember that it isn’t like that for everyone. You do find senior women, who I always talk about, [who] dance with their stilettos on the glass ceiling. They’ve gone up there, so heaven forbid [that] anybody else comes up” (P4-6:10 (45:45)). She believed that, as a leader, “... you have to remember that you have to consciously make it easier for people, but that’s not just a gender

regularly cooks healthy meals and does homework with the children; she is fit/healthy and exudes positive energy; she engages in mentally stimulating activities and hobbies, and she is appreciated and acknowledged for all her contributions in her work and social life. This lucid description of “superwoman” continues to be a dream against which many executive women continue to measure their own success. But sadly, for many women, this will always remain a dream – hard choices and sacrifices often have to be made, where success in some aspects of life may mean lesser success, or even failure, in the other aspects.

This research examined the factors which may lead to feelings of guilt and shame for women who choose to become

## Women will never be fully empowered in the boardroom, unless men are equally empowered in the home

the women who are below you on the corporate ladder don’t want to see you succeed, because they can’t get there ... because they haven’t chosen work over other things, so they want to make sure that you’re kept at the same level. It’s quite a battle, and that battle becomes incredibly tiresome” (P9-9:5 (15:15)).

Respondent 13 claimed that “... when women get these positions, they don’t want other women [there] ... often claiming that they are not competent” (P13-13:13 46:46)).

Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of our executive research respondents did not identify with the queen bee syndrome or, in the very least, did not admit to this during the interviews. They acknowledged its existence but, in addition, thought that it was the responsibility of women to help

issue, although I think women in leadership have a specific role to look after sisters, but it’s true of anybody in leadership” (P4-6:11 (45:45)).

Respondent 5 echoed a similar sentiment: “Whenever I come across somebody who I think can be lifted, I lift and I try and do as much for women as for men. However she does believe in this “... notion that [certain] women like being alone and without others [queen bee], but that’s not my view” (P5-7:4 (102:102)).

### Conclusion

The modern woman’s dream of success inevitably, these days, often include a powerful/influential, high-paying job with economic success; she is also a loving wife/partner who takes care of all her partner’s needs and takes care of the home; she is the wonderful nurturing mother who

executives and are successful at it. While others’ expectations do add to the pressures that women feel in fulfilling the different roles in their lives, it is the women themselves who believe that they have to fulfil these multiple roles if they are ever to be “perfect” or succeed. Guilt and shame often occur upon the realization of failure to successfully fulfil all of these roles, or when prioritizing one role (e.g., career or even non-traditional feminine roles) over other roles.

Their main source of guilt was around being away from the home and loved ones as a result of work engagements – responsibility guilt, which was particularly heightened for executive women who had children. The executive women’s comments around guilt seem to suggest that women still have a strong sense of responsibility



and values around being the primary caregivers and nurturers. It would also appear that the gender socialization of women as nurturers and primary caregivers is still an embedded value or standard that women want to uphold. Being away from home goes against upholding this value and therefore elicits guilt.

Conversely, survivor guilt elicited the least guilt for women. All the respondents, even those who came from generally disadvantaged backgrounds, did not feel guilty about having “made it out” nor did they feel like their achievements were as a result of sacrifices that were detrimental to others. If anything, there was an immense sense of pride over their achievements. The executive women we interviewed were all ambitious and driven to achieve. The triumph of these executive women, against all odds in some instances, did not appear to elicit guilt for their success, even when the women were around those less-fortunate ones or family members, who were not successful.

So while the glass ceiling was indicated to not be overly present in their lives, it was the internal conflict between their career and their home that tended to hold them back. Even for single executive women who had made conscious

decisions to not get married, to delay marriage or start families in order to pursue their career goals, success solely from a career point of view seemed to not define overall success. Additionally, these women spoke of overcompensation for being away from home, in order to lessen the guilt on the one hand, and for having “bad feelings of resentment” against those who were bonding with, and taking care of, their children.

The executive women we interviewed confessed that their uniqueness and contributions were not always embraced or appreciated, both in the workplace and at home – and spoke to the persistent shame and guilt that mental constructs and perceptions engendered as a result of self and other judgements. Judgement, by others in particular over the choices made by executive women to be involved in senior positions, tended to elicit shame. This shame was very prominent amongst Black African executive women, who felt a strong link or need to appease family, relatives or in-laws by upholding customs and traditions – which often also meant being seen as the subservient wife and primary caregiver. Some of our respondents’ partners wanted “carbon copies” of their own mothers in their

household (in addition to the executive income derived from organizational work).

The queen bee syndrome, which is linked to association shame, was not raised as a major issue for our research respondents. The majority of our respondents claimed to have not experienced this from other women but, even in cases where they had, they did not impose this on other women. There was a general supportive tone, and need to help other women. Additionally, the executive women did not feel as if the mistakes or weaknesses of other women reflected badly on them. In recognizing the need to empower and uplift other women, they recognized the ultimate individual responsibility to do so but also did not promote the idea of promoting women at the detriment of men.

What also came across strongly from our research respondents was the role of maturity in reducing the guilt and shame. It would appear that as the women got older, greater self-acceptance tended to reduce feelings of guilt and shame. This could also partly be as a result of reduced child-rearing responsibilities, as well as mother-responsibilities. The research is by no means conclusive and the scope to further examine this topic exists. It would appear that balancing the ‘practical’ against the ‘purposeful/meaningful’ will continue to plague executive women, as long as the underlying gendered natures of work and home life persists. Traditional societal norms and so-called cultural practices often only serve to further complicate the structuration of women’s lives. Women, it would seem, will never be fully empowered in the boardroom, unless men are equally empowered in the home. ☹️

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Reference # 03M-2010-07-09-01

Respondent	Title
Executive Respondent 1	CFO
Executive Respondent 2	Director
Executive Respondent 3	Director
Executive Respondent 4	Deputy CEO
Executive Respondent 5	Director General
Executive Respondent 6	Owner and Founder
Executive Respondent 7	Investment Manager
Executive Respondent 8	Director
Executive Respondent 9	Business Development Executive: Advisory
Executive Respondent 10	Senior Financial Manager
Executive Respondent 11	Owner and Founder
Executive Respondent 12	Head of Treasury
Executive Respondent 13	HR Executive and Consultant
Executive Respondent 14	Owner and Founder