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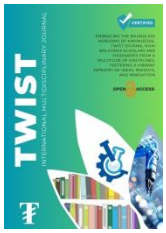

Challenges and Enablers to Higher Education Leadership

Experiences of Women Leaders at a South African University

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Abstract
Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in Higher Education (HE) globally, including South Africa, despite gender equality policies and transformation agendas. However, some women can break through the "glass ceiling" and reach these positions. Hence, this qualitative case study explores the lived experiences of nine women leaders in a South African university to examine the barriers and enablers shaping their leadership trajectories. Data that was generated through semi-structured interviews. The Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach was applied to analyse the data. The findings revealed persistent barriers, including the need to continually prove competence to male colleagues, a lack of institutional support, and balancing family and professional responsibilities. Enablers such as affirmation from senior colleagues, professional networks, mentorship, supportive institutional cultures, and family support assisted the women in advancing to leadership. The findings revealed a disconnect between equity policies and everyday practices, emphasising the need for HE institutions to apply a dual approach: dismantling structural and cultural inequities while institutionalising programmes that build networks, mentorship, and inclusive leadership pathways to foster the presence of women in academic leadership positions.

Keywords
challenges, enablers, leadership, women leaders, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within higher education (HE) despite debates, reports, and policies highlighting the need to enable their advancement to these positions. It is widely agreed that women should hold leadership roles in all sectors, including HE, to promote gender equality and diverse leadership. To signify the importance of this, gender equality is part of the United Nations [UN] Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs], specifically Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality (United Nations, 2023). However, women's underrepresentation in HE leadership remains a global issue. The 2025 gender report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] shows that women are underrepresented in leadership across many sectors, including HE. The report indicates that in HE, women occupy only 30%, despite being the majority of the workforce (UNESCO, 2025). Although some progress has been noted in the increasing number of women occupying leadership roles, they still lag behind men, and some institutions have no women in leadership at all, which is also evident in high-income countries. For example, in Europe, where women hold only 22% of university leadership positions (UNESCO, 2025). Similarly, in the United States [US], about 40% of all universities have never had a woman president (UNESCO, 2025). This demonstrates that women remain poorly represented in key leadership positions within HE institutions. Underrepresentation of women in HE leadership is also observed in various African countries for multiple reasons, including cultural beliefs and values (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). This is also observed in South Africa [SA] as women remain a minority in leadership positions, even though they make up most of the staff. Pillay (2025) reported that women account for 54% of university staff, but only 27% of leadership roles in SA. Few women occupy the key VC position. The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation announced that only five women have held this key VC position in South Africa's 26 public universities for some time (RSA, 2023). SA women continue to face discrimination, hierarchy, and systemic inequality (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022), despite many years of democracy since 1994, which declared equality for all and

resulted in laws and policies that promote this. This includes the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996, the Commission for Gender Equality Act 30 of 1996, the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022), designed to promote gender equality. Additionally, programs such as the Women in Leadership (WiL) initiative aim to empower women by improving their leadership skills to overcome systemic barriers (Schreiber & Zinn, 2023).

Leadership is regarded as the act of influencing others in educational settings to work towards achieving the goals of an institution (Connolly, et al., 2019). The concept of leadership is used to refer to those occupying senior positions in an organisational hierarchy in an educational institution (Connolly et al., 2019). In HE context, leadership refers to those who hold formal leadership positions in a department or faculty, and who influences academic policies, strategies, structures, management, resource allocation, and decision-making (Fields et al., 2019). In the context of this study, we use the concept of leadership to refer to women occupying positions such as Head of Department, Head of a Center or Unit, Deputy Dean, and Dean of Faculty.

Having fewer women in leadership positions deprives HE institutions of benefiting from women leaders' unique skills, talent, capacity, expertise, and competence (Gaus et al., 2023). It also limits institutions from benefits such as improved financial performance, strengthened organisational climate, increased corporate social responsibility and reputation, leveraging talent, and enhanced innovation and collective intelligence, which are benefits of having women in leadership (Madsen & Longman, 2020). Limited diversity in leadership affects institutions negatively, reducing better decision-making, innovation, and problem-solving (Velar & Kee, 2024). Therefore, the issue of women's underrepresentation in leadership and their challenges in pursuing these positions must be addressed by eliminating barriers to their advancement.

There are persisting barriers preventing women from reaching leadership positions in HE, which are widely noted. They include gender bias in recruitment and promotion, a masculine organisational culture, inflexible working hours, work-family issues, inadequate professional support, and bullying from senior male colleagues (Cele & Maphalala, 2025; Herbst & Roux, 2023; Herbst et al., 2024; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022). Women also experience challenges regarding research output negatively impacting their chances of academic promotion and career progression (Diab et al., 2024). Herbst and Roux (2023) note that this is a considerable challenge since promotion to leadership positions usually requires one to have obtained associate professor or professor status in several HE institutions. This means that women must be assisted in achieving these requirements for promotion, more so because women's underrepresentation in academic leadership is also a challenge from a social justice perspective and in terms of the failure to utilise a population's full capacity (Diab et al., 2024).

Despite the challenges, some women have been able to dedicate time and put effort towards leadership positions in HE and have been able to break the "glass ceiling" (Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022). It is therefore significant to share their experiences and what enabled them to reach these positions. While studies (Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Maheshwari et al., 2025; Thien et al., 2025) have looked at the experiences of women leaders in higher education, barriers and enablers, few studies (Dyantyi, 2024; Kela et al., 2024; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022; Moodly, 2024; Nkosi, 2024; Schreiber & Zinn, 2023) have looked at this from the South African context, drawing from the experiences of women leaders. This paper adds to this body of knowledge by drawing from the lived experiences of the women who have advanced to leadership positions in South Africa at a university in the Gauteng province. Drawing on their lived experiences, this paper sheds light on the institutional, cultural, and personal factors that shaped their leadership trajectories and what enabled their advancement, which might inform policy and practice towards advancing gender equality and strengthening leadership diversity in the HE sector.

The study explored these research questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by women leaders in HE?
2. What enables women to advance to leadership positions in HE?

The rest of the paper presents the literature review, research methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review discusses commonly recorded barriers and enablers towards women's leadership in HE.

Barrier to women's leadership in HE

Research (Dyantyi, 2024; Herbst, 2020; Thien et al., 2025) consistently shows that women in academia face persistent and multifaceted barriers limiting their progression into leadership roles. Barriers such as gender stereotypes, work-family conflicts, and limited suitable/women mentors restrict the progress of women towards leadership in the sector.

Gender stereotype

Gender stereotypes are among the most cited barriers to women leaders. In HE, leadership is still associated with masculine traits, undermining women's leadership competence. Gender stereotypes typically characterise women as weaker in various aspects, more so in leadership, where women are seen as less capable (Dyantyi, 2024). As a result, women are often expected to demonstrate their competence and embody male-associated traits to be seen as effective leaders (Thien et al., 2025). This is worsened in countries such as Pakistan and South Africa, where patriarchal values

shape perceptions about women, as gender stereotypes in such countries may be rooted in societal beliefs about traditional gender roles and historical divisions of labour (Dyantyi, 2024; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). Gender stereotypes affect women negatively, and some lose self-confidence and interest in applying for leadership positions (Herbst, 2020). Gender stereotypes associate women with weaker leadership and thereby can affect their self-esteem towards leadership, hence, this is a barrier to women's leadership.

Work-family conflict

Balancing work and family life is a challenge to women in academia and more so for women leaders. Research shows that academic women struggle to balance family and professional responsibilities (Dyantyi, 2024; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). This challenge is exacerbated for women with family responsibilities based on their culture, societal expectations, and background (Khan & Hollingworth, 2024). For example, in certain cultures in South Africa, where women are still expected to fulfil some traditional roles as women or wives despite their position in the marketplace. Balancing the roles between work and family life often requires women to work long hours. Though this is good and shows dedication to their profession, it causes conflicts with household duties, forcing them to navigate tough decisions between fulfilling job commitments and attending to family needs (Dyantyi, 2024). In this circumstance, some women often choose their family, opting out of the demands of a leadership position, thereby limiting career growth and women's advancement to leadership (Dyantyi, 2024; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Hence, this is noted as one of the barriers to women leadership success in academia. This implies that women have to be given support to enable them to navigate between the demands of a career, family, and leadership.

Limited appropriate mentorship

The lack of mentorship and the limited availability of women mentors have been identified as challenging. There are few available mentors and women who have succeeded in leadership and can serve as mentors and role models to women leaders. This may be attributed to the fact that some women prefer having women mentors who can serve as role models. In a study by Calinaud et al. (2021), women complained about not having women who have travelled a similar journey to mentor them and serve as role models. This may kill the desire and ambition for leadership among prospective women leaders, as they need to see women who have succeeded to be motivated to rise to these positions (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Additionally, some women lose hope and leave the profession (Bridges et al., 2021). This is affirmed by Khan and Hollingworth (2024) who argue that there a significant benefit from same gender mentor-mentee relationships. This calls for the recruitment of women mentors who have succeeded in the leadership journey and can support and mentor women leaders.

The persistent barriers show that there is more to be done to enable women to hold leadership positions. Despite the barriers, some enablers that make it possible for women to reach leadership positions have been noted, and some are discussed below.

Enablers for women leaders in academia

This section presents factors contributing to women advancing to leadership positions in HE, specifically, resilience and self-efficacy, mentorship, and family support.

Resilience and self-efficacy

Leadership in higher education has proven to be challenging and demanding, especially for women leaders, as they face various obstacles they need to overcome to succeed in their roles. As a result, women must possess suitable personal competencies and attributes that contribute to their daily leadership efforts. Among these are resilience and self-efficacy, which are regarded as qualities that enable women to lead in higher education (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). Resilience can be seen as the ability to overcome sources of stress, threats, and challenges, involving the capacity to handle future difficulties (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). This appears to be a unique trait for women leaders in higher education, who demonstrate resilience and willingness to take on challenges, advance in their careers, and succeed in their leadership roles (Maheshwari & Kha, 2023). Self-efficacy, on the other hand, which refers to a person's beliefs about their capabilities (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022), is considered essential for leadership effectiveness (Herbst et al., 2024). Moreover, scholars argue that it contributes to success in leadership roles (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). Women leaders are highly encouraged to believe in and have confidence in their ability to influence others and recognize the value of their opinions (Herbst et al., 2024). Resilience and self-efficacy are important attributes for women leaders in navigating the challenges they encounter. If they are to succeed, they need to believe in themselves, be resilient, and persistent.

Mentorship

Mentorship is among the most notable enablers for women to attain leadership positions in HE. It is noted to provide women leaders with essential support, advice, and guidance throughout their careers (Thien et al., 2025). This means that women receive career guidance throughout their career trajectory to leadership. One example of the positive impact of mentorship on women is a study conducted in the United Kingdom [UK] where women who participated in a mentoring programme progressed to Director roles (Calinaud et al., 2021). They associated their growth to this level with the mentorship they received (Calinaud et al., 2021). The role of mentorship is also recognised in the South African context,

where mentorship workshops for aspiring female academics serve as positive platforms for women's career growth and progression in South African universities (Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022). The success of mentorship signifies the role of mentors in developing women leaders. Maheshwari & Nayak (2022) argue that mentors play a vital role in supporting women's development toward leadership in academia, regardless of their context. In addition, mentors act as role models who lead by example while supporting women in their career management, guidance, and development (Calinaud et al., 2021). Mentorship is crucial in enabling women to reach leadership positions and should be supported, funded, and encouraged.

Family support

Family support, especially from close family, enables women's success in an academic career and leadership. Family members act as a crucial pillar for women navigating the challenges of balancing professional aspirations with personal responsibilities. Literature (Dhania et al., 2022, Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022, and Thien et al., 2025) shows that women who have their spouses and family members support advance to leadership and succeed in their roles. Husbands of women leaders, in particular, provide emotional support, encouragement, understanding, and space for personal growth, which is imperative for women leaders' growth (Dhania et al., 2022). The provided support and encouragement has the ability to push women to step out of their comfort zones and pursue leadership roles (Dhania et al., 2022). Importantly, family support also involves sharing household responsibilities, which enables women to focus on their careers and leadership aspirations without being overburdened by domestic duties (Dhania et al., 2022). Supportive families assist women leaders in navigating the challenges they encounter, provide relief from some family duties, thus enabling women to thrive in their careers and leadership.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Role Congruity Theory [RCT] of prejudice towards female leaders and the Social Capital Theory [SCT]

The research was grounded on the Role Congruity Theory [RCT] of prejudice towards female leaders and the Social Capital Theory [SCT]. We adopted the RCT of prejudice toward female leaders by Eagly and Karau (2002) to frame our understanding of women's leadership in the HE sector. The theory extends Eagly and Kite's (1987) and Eagly et al.'s (2000) social role theory of sex differences and similarities into new territory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). RCT of prejudice toward female leaders posits that bias emerges when there is an inconsistency between the perceived attributes of women and the qualities traditionally associated with leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). People hold conceived perceptions and biases towards women leaders, which are associated with negative judgments (Ayyildiz & Banoglu, 2024). In HE, leadership is often linked to agentic traits such as assertiveness and authority, whereas women are stereotypically expected to embody communal traits like warmth and empathy (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, this conflict and misalignment result in two forms of prejudice: women are less likely to be considered appropriate for leadership positions, and when they do occupy such roles, their behaviours are scrutinised more harshly than those of their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, the theory provided a compelling framework for understanding challenges women face in attaining and succeeding in leadership roles in HE.

SCT emphasises the value of networks, relationships, and social interactions in enabling individuals to access resources, opportunities, and support (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). In the context of women's leadership in HE, social capital refers to the formal and informal connections that facilitate access to mentorship, sponsorship, collaborative networks, and decision-making spaces (Coleman, 1988). These connections can help women overcome structural barriers by providing information on leadership opportunities, guidance for career advancement, and advocacy within institutional structures. Enablers such as mentoring programs, professional development initiatives, and inclusive leadership networks can be conceptualised as mechanisms for building women's social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). In SA, where institutional transformation is a policy priority, strengthening women's access to high-quality networks both within and outside academia can play a pivotal role in diversifying leadership and fostering gender equity. Therefore, the theory was relevant to understanding enablers for women leaders in HE.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this research, we positioned ourselves within the interpretivist paradigm to study the lived experiences of women leaders at a South African university, to understand the challenges and enablers in their leadership. This paradigmatic positioning foregrounds the notion of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018); as a result, we share the subjective multiple realities of these women leaders. The study used a qualitative case study. It is a case study involving one university as a case. It is a case study of challenges and enablers for women's advancement to leadership at this university. Focusing on one university allowed us to study in-depth the lived experiences of the women leaders involved and gather deeper insight (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021; Yin, 2018). The study involved nine women leaders occupying leadership positions in nine faculties of this one university located in the Gauteng province. The university was sampled based on convenience, as one of the researchers worked in this institution at the time of the interviews. The university was therefore easily accessible (Golzar et al., 2022) and had women who had achieved leadership positions. Nine faculties were sampled to generate data from women leaders in different fields of study, to gather leadership trajectories of the women leading in different specialisations within one university. The women leaders were purposively selected based on the fact that they had leadership experience in this institution. Invitations to participate in the study were shared with

women leaders in the different faculties. Women occupying Head of Department (HoD), Deputy Dean, and Centre Manager positions who agreed to participate in the study were included. As a result, they could provide relevant and deep insight into the research (Memon et al., 2025). They were also Associate Professors and Professors. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from a university in South Africa, Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. The ethics approval number was given. The university is protected for anonymity purposes. Before participating, all participants were given informed consent forms to sign after being briefed on the study's aims and procedures. To ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms such as WL1, WL2, WL3, WL4, WL5, WL6, WL7, WL8 and WL9, were given to participants and are used. WL stands for Women Leader. Biographical details of participants are provided in the table below.

Table 1 Biographical information of participants

Pseudonym of participant	Race	Age group	Years of leadership experience	Current leadership position	Faculty
WL 1	Black	46-55	7	Deputy Dean	Economic and Management Science
WL2	Black	46-55	8	Director of a Centre	Education
WL3	White	35-45	3	Head of Department	Law
WL4	White	56-65	8	Deputy Dean	Humanities
WL5	White	56-65	15	Deputy Dean	Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology
WL6	White	46-55	4	Head of Department	Faculty of Theology and Religion
WL7	Black	35-45	7	Deputy Dean	Health Sciences
WL8	White	46-55	9	Deputy Dean	Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences
WL9	White	56-65	11	Deputy Dean	Faculty of Veterinary Science

Data was generated through one-on-one virtual semi-structured interviews, using virtual platforms, including Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom meetings. The interviews lasted for about 45 minutes to an hour. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to generate in-depth accounts of participants' lived experiences (Evans & Lewis, 2018). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. For credibility purposes, the transcripts were shared with participants to verify if their experiences were captured correctly (Ahmed, 2024). The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). We followed the six phases by familiarising ourselves with the dataset by reading and re-reading it until we fully understood it. We thereafter coded the data, after which we generated initial themes. The themes were generated based on the relevance to the data. After generating the themes, we further developed and reviewed them until we were comfortable with them reflecting the reality of the data. We continuously refined the themes, defined and named them. In the final phase of the analysis, we present the data by sharing the findings in this paper, using the identified themes presented in the findings section below.

FINDINGS

The study involved nine women leaders occupying positions such as HoD, Deputy Dean, and centre manager at a SA university. They shared challenges they encountered in their leadership journey and enablers towards positions they had occupied before and those they occupied during interviews. The findings are presented thematically.

Challenges encountered

This section shares the challenges women leaders faced in their leadership journey, under three themes: proving oneself to gain trust from men, lack of institutional support, and balancing family and career life. Verbatim excerpts from participants' expressions are included to support the findings.

Proving oneself to gain trust from men

The findings showed that women leaders sometimes faced challenges in leading males who did not support them and sometimes worked against them. They therefore had to prove themselves to earn their trust and approval. They also had to be careful about how they present themselves for acceptance and approval, mainly from male colleagues. WL 2 said:

> *Our male counterparts worked against my effort, and I could pick one or two, but I will not mention names. It was very hard for me to penetrate the male camaraderie. So as a woman leader in HE, I had to break through this comradely collegial team, this strong team, that sometimes worked against me because everybody wants to be a leader.*

Another woman describes how she feels during male-dominated meetings:

> *I do feel like, as a woman, I am looked at differently still, and I fear that if I am in a meeting full of men, I need to deliver even more because I am looked at differently by that group. After all, there are mostly men in my field. It feels like I am always on my guard about how I present myself in those meetings. I can never be relaxed in how I approach something because I worry that I am being judged in that position. I still feel like that, which is awkward because I feel confident in my character and ability, yet I still feel like that.* (WL3)

The findings show that women constantly feel the need to prove themselves to be accepted. The sad thing is that some women expressed that they had to change who they are and their preferred leadership style to deal with challenges posed by the male colleagues they lead.
WL2 expressed:

> *It is very difficult to work with the men, because they question everything that you do. The first thing that they always question is your qualifications and why you have this job. So, working with men and leading them can be very hard. I ended up becoming very tough. I want to put it nicely; I am very competitive and very tough-headed. I became very aggressive in pursuing what I need because if they notice that you are weak and can break you, they can break your spirit, which is exactly what they do.*

The study's findings show that women must continually demonstrate competence to be approved and that male academics are still sceptical about women's leadership. The study's findings align with international studies by Bhatti and Ali (2020) and Maheshwari et al. (2025), where women adopted more assertive, competitive leadership approaches to be accepted, which may not be leadership qualities they subscribe to. This also echoes RCT theory, which asserts that HE institutions require women to prove themselves and adopt masculine traits to be seen as legitimate leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), sometimes at the cost of their authentic leadership style.

Lack of institutional support

Women expressed a lack of support from the institution to ensure their leadership success. They felt left alone in these positions to sink or swim. It sounded like they were given the opportunities because institutions have to, but are unwilling to ensure their success. One of the women articulated:

> *As much as the country's policies show that they want us here and that you should be the first one to be picked, when you are picked into that position, there are no systems in place to help you succeed. There are no systems in place to help enable you to be the leader that they want to see.* (WL7)

The findings affirm that women do not receive support to grow and excel in their leadership positions, aligning with the findings from studies conducted in South Africa and other parts of the world. In a study conducted in South Africa, in the Eastern Cape, women deans expressed a similar concern about not being supported (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Similarly, findings from Ethiopia (Adamu, 2023) and Malaysia (Thien et al., 2025) show that women leaders do not receive sufficient support for their professional effectiveness, career development, and leadership. This hinders women's growth and success in leadership. SCT interprets this as a failure to institutionalise access to resources and networks that could enhance women's leadership capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Without formal mentoring, training, or sponsorship, women's ability to thrive in leadership is left to chance.

Balancing family and career life

Work-family conflict emerged as a persistent barrier. Women leaders expressed challenges they had in trying to balance their careers and family life, saying:

> *For me, the biggest challenge is to juggle everything. Keeping the family together, to be a good wife, to cook, to buy all the ingredients for food, and do all the errands, be a good mother, and still be successful in my career and leadership*. (WL9)

Balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations remains a significant challenge for women in academia, and is exacerbated in cultures with traditional gender roles (Dyantyi, 2024; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024). Hence, Dyantyi (2024) also found similar results, where work-life conflicts pose significant barriers to women advancing to leadership positions in South African HE. As a result, some women leave the leadership roles. One woman leader in the study affirmed this by sharing that she knows of women who have left leadership positions because of the pressure it poses to women without any support. She said:

> *I know many South African women with the right qualifications who have stepped into leadership and quickly turned back.* (WL7)

This highlights how challenging it is to be a woman leader in academia, balancing many academic duties and still having a healthy family life. In RCT terms, societal expectations of women's primary caregiving roles conflict with the high-availability norms of academic leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Internationally, women leaders often navigate this by opting for roles with greater flexibility or by reducing their leadership ambitions, perpetuating the leadership gender gap (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022).

Enablers to women's leadership in HE

The women leaders shared several enablers that contributed to their navigating the challenges and advancing to academic leadership positions that they occupied or held at the time of the interview. The findings revealed a wealth of information about what they had to do and the support and contribution of mentors, academic networks, the institution, and family. The findings revealed five key themes about the enablers: hard work and dedication, mentorship, networks and collaboration, institutional support, and family support. Verbatim excerpts from participants' expressions are included to support the findings.

Affirmation and encouragement

Literature (Adamu, 2023; Madsen & Longman, 2020) shows that sometimes women lack self-belief when it comes to leadership and need to be motivated and encouraged to step into leadership. Interestingly, most of the women leaders in the study did not just apply for the positions they held, but were encouraged by their leaders and mentors to apply. Most indicated they did not see themselves as qualified for the positions. So, affirmation and encouragement to apply came from mentors and senior colleagues. These are some of their expressions:

> *Professor* […]….*encouraged me to apply for the job and affirmed me as an able person, which built my confidence.* (WL4)
> *The previous encouraged me to apply for promotion and for the position.* (WL6)

The findings of the study show that encouragement acts as a catalyst for self-belief and career progression (Madsen & Longman, 2020), among women. Adamu (2023) and Madsen and Longman (2020), who conducted a similar study involving women leaders, found that many women only considered leadership roles after targeted encouragement. This suggests that institutional cultures that normalise such affirmation may widen the leadership pipeline for women. This finding aligns with SCT's principle that social capital can be mobilised through trusted and developmental relationships where mentors and sponsors open access to opportunities (Coleman, 1988), for women to step into the terrain of leadership.

Hard work and dedication

Women sometimes feel pressured to work harder than required (Banker, 2023). The study's findings showed this as women repeatedly emphasised how hard they had to work, the sacrifices they had to make, and the dedication they had to show to achieve leadership positions. They felt that they had to prove themselves to qualify for leadership. They associated their exceptional levels of commitment, working beyond expectations, with demonstrating leadership potential. WL1 explicates:

> *I worked very hard, I do not want to lie. I worked evenings, weekends, whatever it took, I did that. I read, trying to teach myself the necessary techniques for a successful academic career. I would, honestly, sometimes have only two or three hours to sleep.*

Another woman expressed:

> *If we had meetings, I always availed myself to do more. If someone asked, "Who is willing to do this?", I always put my hand up. It is the willingness to go beyond your own work. If in your performance management you are supposed only to do A, B, and C, then you must do D, E, and F, on your own extra time, be willing to do more, because that is the way that people see you and realise that you are a leader.* (WL9)

The findings showed that women had to go the extra mile, dedicate much time to their duties, develop themselves, and succeed in their careers. There is a strong emphasis on having to prove oneself and excel to earn leadership positions. The study's findings affirm that Mbukanma and Strydom (2022) state that women must do more to overcome the barriers and address the challenges that cause gender imbalances within SA universities. Hlatshwayo et al. (2022) add that women must work twice as hard to occupy leadership positions in SA HE. This is also noted in other countries. For example, in a study conducted in Mexico involving 22 women leaders, women presented the same behaviour; they demonstrated resilience and were willing to take challenges to move up the ladder in their professional lives (Maheshwari et al., 2025). This shows that women are resilient, determined, and willing to do whatever it takes to move up the ladder, affirming RCT, which explains that women feel a need for extra labour to counteract prejudiced assumptions about their

competence (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Though this is good, it affects women's family life as they must work long hours and might neglect their families (Dyantyi, 2024).

Mentorship

Mentorship was a recurring theme, with women leaders attributing much of their success to guidance and support from their mentors. They regarded mentorship as an enabler in their leadership and shared the significant role of mentorship in their career and leadership growth.

WL 2 said:

> *When I got a job at […] University, the university's Vice-Chancellor happened to be a lady by the name of […]. She saw potential in me and took it upon herself to mentor me. I grew so much in my practice that I did not disappoint her. I think she was the game-changer in my life because she offered me opportunities. I think mentoring played a great part. I would say 80% of my success originated from my mentoring relationship with this lady.* (WL2)

WL7, who has a similar experience concerning mentorship, added:

> *I have had mentors, and I was mentored throughout my career, and that is what has really helped me. I always had somewhere to go and someone to discuss issues.*

The findings show the importance of mentorship in developing women leaders, affirming that mentorship enhances confidence and career navigation (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). Women who are mentored are likely to succeed in their careers, gain valuable insights, confidence, and encouragement (Dyantyi, 2024). The findings of a study by Maheshwari and Nayak (2022) showed that women in Vietnam HE were supported through mentorship, which enabled them to advance in their leadership, aligning with SCT, which views mentorship as a conduit for accessing institutional knowledge, networks, and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Mentorship directly builds social capital by offering guidance, advocacy, and access to influential networks (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022).

Networks and collaboration

Networking was repeatedly identified as an enabler. Most women valued networks and collaborations and expressed their impact on their careers and leadership. Local and international networks were vital for visibility and career growth. Women leaders elucidated:

> *I had a great network of people who used the same kind of tools for research that I used. We are a very small group and a very good community, we work together quite a lot, which also helped me.* (WL1)
> *Never underestimate the power of networking. You can become known through the value of your research and your ability to lecture well; that is great, but if you do not network, then your potential to grow will be limited, and nobody will see your growth. It is important to become involved in networks where people will get to know who you are and the value you can add. As a young career researcher, I joined the African Association of […], which was an immediate way to access everybody else in the country in the […] network.* (WL3)

Having local and international networks appeared necessary for the leadership journey and growth. This aligns with the findings from Moodly (2024), which showed that networking and collaboration contributed to strengthening the career trajectory of the women involved in the study. Networking allows women to share practical knowledge and experience, developing their leadership capacity, and contributes to women accessing leadership positions (Adamu, 2023). Networks can provide emotional support, access to information and resources, and opportunities for collaboration, which, in turn, can enhance well-being and opportunities for success (Coleman, 1988).

Family support

Family support, much of it from husbands of the women leaders, was common among the findings. Most women leaders expressed how much support they received from their husbands, who were in a similar field of work or understood their profession. The findings show that support from spouses and family members was a critical enabler, especially when partners shared academic backgrounds.

WL1 explicated:

> *I am also very fortunate that my husband is an academic like me, and we were trained for a PhD at the same university, used the same tools, and often wrote together, which is very useful. We understand how much work needs to go into this, and we have been working together like that.*

Similarly, WL4 shared:

> *On a personal level, I think this is very important, and I am grateful that I have an academic partner. I think because of that, he understood… we shared similar sorts of work responsibilities, and he was very supportive. Though I probably still take up the major responsibility at home, it is like 60% and my husband 40%.*

The findings show that family support is essential to women's leadership in HE. Studies on women's leadership show that women whose families support them can succeed in their careers and leadership. For example, a study by Maheshwari and Nayak (2022) showed that women who received family support in Vietnam could advance their academic leadership. Women whose husbands support them succeed in leadership. The evidence from a study conducted in Indonesia shows that husbands provide assistance and emotional support when women face challenges (Dhania et al., 2022). This kind of support also assists women in mitigating work–family conflicts that are identified as barriers. For example, sharing duties as part of support for women leaders contributes to their reaching leadership. Studies in Vietnam (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022) and SA (Dyantyi, 2024) show that when domestic responsibilities are shared, women can meet the demands of leadership roles. In SCT terms, family support represents a form of bonding social capital that underpins professional resilience (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

The findings showed that women leaders in the sampled institution experienced common challenges and enablers despite their race or experience in leadership positions. This may be due to the culture of the institution.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of nine women leaders in a South African university, revealing a complex interplay of institutional, cultural, and personal factors that both hinder and enable their advancement into leadership roles. The findings affirm and extend existing literature on gendered leadership in higher education, offering context-specific insights into the South African academic landscape. The findings reveal that women leaders in South African HE navigate a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and personal factors. Challenges such as the need to constantly prove competence to male colleagues, lack of peer and institutional support, and persistent work–family conflicts mirror the gendered leadership constraints described by RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These challenges reflect the enduring misalignment between the communal traits expected of women and the agentic qualities associated with leadership, creating a "double bind" that forces women to adjust their leadership style to gain legitimacy. The persistent need for women to prove themselves, particularly in male-dominated environments, reflects the central tenets of RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Participants described feeling scrutinised, undervalued, and compelled to adopt assertive or "masculine" leadership traits to gain legitimacy. This incongruity between societal expectations of femininity and leadership norms not only reinforces gender bias but also places emotional and psychological burdens on women leaders. These findings echo global patterns (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Maheshwari et al., 2025) but are intensified in South Africa by entrenched patriarchal norms (Booysen & Bosch, 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2022). The need to "perform" leadership in ways that align with male expectations undermines authentic leadership and contributes to burnout and self-doubt. Despite national policies promoting gender equity (e.g., Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998), participants reported a lack of institutional support structures to sustain their leadership success. This disconnect between policy and practice suggests that inclusion is often symbolic rather than substantive. Women are appointed to leadership roles but are not adequately equipped or supported to thrive. Without mentorship, leadership development programs, and inclusive cultures, women leaders are left to "sink or swim," perpetuating cycles of exclusion. Work-family conflict emerged as a significant barrier, with participants describing the strain of balancing professional duties with traditional domestic roles, reflecting broader societal expectations that women shoulder caregiving responsibilities, even when occupying demanding leadership positions (Dyantyi, 2024; Kaymakcioglu & Thomas, 2024). The findings suggest that leadership advancement for women is not merely a professional challenge but a deeply personal negotiation of identity, responsibility, and sacrifice. Institutions must recognise this dual burden and implement flexible policies that support work-life integration.

In contrast to these challenges, the study revealed powerful enablers for women to leadership in HE. The enablers identified in this study underscore the transformative power of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Mentorship, affirmation from senior leaders, active engagement in professional networks, supportive institutional cultures, and family backing provided women with both tangible resources and psychological empowerment to pursue and succeed in leadership roles. These findings reinforce earlier studies in South Africa (Dyantyi, 2024; Mbukanma & Strydom, 2022) and globally (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022; Thien et al., 2025) that emphasise relational and institutional supports as essential to overcoming systemic barriers. Mentorship, professional networks, and affirmation from senior colleagues played a pivotal role in participants' leadership journeys. These relational resources provided guidance, advocacy, emotional support, and confidence-building (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). The importance of mentorship, particularly from women leaders, was repeatedly emphasised, affirming literature highlighting gender-matched mentoring as a key driver of career advancement (Madsen & Longman, 2020; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2022). Similarly, access to professional networks enabled visibility, collaboration, and recognition, essential for leadership legitimacy. Where institutional culture was inclusive and supportive, women leaders thrived. Institutions with visible female role models and leadership development programs created environments where women's leadership was normalised and nurtured. This

finding underscores the importance of institutional transformation, not just in policy but in everyday practice and culture (Schreiber & Zinn, 2023). Institutions that actively cultivate leadership pipelines for women, celebrate diverse leadership styles, and embed gender equity into their ethos are more likely to retain and empower women leaders.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that women leaders in South African HE face persistent gendered barriers despite progressive equality policies. The challenges of proving oneself to male colleagues, limited institutional support, and managing competing family and professional roles are consistent with the misalignment between gender norms and leadership expectations described in RCT. These barriers remain deeply embedded in institutional cultures and societal attitudes. At the same time, the study highlights key enablers, mentorship, affirmation, networking, supportive institutional cultures, and family support, which align with SCT's emphasis on the value of relationships and networks in career advancement. These enablers demonstrate that when women have access to both relational and institutional resources, they are better positioned to navigate systemic constraints and thrive in leadership roles. The findings indicate a need for a dual approach: dismantling structural and cultural barriers while actively building and sustaining networks, mentoring relationships, and inclusive institutional practices supporting women's leadership trajectories.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite offering rich insights into the experiences of women leaders in South African higher education, this study is subject to several limitations. The small sample size, drawn from a single institution, involving nine women, restricts the generalisability of the findings across broader university contexts. Future research should further explore the lived experiences of women leaders in various HE institutions across South Africa, have a bigger sample, and explore policy development around women leadership in HE. Future studies could also use multiple data collection methods to capture more detailed information.

RECCOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made:

HEIs should formalise mentorship programmes that pair aspiring women leaders with senior mentors, particularly female role models, to provide guidance, advocacy, and access to decision-making spaces. Resolve problems associated with the mentorship of women leaders by engaging with them to identify the best possible mentorship. Source and develop female mentors in leadership positions who will mentor women for leadership. Embed gender-responsive leadership development initiatives, equipping women with skills while challenging institutional norms that devalue their leadership styles. Foster inclusive institutional cultures by promoting visible female leadership role models and recognising diverse leadership approaches. Implement structured support systems for women appointed to leadership positions, including orientation, leadership coaching, and ongoing peer support groups.

Policy makers should strengthen accountability mechanisms in equity policies, ensuring that representation targets for women in leadership are matched with substantive support for career progression. Incentivise family-friendly workplace policies such as flexible work arrangements and on-campus childcare facilities to mitigate work–family conflicts.

Women leaders and aspiring leaders should actively engage in professional networks locally and internationally to expand influence and opportunities. They should seek out and cultivate mentoring relationships that offer both psychosocial support and strategic career guidance.

By implementing these strategies, HE institutions can move beyond policy rhetoric to practical, sustainable change, strengthening the leadership pipeline and contributing to more diverse, equitable, and effective leadership across the sector.

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