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Does the Gender of a Leader have an Impact on Leadership in Higher Education?

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Abstract
To understand the significance of the experience of being a female leader in higher education, phenomenological research was done, the results of which are summarized in this article. Due to disparities in the representation of female leaders, barriers to advancement, and disconnects in development activities, the experience of women is challenging. Ten individuals were the subject of in-depth interviews, which produced four major themes that shed light on this interaction. In all higher education leadership positions, the four themes are common. Which are: (1) what women are fighting for (2) how they survived adversity (3) how they interact with others and (4) how they move forward. Further details regarding how women handle their personal and professional life as well as leadership roles in higher education were revealed by the studies. In addition, what challenges women faced in achieving leadership roles in higher education, as well as their management and leadership philosophies.
Keywords: women in leadership; higher education leaders, transformational leadership style

1. Introduction

Demographic statistics reveal both a noticeable increase and a persistent imbalance in women's involvement in leadership roles (US Department of Labor, 2022). Although women are entering the workforce in larger numbers and gradually moving into supervisory and mid-level management positions, their representation in senior executive roles continues to be limited (Smith et al., 2018). Scholars suggest that this slow progress can largely be attributed to a combination of organizational barriers, interpersonal challenges, and individual-level difficulties (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003; Hook et al., 2018).

One of the most commonly cited explanations is the concept of the **glass ceiling**—an unseen barrier that restricts upward mobility, often reinforced by cultural stereotypes, gendered expectations, and structural discrimination within

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institutions (Carnes et al., 2015; Barr, 1996; Coaxum, 2017). In addition to vertical restrictions, researchers have highlighted the presence of **glass walls**, which limit women to lateral movements or confine them to particular domains, thereby constraining broader career advancement opportunities (Tariq et al., 2021; Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003). These barriers illustrate how advancement is not only about reaching higher positions but also about navigating structural patterns that channel women away from influential leadership roles.

Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain why women encounter difficulties in reaching top-tier leadership. Many of these arguments have been supported through surveys that gather women's perceptions and self-reported experiences across different organizational contexts (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Triandis, 2018). While such quantitative studies are important for identifying broad trends, they often fail to capture the **lived experiences** of women who have successfully broken through these barriers. In other words, although surveys provide numerical evidence of disparities, they do not sufficiently explore the nuanced realities of women who have managed to secure leadership positions despite these challenges.

This gap in the literature underscores the importance of exploring women's leadership journeys through a more qualitative and interpretive lens. Understanding not only the barriers but also the strategies, resilience, and support systems that have enabled women to succeed is crucial. Higher education, in particular, provides a valuable context for such an investigation, as universities are often seen as progressive spaces yet still mirror the same gendered disparities found in other sectors. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon of women's leadership in higher education, with a focus on the meaning, challenges, and significance of their experiences. By doing so, it aims to contribute to both scholarly debates and practical strategies for fostering more inclusive leadership structures.

2. Conceptual Framework

Organizations today increasingly recognize that barriers to women's career progression are not only an equity concern but also a factor that can negatively influence institutional performance in competitive environments. When women perceive that their professional growth has stalled, it often leads to diminished motivation, higher turnover, and lower organizational productivity. Thus, the so-called "glass ceiling" becomes a costly reality in terms of both human capital and institutional effectiveness. In the context of higher education, the underrepresentation of women at the top echelons of leadership is well documented, particularly in roles such as presidents, vice chancellors, and chancellors (Xiang et al., 2017; Burkinshaw et al., 2018). Over the past two decades, the scholarly community has produced a growing body of literature on women in educational leadership, yet gaps remain in terms of understanding how gender bias specifically shapes leadership trajectories and leadership styles (Mythili, 2017; Banker & Banker, 2017).

One recurring theme across leadership studies is the notion that effective leadership is often framed in ways that exclude or undervalue behaviors traditionally associated with femininity. This intersection between gendered expectations and leadership standards invites further inquiry into the role of bias

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and stereotypes in shaping women's leadership experiences, especially within higher education (Alex-Assensoh, 2012; Madden, 2011; Cook & Glass, 2014; Parker, 2015; White, 2012; Maranto & Griffin, 2011). The persistence of these stereotypes reinforces the need for research that investigates how cultural and organizational prejudices intersect with women's advancement and influence their approach to leadership.

Current theoretical approaches often draw on behavioral and organizational perspectives to explain the structural discrimination women encounter in executive search processes. The constructivist paradigm, as described by Creswell (2015), emphasizes flexible strategies that highlight participants' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences. Unlike more rigid theories, constructivism provides space to capture the dynamic, context-specific realities that women face when navigating patriarchal institutions. Applied to gender equity research, this lens helps illuminate how entrenched power structures in higher education limit women's opportunities to secure executive positions (Hirschmann & Regier, 2018). Political scientists describe this interplay as "subjectivity freedom," underscoring how law, ideology, language, and other social norms collectively shape the identities and opportunities of individuals (Hirschmann & Regier, 2018).

As women attempt to move upward within academia, they must grapple with institutional cultures that often remain deeply patriarchal. To succeed in leadership searches, many women adapt their behavior to align with organizational expectations (O'Connor, 2018; Reis & Grady, 2018). Linguists such as Lakoff (2004) and communication theorists like Tannen, Hamilton, and Schiffrin (2015) argue, drawing from difference theory (Tannen, 1990), that women are not inherently hesitant but instead become cautious because of cultural and structural limitations. These findings highlight how societal and institutional constraints shape communication and confidence in professional settings. Complementary scholarship by Bolman and Deal (2013) demonstrates how reframing organizational structures can help dismantle barriers, providing strategies for reducing inequities and promoting women's leadership advancement (Thompson, 2000).

The conceptual grounding for this study draws from both Tannen's (1994) difference theory and the four-frame leadership model of Uzarski and Broome (2019). Together, these frameworks assist in understanding how women navigate presidential and chancellor-level search procedures. Leadership in higher education today requires far more than traditional managerial skills; it demands adaptability in the face of technological, economic, and social transformations. As Thelin (2011) and Rhee and Sigler (2015) note, universities in the 21st century must contend with technological innovations, changing academic disciplines, heightened competition for a shrinking student population, and evolving stakeholder demands. These dynamics necessitate leaders who are not only administrators but also visionaries capable of interdisciplinary engagement (Selingo et al., 2017). Research indicates that women often thrive in such contexts because their leadership styles tend to emphasize collaboration, communication, and adaptability (Hironimus-Wendt & Dedjoe, 2015; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Haslam & Ryan, 2008).

Nevertheless, the enduring difficulties women face can be traced back to 20th-century conceptions of leadership identity. Traditional leadership theories often

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described effective leaders using masculine-coded traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and decisiveness (Debebe, 2011; Enke, 2014; de Vries & van den Brink, 2016). These trait-based frameworks, widely adopted by organizations, systematically embedded male bias into leadership training and development programs (Ibarra et al., 2013; Enke, 2014; Robinson & Lipman-Blumen, 2017). In contrast, the demands of the 21st century are shifting leadership expectations. In an interconnected, digital world, relational and collaborative approaches are becoming more valuable than hierarchical and authoritarian ones (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Mack, 2015; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The foundation for much of this understanding traces back to John Gumperz (1983), whose pioneering research on cross-cultural communication revealed systematic miscommunication between men and women as a result of differing linguistic styles. Building on this, Tannen (1990, 1994) conceptualized gender as a form of cultural difference, which, when combined with her later collaborations (Tannen, Hamilton, & Schiffrin, 2015), provides insight into how gendered communication patterns contribute to misunderstandings in professional environments.

In recent years, organizations have also begun to acknowledge that the perspectives and skills women bring to leadership roles are not liabilities but valuable assets. Meta-analyses suggest that women leaders are generally as effective as men and, in some respects, more likely to employ participatory and collaborative approaches (Northouse, 2007). As institutional boundaries become more fluid, the ability to lead through networks, partnerships, and cross-departmental collaboration becomes increasingly essential (Rosener, 1995; Ready, 2004). Women's relational style is well-suited to these demands, further reinforcing the importance of diversifying leadership pools.

Despite this recognition, relatively little research examines the specific experiences that enable women to navigate critical career transitions. Scholars like Bernthal, Cook, and Smith (2001) argue that understanding the experiences that matter most to women during these transitions is crucial for fostering advancement. Gaining broad-based management or line experience has been shown to be essential for preparing leaders for senior roles in higher education (Estrich, 2000). Without such opportunities, women remain disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that women face a unique blend of structural, cultural, and interpersonal obstacles in their pursuit of top leadership roles in higher education. However, it also highlights that the very qualities traditionally undervalued by organizations—collaboration, inclusivity, and adaptability—are increasingly vital for effective leadership in today's complex academic landscape. Thus, the challenge for institutions lies not only in dismantling outdated barriers but also in recognizing and leveraging the strengths that women leaders bring to higher education.

3. Findings

The position of a higher education leader was regarded as being extremely difficult and demanding, both intellectually and socially. The following four key themes arose because of the nature of the job requirements and the personal traits of the women holding these roles, which resulted in a distinctive style and method of doing the job.

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Theme 1: What Women Are Fighting For

In the early stages of their careers, many women in economics encountered stark gender disparities. While graduate programs often included a relatively balanced number of male and female students, very few women advanced into faculty positions. One participant recalled that in her PhD class, there were many female peers, yet she was the only one who later entered academia. She described how rare it was to even secure a job in her field. At an introductory departmental meeting, the chair presented two new faculty members in strikingly different ways: for a male colleague, he highlighted his doctorate, alma mater, and publications in prestigious journals. For her, however, the introduction was framed around personal details—"she is married and has no children." The difference in emphasis reflected a form of bias that was both troubling and discouraging. Rather than letting the incident pass unnoticed, she chose to confront it by scheduling a meeting with the chair to point out the unconscious bias embedded in his words.

Another woman emphasized how doubt and discouragement from others became fuel for her determination. She explained that whenever someone told her she could not succeed—because of her accent, ethnicity, or gender—she felt compelled to work harder and prove them wrong. Being told "you cannot do this" became a motivation to excel and demonstrate her capability.

Across participants, the study found that women in higher education leadership consistently experienced bias and exclusion. These ranged from subtle, second-generation biases to overt acts of racism, sexism, ageism, and even sizeism. Women of color, in particular, reported being subjected to layered discrimination from both men and women in the academy. Such challenges align with existing literature showing that structural inequities persist within U.S. higher education.

The research also confirmed the importance of mentors, sponsors, and leadership development programs. These forms of support enabled women to build confidence, adopt new leadership behaviors, and expand their professional networks. However, participants stressed that while these programs helped with skill-building and self-perception, they rarely addressed the deep emotional toll of explicit racism and sexism. Processing such experiences required private conversations within personal support circles—spouses, family members, trusted friends, and close colleagues—who provided empathy and validation during difficult moments.

The narratives revealed that despite occupying high-level leadership roles, women still carried the weight of discrimination. Their reflections underscored both the resilience required to persist and the urgent need for structural change in higher education.

Theme 2: How They Survived Adversity
Resilience, Balance, and Self-Care in Women's Leadership

One of the most recurring themes in women's narratives about leadership is the pursuit of balance. Many participants highlighted that sustaining both professional and personal roles required intentional prioritization. For instance, one respondent explained that she managed her time by carefully scheduling family commitments first. Weekly family activities, children's programs, and faith-based engagements were deliberately placed on her calendar to ensure that

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they would not be overlooked. Only after these priorities were secured did she structure her professional responsibilities. She emphasized that although her work generally followed an 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. routine, the flexibility of her schedule allowed her to adjust when necessary. If her children had an event during the day or needed medical attention, she could rearrange her work—starting earlier in the morning, extending into the evening, or working after her children went to bed. This flexibility, she noted, was essential for achieving a sense of equilibrium.

Another participant described the challenges of being labeled a "doer" rather than a "big idea person." She explained that this perception often resulted in her receiving more responsibilities than others because colleagues and supervisors trusted that she would complete the tasks, no matter how busy she was. She recounted approaching her supervisor for advice, only to leave the meeting with additional duties assigned to her. Despite already feeling overburdened, she fulfilled the new obligations because they came from her superior. Reflecting on this, she recognized that while her ability to get things done was valuable, it also placed her at risk of burnout. She admitted that "doers" often invite more tasks because they rarely refuse, a cycle that can be difficult to break. Although she acknowledged this pattern, she also conceded that changing her natural inclination to take on work was unlikely.

Across the interviews, **resilience emerged as the unifying thread** that enabled women to navigate such challenges. When discussing strategies for overcoming hardship, participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of self-care. Yet, the meaning of self-care varied. For some, it was centered on family commitments, particularly raising children or caring for elderly relatives. For others, balance was closely tied to spiritual practices. Many highlighted prayer, meditation, or religious observances as key sources of stability and strength. These practices not only offered emotional comfort but also provided clarity during stressful times, reinforcing their sense of purpose and direction.

Integrity also appeared as both a leadership value and a protective mechanism. Women frequently described making decisions guided by their principles and ethics, even when these choices were costly to their careers. Some recounted facing institutional resistance—hitting a "brick wall"—yet choosing to act according to what was right for their communities, organizations, or students. Such decisions often required sacrifice; however, they also affirmed the participants' commitment to their values. Integrity thus became a shield, enabling them to preserve their self-respect and credibility even in difficult circumstances.

Equally significant was the reliance on community support networks. In moments of strain, participants turned to trusted circles—family, friends, professional peers, and mentors—for guidance and reassurance. These networks provided safe spaces where women could be vulnerable, discuss experiences of discrimination, and process personal or professional struggles. Conversations with mentors and elders, in particular, were highly valued for offering perspective when participants faced complex decisions. The confidentiality and empathy inherent in these interactions were seen as essential for healing and resilience. Community ties thus reinforced self-care practices, allowing women to reconnect with their identity and strength.

A key insight from the participants is the recognition that leaders must actively

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protect their well-being. Ignoring practices of self-care, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, was perceived as a risk that could accelerate fatigue or burnout. Therefore, women stressed the need to recommit to these routines, especially in times of crisis or heightened stress. This daily attention to balance—through prayer, family time, or community connection—was not only self-preserving but also an act of leadership. By caring for themselves, these women modelled sustainability for their teams and organizations.

Ultimately, the narratives show that women leaders navigate their responsibilities through a continuous negotiation of priorities. Balance is not a static state but a process that is recalibrated depending on family demands, workplace expectations, and unforeseen challenges. Resilience is fostered through a combination of prioritization, faith, integrity, and community ties. These practices safeguard personal well-being while also enhancing leadership effectiveness. By upholding their principles and caring for themselves, women extend the same ethic of care to those they lead, thereby strengthening their organizations and communities.

In conclusion, the accounts underscore that leadership is not merely about organizational efficiency but about **sustaining the self** in the midst of competing demands. Resilience is cultivated through intentional practices—prioritization, ethical decision-making, reliance on faith, and community support—that enable women to persist with integrity. The commitment to self-care is not an indulgence but a necessary leadership strategy, ensuring that they remain effective and compassionate leaders who can guide others even during crises.

Theme 3: How they interact with others

Collaborative and Feminist-Inspired Leadership in Higher Education

One participant described her leadership philosophy as grounded in service and teamwork. Rather than adopting a top–down perspective, she emphasized working alongside her colleagues, valuing them as collaborators rather than subordinates. In her words, leadership was about creating conditions that enabled others to succeed. This description reflects a democratic, transparent, and collaborative style, though the participant herself was uncertain whether it aligned most with transformational or servant leadership.

The broader discussion among women leaders in higher education revealed similar tendencies. Their approaches to management were marked by collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility. Many of them spoke of coaching, mentoring, and consulting with their teams, ensuring that decision-making processes incorporated diverse perspectives. This style of leadership resonates with descriptors often attributed to women in leadership—such as participatory, democratic, and inclusive—though participants stressed that their approaches were less about conforming to gendered expectations and more about building effective, ethical organizations.

A strong theme that emerged was the idea of reciprocity. Many participants highlighted how earlier leaders, mentors, or colleagues had guided and supported them, shaping their values and professional pathways. In turn, they felt responsible for "paying it forward," particularly by uplifting emerging women leaders and supporting students and colleagues from underrepresented backgrounds. For them, leadership was not simply about authority but about

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stewardship—modeling integrity, encouraging equity, and ensuring that others had the resources and opportunities to thrive.

Another significant aspect of their leadership practice involved networks of support. During challenging times, participants frequently leaned on mentors, peers, and personal communities for guidance and resilience. These relationships created safe spaces where they could reflect, problem-solve, and strategize, reinforcing both their confidence and their commitment to their values.

Interestingly, many participants acknowledged that while they did not consciously label themselves as "feminist leaders," their practices aligned with feminist and transformational leadership theories. They consistently emphasized collaboration, consultation, and inclusivity in decision-making, and sought to use their positions of privilege to challenge inequities within their institutions. In this sense, their leadership style combined elements of feminist and ecofeminist approaches with transformational principles, producing positive organizational outcomes. By centering integrity, collaboration, and shared responsibility, these women demonstrated that effective leadership in higher education can simultaneously advance institutional goals and address systemic inequities.

Theme 4: How They Move Forward
Leadership, Resilience, and Transformational Practice in Higher Education

My leadership philosophy is grounded in trust, empowerment, and collaboration. I place strong value on surrounding myself with capable individuals and then providing them the autonomy to work independently. I avoid micromanagement, preferring instead to offer a broad vision or idea and allow my colleagues to explore solutions. When challenges arise, they are encouraged to return for dialogue and problem-solving, but the responsibility for execution remains with them. I see this as the most effective way to foster professional growth, as individuals often learn best when given the space to navigate challenges themselves.

Decision-making in my practice also emphasizes inclusivity. I actively seek the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders before arriving at conclusions, recognizing that consensus is not always possible. Nevertheless, when people have had the opportunity to voice their perspectives and understand the rationale behind the final decision, they are more likely to accept and respect the outcome. This approach was particularly important during the COVID-19 crisis, when difficult institutional decisions were required. By gathering diverse groups, engaging in open dialogue, and weighing multiple perspectives, I was able to facilitate transparent and informed decisions, even when they were not universally popular.

Research on discrimination and leadership has long noted that women face distinct barriers to recognition and advancement. Eagly and Karau (2002) observed that women are often held to higher standards of competence than men, where effectiveness is judged not only by results but also by the visible effort and long hours invested. Many female leaders report the need to exceed expectations consistently in order to be perceived as equally capable. This dynamic reflects broader socialized stereotypes and underscores why additional training or

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development programs, while valuable, cannot alone dismantle entrenched attitudes within organizations.

In this context, self-leadership emerges as a powerful tool for women in higher education. Defined as the ability to harness personal strengths, maintain resilience, and manage adversity, self-leadership provides the foundation for transformational practice (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018). Female leaders who draw on an internal compass rooted in personal values and purpose are able to remain effective even when confronted with systemic prejudice, racial or gender discrimination, or personal challenges. By reframing difficulties as opportunities to build resilience, they maintain momentum and model strength for their teams.

This study found that many women leaders embody principles of transformational leadership—collaboration, inclusivity, inspiration, and ethical guidance—even if they do not explicitly label themselves as transformational leaders (Astin & Astin, 2000). They tend to create environments where individuals feel valued, motivated, and supported to contribute their best. Importantly, these leaders' emphasis on inclusivity aligns closely with feminist leadership ideals, which prioritize equity, shared responsibility, and dismantling hierarchical barriers.

The combination of feminist and transformational approaches allows women leaders to create institutional cultures that are not only more collaborative but also more just. By leading with integrity, involving others in decision-making, and modeling resilience, these leaders challenge gendered and racial hierarchies that persist in higher education. However, it is also evident that consciously embracing transformational leadership could amplify their impact, providing a systematic framework to address structural inequities more effectively.

In conclusion, women in higher education leadership navigate unique challenges shaped by bias and heightened expectations of competence. Yet through trust-based leadership, inclusivity in decision-making, and resilience rooted in self-leadership, they have developed practices that align with both transformational and feminist leadership theories. These approaches not only advance organizational goals but also foster more equitable, collaborative, and sustainable academic environments. The evidence suggests that if applied more deliberately, transformational leadership strategies could further dismantle barriers and create meaningful structural change in higher education leadership.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that women leaders in higher education share four interconnected experiences that collectively shape their leadership capacity. These aspects—collaborative influence, resilience and adaptability, self-determination, and balancing multiple roles—function as a reinforcing cycle. Each element builds upon the others, creating a leadership identity that is both strong and sustainable. Recognizing these shared experiences provides a pathway for addressing the persistent barriers women face and diversifying leadership pipelines in higher education.

Building Cooperative Relationships and Exercising Influence

A defining characteristic among participants was the ability to foster meaningful relationships and leverage them to create institutional impact. Many women

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described consciously adapting their communication style to different contexts and audiences, highlighting an awareness of how influence is gained through flexibility and connection. By engaging in what they called a "connect-and-collaborate" approach, they were able to generate trust, encourage teamwork, and stimulate innovation.

This leadership style emphasized inclusivity and partnership, often manifesting in practices such as collective decision-making, consultation with peers, and active mentoring. Participants noted that such relational strategies helped them manage change more effectively and mobilize support for organizational goals. In male-dominated spaces, where hierarchical or competitive models of leadership are often privileged, this approach provided an alternative path to authority—one rooted in collaboration rather than command.

Developing Resilience and Adaptability

Resilience and adaptability emerged as essential competencies for women navigating leadership in higher education. The participants echoed earlier research that found female executives frequently contend with multiple, overlapping pressures: professional expectations, the symbolic weight of being pioneers in leadership roles, and the ongoing responsibilities of family and community (Ruderman & Ohlott, 2002; Rosener, 1995).

The women in this study consistently emphasized their determination to take control of their own trajectories. For many, this meant learning how to resist or reframe gender stereotypes, understanding the explicit and implicit rules of organizational culture, and cultivating the ability to adapt in environments often resistant to female leadership. They also spoke of the importance of embracing ambiguity and multitasking as necessary survival skills.

Work–life balance was another recurring theme. Leaders described the continual effort required to prioritize family, career, and community obligations without sacrificing personal well-being. Strategies included setting clear priorities, modeling balance for others, and drawing strength from supportive personal relationships. This balancing act, though demanding, was framed not as a weakness but as a vital part of leadership identity—demonstrating that resilience is not only about persistence but also about maintaining equilibrium.

Implications for Human Resource Development

The study's findings carry significant implications for human resource development (HRD) within higher education. First, the inner drive described by participants—shaped by principles such as honesty, autonomy, and resilience—should be recognized as a leadership competency in its own right. HR professionals can play a role in identifying, nurturing, and leveraging these traits to expand the leadership pipeline for women.

Second, because these leadership positions are complex and demanding, institutions should acknowledge that women who succeed in them bring not only technical expertise but also a distinctive set of adaptive skills. Training and development initiatives should, therefore, address the realities of these roles by preparing women for the simultaneous pressures of leadership, symbolic representation, and family responsibilities. Mentorship programs and leadership development curricula can be tailored to highlight coping strategies, resilience-building practices, and collaborative approaches to influence.

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Third, the challenges reported by participants underscore the importance of designing HR systems that actively dismantle barriers. Selection processes should not only evaluate candidates for their professional qualifications but also account for the broader skill sets women leaders demonstrate, such as adaptability, relational capacity, and value-driven decision-making. By embedding these themes into recruitment, evaluation, and promotion practices, HR professionals can contribute to breaking the "glass wall" that continues to restrict women's advancement.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of women leaders in higher education highlight the importance of cooperative influence, resilience, adaptability, and balance in shaping effective leadership. Together, these elements operate as a reinforcing loop, enabling women not only to survive but to thrive within complex and often exclusionary institutional cultures. For human resource professionals and higher education institutions, the message is clear: supporting women's leadership requires more than skill training—it requires systemic recognition of the unique strengths and challenges women bring to leadership roles. By doing so, institutions can expand the pool of high-potential women leaders and create more equitable pathways to executive positions.

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