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**EXPERIENCES FACED BY FEMALE STUDENT LEADERS IN TRADITIONALLY MALE-DOMINATED LEADERSHIP ROLES AT A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY****Sinazo Majola<sup>1\*</sup>, Bulelwa Makena<sup>2</sup>, Ntando Elliot Mpahla<sup>3</sup>***Walter Sisulu University, South Africa*<sup>1\*</sup> [smajola@wsu.ac.za](mailto:smajola@wsu.ac.za) (Corresponding author); <sup>2</sup> [bmakena@wsu.ac.za](mailto:bmakena@wsu.ac.za); <sup>3</sup> [nmpahla@wsu.ac.za](mailto:nmpahla@wsu.ac.za)*Received 18 May 2026; accepted 21 August 2026; published 30 September 2026*

**Abstract.** This paper explores the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African University. Given the gender differences often present in leadership positions in higher education, this paper aims to examine the challenges these student leaders face, the strategies they employ to overcome obstacles, and the impact of their leadership on the university community. The paper used a qualitative research methodology. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, as the researchers deemed them knowledgeable about the problem under study. The researchers utilised 5 female student leaders who hold prominent leadership positions in various student organisations, including student government, academic societies, and cultural groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe participants' responses and gather data. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse data. Findings of the paper show that although female student leaders encounter many difficulties, such as stereotyping, discrimination based on gender, and a lack of institutional support, they also show resiliency and flexibility in overcoming these barriers. This paper highlights the need for inclusive policies and support systems at a selected university and advances our understanding of leadership dynamics in a gendered setting. The paper concludes that targeted mentorship, gender-specific training, and inclusive policies are crucial for empowering female student leaders and fostering an equitable leadership environment. Recommendations include establishing mentorship programs, facilitating networking opportunities, and reviewing organisational policies to address gender biases. This research offers valuable insights into gendered leadership dynamics in South African higher education, underscoring the need for institutional reforms to promote diversity and gender equality in student governance. It underscores the importance of supportive environments in enabling women to realise their leadership potential and advance social justice in academic settings.

**Keywords:** male-dominated spaces; gender-diverse leaders; leadership positions; higher education

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**JEL Classifications:** I2, I3

## 1. Introduction

A traditionally male-dominated leadership refers to positions of authority and influence that have historically been occupied predominantly by men (Geffner, 2023). In higher education, a relevant example is the role of Student Union President or Student Government Leader. Historically, these roles have been primarily held by men across many universities worldwide. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) added that Individuals in these positions are responsible for organising student activities, representing student interests, advocating for student rights, and influencing university policies affecting the student body. Despite ongoing efforts to promote gender diversity, these leadership roles continue to exhibit a higher representation of men, reflecting longstanding gender disparities in university leadership.

Higher education leadership has traditionally mirrored larger gender inequalities in society, with males typically holding most leadership positions, even at the student leadership level (Moodly, 2024). Globally, women's access to education has increased, but structural, cultural, and societal issues that impede equal representation continue to produce gender inequalities in leadership roles (Risman, 2018). Muthuswamy and Savithri (2025) argued that historical injustices, cultural norms, and institutional factors that interact with gender to affect leadership opportunities and experiences further exacerbate existing discrepancies.

A robust understanding is that, at universities, student leadership is essential for influencing policies, representing a range of student interests, and forming campus culture. In traditionally male-dominated entities such as student government, academic societies, and cultural clubs, female student leaders frequently face significant obstacles. Stereotyping, gender-based discrimination, and occasionally insufficient institutional support systems are among the barriers that prevent female students from fully participating and exerting influence (Muthuswamy & Savithri, 2025; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). In this instance, fostering inclusive leadership environments that represent a range of views and experiences requires an understanding of these obstacles and how female student leaders overcome them.

This paper, therefore, explored the experiences of female student leaders in leadership roles at a selected South African university. The focus is on investigating the specific challenges these women face, the strategies they deploy to overcome these barriers, and the influence of their leadership on the broader university community. Employing a qualitative methodology allowed for in-depth insight into the lived experiences of these student leaders, shedding light on the complexities of leadership within a gendered context. The paper contributed to the expanding corpus of research on leadership and gender in higher education, particularly in light of the distinct sociopolitical context of South African universities. The results influenced institutional policy by emphasising the need for inclusive, empowering policies that empower female student leaders and advance gender parity in leadership positions. From these results, the researchers found that many studies worldwide have examined the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles. Still, no study has been conducted at a selected South African university. As such, a research question arose: What are the experiences and challenges faced by female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African university?

### *Background*

The ideal situation for higher education is gender equality, with varied and inclusive campus leadership, reflected in the full participation and success of female student leaders in roles that have historically been held by men (Tshipani, 2021). The reality at the chosen South African university, however, shows enduring gender inequality, with female student leaders encountering major obstacles like gender-based discrimination, stereotyping, and a lack of institutional support that restricts their efficacy and career prospects (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). In addition to jeopardising the growth and empowerment of female student leaders, this disparity between the ideal and the actual limits the wider university community's ability to gain from equal representation and a diversity of viewpoints.

Among the repercussions of this discrepancy are persistent gender biases and unequal power dynamics within university leadership structures, which limit women's leadership development and career options (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). Additionally, the marginalisation of female leaders harms the university's culture and its compliance with national gender equality goals, undermining efforts towards social justice and inclusivity. These issues risk escalating structural injustices and reducing the possibility of revolutionary leadership in student government if left unchecked.

Therefore, the suggested remedy is a thorough investigation into the real-life experiences of female student leaders, with an emphasis on identifying the difficulties they face and the coping mechanisms they use, and

evaluating the effectiveness of current support networks. The paper's conclusions are to guide the creation of targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, gender-responsive leadership training, and inclusive institutional policies, to empower female student leaders and foster a welcoming atmosphere that defies longstanding gender stereotypes (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). By encouraging fair participation and strengthening women's leadership abilities in higher education, these initiatives seek to close the gap between the ideal and reality.

An important consideration of this paper is its capacity to enhance understanding of the distinct experiences and obstacles faced by female student leaders in roles that have historically been dominated by men at a particular South African university (Mkhize, 2022). The paper provides important insights into how gender dynamics influence leadership experiences in higher education by emphasising obstacles such as discrimination, gender stereotyping, and a lack of institutional support. This knowledge is essential for guiding university policies and procedures aimed at fostering more welcoming and encouraging environments for women in leadership roles (Shubhanshi, 2026).

Additionally, there is a broader conversation on gender equality and leadership in higher education, particularly in the South African context, where historical and societal factors strongly shape gender roles. The paper provides useful advice for creating mentorship programs, leadership development courses, and support networks tailored to women's needs by describing the tenacity and tactics used by female student leaders to overcome challenges (Geffner, 2023). To create a leadership culture that celebrates diversity and advances social justice in educational institutions, the paper ultimately aims to empower female student leaders and advance gender equity in student governance.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### *Gender and Leadership in Higher Education*

Historically, men have held most leadership positions in higher education institutions, reflecting broader societal norms and power dynamics (Moodly, 2024). In addition to senior academic roles held by men, there is a noticeable gap at the student leadership level, where men predominate, particularly in student government and several academic societies perceived as typically masculine (Bush et al., 2022). Systemic obstacles such as gender stereotyping, corporate cultures that value male values, and restricted access to professional networks and mentorship have resulted in women's under-representation in leadership positions worldwide (Zahoor et al., 2025). Correa, Glas, and Opara (2025) added that females remain underrepresented in academic roles, particularly in leadership positions that shape the future direction of higher education and impact society at large.

In South Africa, gender inequalities in leadership are further nuanced by the country's socio-political history and ongoing efforts to redress past injustices. Universities have made strides toward gender transformation; however, women often remain marginalised in leadership, both formally and informally (Bosch, 2019). The intersection of gender with race, class, and culture complicates women's leadership experiences, especially within student leadership structures, where societal expectations shape both self-perceptions and external perceptions of female leaders (Dlamini & Mnguni, 2025).

#### *Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership*

Gender-based barriers that prevent women from assuming leadership positions are regularly identified by research. One major barrier is stereotyping, in which women are frequently viewed as less capable or as authoritative leaders, especially in settings that have historically been controlled by men (Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). Discrimination, marginalisation, and heightened scrutiny of women's choices and leadership philosophies can result from these misconceptions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Social constraints

associated with traditional gender roles, which require women to prioritise family obligations over leadership commitments, exacerbate these obstacles for student leaders (Sokani, 2025). Boerner, Schwarzmaier and Tagos (2025) found that women tend to be less motivated to take on leadership positions than men.

Furthermore, organisational cultures within universities often reflect and reinforce male-dominated leadership paradigms, creating environments that are less welcoming or supportive of women leaders (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). A lack of institutional support structures, such as mentoring programs, leadership development tailored to women, and networking opportunities, exacerbates these challenges, leading to feelings of isolation and restricted professional growth (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

#### *Resilience and Strategies for Overcoming Barriers*

Despite the difficulties women face in leadership roles, studies highlight the resilience and adaptability of women leaders, who actively employ a range of strategies to navigate and overcome barriers. These strategies include building informal support networks among peers, leveraging role models, and engaging in continuous self-improvement and leadership development (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). Female student leaders often demonstrate flexibility, balancing academic, social, and leadership responsibilities while challenging gender norms through advocacy and visible leadership (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Empowering women leaders through targeted interventions such as mentorship, leadership training, and inclusive policies has been shown to enhance women's leadership effectiveness and satisfaction. Transformational leadership theory, which emphasises inspiration, individualised support, and empowerment, offers a useful lens for understanding how women leaders motivate others and drive change in challenging environments (Adeoye, Baharun, and Munawwaroh, 2025).

#### *Support Systems for Women Leaders in Higher Education*

Support systems are crucial to fostering gender equity in leadership. Effective mentorship programs, leadership development workshops, peer networks, and institutional policies designed to address gender biases have proven essential in advancing women's leadership (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). In South African universities, some institutions have introduced gender equity frameworks and leadership initiatives; however, disparities in implementation and cultural resistance remain challenges (Akala, 2018). Understanding how female student leaders experience and access support systems in their unique contexts will inform practical recommendations to enhance institutional support and foster a more inclusive leadership culture.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework**

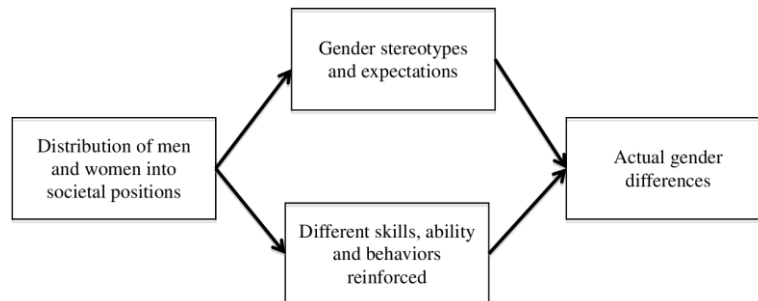
The Transformational Leadership Theory of Bass and Riggio (2006) and the Social Role Theory of Eagly and Kite (1987) serve as the foundation for this paper on the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership positions at a particular South African university. Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that Transformational Leadership Theory, effective leaders inspire and motivate followers to go above and beyond expectations by cultivating an inclusive vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. This notion is especially pertinent to understanding how female leaders fulfil their duties in male-dominated environments by motivating change, questioning accepted wisdom, and empowering others despite structural obstacles. Examining how female student leaders exercise influence and promote favourable organisational outcomes is made possible by its emphasis on leadership as a dynamic and relational process.



**Figure 1.** The Transformational leadership Theory Bass & Riggo (2006)

The image in Figure 1 shows a leader guiding and inspiring a team through communication, innovation, and personal support, as seen in activities such as presenting ideas, mentoring, and encouraging collaboration. The picture demonstrates how effective leaders motivate and empower individuals to achieve shared goals and drive positive change.

Social Role Theory (Eagly & Kite, 1987) explains that gender roles and stereotypes in society shape individuals' behaviour and expectations (see Figure 2 below). It suggests that women often face prejudice in leadership roles due to traditional norms that associate leadership with masculine traits. This theory helps to contextualise the challenges female student leaders encounter, such as stereotyping and discrimination, and explains societal resistance to women in leadership positions.



**Figure 2.** Social Role Theory (Eagly & Kite, 1987)

Both theories provide a lens for examining how female student leaders inspire and lead within contexts that often marginalise them, emphasising their resilience, empowerment, and strategies for effective leadership. Social Role Theory enhances this by highlighting the social norms and gender-based obstacles that shape their experiences. These theories work together to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges and leadership styles faced by female student leaders in predominantly male environments. This understanding informs prospective interventions and support networks aimed at advancing gender parity in student leadership in higher education.

### 3. Research methodology

#### *Research Approach*

This paper employed a qualitative research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and support systems of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African University. Qualitative research enables rich, detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings, which are essential to uncovering the complexities of gendered leadership dynamics (Lim, 2025). The qualitative approach was relevant to the paper because it enabled a thorough examination of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives.

### *Research Design*

A case paper design was selected to focus on a specific university context, enabling a comprehensive and contextualised examination of the issues faced by female student leaders. The researchers used a case paper research design, which they considered suitable for this paper. In this paper, the researcher employed a case paper research design because, in qualitative research, case studies are frequently driven by the goal of obtaining a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a particular instance, event, individual, or group in its actual setting.

### *Population and Sampling*

The population of interest comprised female student leaders holding prominent leadership positions within various student organisations, including student government, academic societies, and cultural groups. The researcher identified female student leaders as the primary source of information because the researcher wants to understand the support needed to improve the academic performance of first-year students at a selected university.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants who were deemed knowledgeable and experienced regarding the research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach ensured that the sample included women with firsthand experience navigating leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. A total of 5 female student leaders were recruited for the paper. Participants represented a cross-section of leadership roles across student government bodies, academic and disciplinary societies, and cultural organisations, providing diverse perspectives on leadership experiences within the university.

### *Data Collection Instrument*

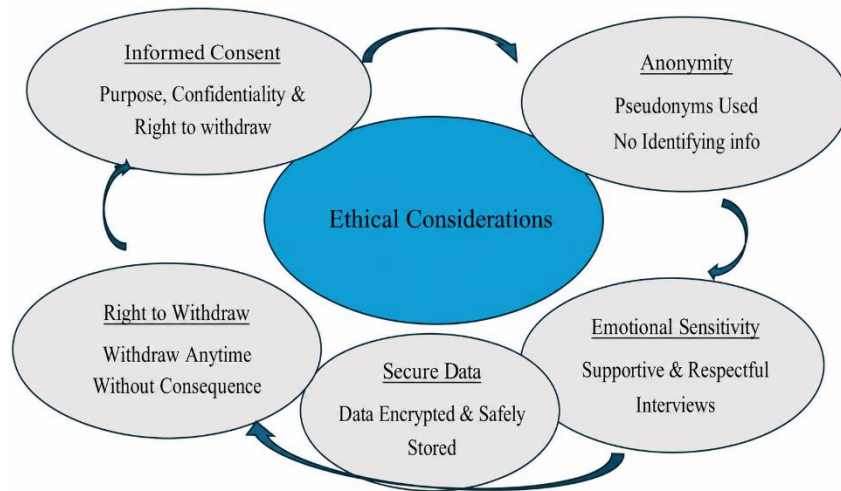
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility to probe and clarify participants' responses while maintaining a focus on key research themes. The researcher used semi-structured interviews, recorded and transcribed for analysis, to gather data. The researchers chose semi-structured interviews as a relevant tool for data collection in this paper because Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) argue that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore topics in depth while following a set of guiding questions. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) also noted that semi-structured interviews provide participants with greater freedom to share their ideas and experiences. The interviews explored the challenges participants faced in leadership roles, the strategies they employed to overcome barriers, and their perceptions of institutional support systems.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the interview data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were analysed to comprehend and explain the rich experiences, viewpoints, and significance within the data. In addition, thematic analysis was useful for locating recurrent themes and subthemes in the data. This involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming final themes. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurrent patterns across participants' narratives related to gender-based challenges, coping strategies, and support mechanisms. The analysis was iterative, with ongoing reflection and coding adjustments to ensure trustworthiness and depth of interpretation.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was approved by the Faculty Research and Higher Degree Committee of Walter Sisulu University (Protocol Number: FEDSHREC1130-10-23). The paper adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants, and the study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the paper, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information was excluded from reports. Data were securely stored, accessible only to the research team. Sensitivity to the potential emotional impact of discussing experiences of discrimination and stereotyping was maintained throughout the interview process.



**Figure 3.** Ethical Considerations (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023)

The diagram (see Figure 3) illustrates the key ethical principles guiding research with human participants, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. It shows how participants' identities are protected through anonymity and secure data storage, ensuring that sensitive information is not disclosed.

#### 4. Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews with 5 female student leaders revealed several key themes related to their experiences in leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. These themes reflect the challenges they face, the coping strategies they employ, and their perceptions of institutional support.

##### Theme 1: Gender-Based Stereotyping and Discrimination

Participants consistently reported encountering gender-based stereotypes that questioned their competence and suitability for leadership roles. Many expressed experiences where their authority was undermined or overlooked by peers and other leaders, reflecting persistent patriarchal attitudes within the university setting. For example, P1 commented: *"Sometimes I feel like my ideas are not taken seriously because I am a woman leading in a space mostly occupied by men. There is always a question of whether I am capable enough."* Of a similar opinion, P2 highlighted: *"I have often felt that my ideas are dismissed just because I'm a woman. Whenever I suggest something in meetings, I notice that my peers tend to overlook or undermine my suggestions, assuming I lack the authority or competence to lead."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"Despite having the skills and experience, I still encounter stereotypes that question whether a woman can handle leadership responsibilities. My authority is often challenged or ignored, especially when I attempt to make tough decisions."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"I often notice that I am not taken as seriously as my male counterparts. There seems to be an unspoken expectation that women should be more collaborative and nurturing, which makes it harder for me to be recognised as a strong, confident leader."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"I have noticed that female colleagues often have to work twice as hard to earn the same respect as male leaders. There is a persistent male-dominated attitude that leadership is primarily male, which affects how our contributions are valued and recognised."*

**Theme 2: Navigating the Dual Burden of Leadership and Social Expectations**

Balancing leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations emerged as a significant source of stress. Participants described feeling pressure to conform to traditional gender roles outside the university, which sometimes conflicted with their leadership commitments. This dual burden often limited their availability and energy for leadership activities, resulting in heightened stress and, at times, burnout. For instance, P3 said that: *"There are expectations from family and community that I should prioritise certain roles as a woman, which makes balancing everything very challenging."* With the same opinion, P2 mentioned that: *"There is this constant pressure to fulfil traditional gender roles at home, which conflicts with my leadership duties. It's exhausting trying to meet everyone's expectations while also trying to make a difference on campus."* In line with the above claims, P1 stated that: *"Balancing leadership responsibilities with societal expectations often leaves me drained. I find myself sacrificing sleep or free time to keep up with everything, and it's taking a toll on my mental health."* With a slightly different opinion, P5 argued: *"Juggling my role as a student leader and the expectations my family has for me outside of university can be really overwhelming. Sometimes I feel like I'm pulled in different directions, and it's hard to give my best to both."* P4 agrees with P5 by saying that: *"Sometimes I feel like I have to choose between being a good leader and fulfilling my family's traditional role. The dual burden makes it hard to focus fully on my commitments, and I worry about burnout."*

The participants' experiences of balancing leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations reflect the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as outlined in the literature, which often place women in subordinate or supportive positions, both socially and within organisational cultures (Moodly, 2024; Sokani, 2025).

**Theme 3: Limited Institutional Support and Visibility of Policies**

Many participants highlighted a lack of accessible and effective institutional support mechanisms tailored to the needs of female student leaders. While some mentioned the existence of general leadership programs, few found these resources adequately addressed gender-specific challenges. Awareness of such programs was also limited. Participants expressed a desire for mentorship, leadership development workshops, and networking opportunities that support women leaders.

P1 commented: *"There are some leadership programs at the university, but most of them are not specifically tailored to address the challenges women face. I wish there were more targeted support for female leaders."* Of a similar opinion, P2 highlighted: *"I wasn't even aware of some of the existing mentorship opportunities until recently. It feels like these resources are not well-advertised or accessible to us."* In line with the claims above, P3 opined: *"Leadership workshops are available, but they often don't focus on gender-specific issues or how to overcome barriers faced by women in leadership roles. More specialised training would be helpful."* With a slightly different opinion, P4 argued: *"I think we need more networking events that connect women leaders across different faculties. Building a community and sharing experiences could really strengthen our confidence and visibility."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"Mentorship programs specifically for women would make a big difference. It's hard to find role models or guidance without targeted support, and I believe that could really empower more women to step into leadership roles."*

**Theme 4: Resilience and Adaptive Strategies**

Despite the barriers, female student leaders demonstrated notable resilience and resourcefulness. They employed various strategies to cope with challenges, including building informal peer support networks, seeking guidance from role models, and continuously developing personal skills independently. These strategies enabled them to maintain confidence and effectiveness in their roles.

P1 commented that: *"Whenever I face challenges, I turn to my peers for advice and support. Having a strong network of friends who understand what I'm going through really helps me stay motivated."* Of a similar opinion,

P2 highlighted: *"I've sought out role models within the university who inspire me. Their guidance has been invaluable in helping me develop my leadership skills and stay confident."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"I've been focusing on improving myself by taking online courses and workshops. Continuously developing my personal skills keeps me effective and energised in my leadership role."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"Sometimes, I rely on my own resilience and problem-solving abilities. I've learned to adapt quickly and stay focused on my goals, even when faced with setbacks."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"Building informal support groups with fellow female leaders has been crucial. Sharing our experiences helps us navigate challenges and stay resilient."*

### **Theme 5: Impacts of Leadership on Self-Identity and Empowerment**

Participants reported that their leadership roles were transformative experiences that contributed to their personal growth and empowerment. Holding leadership positions allowed them to challenge prevailing gender norms and inspire other women within the university community. However, they also experienced increased scrutiny and pressure to prove their capabilities.

P1 said that: *"Taking on a leadership role has really boosted my confidence. It made me see that I can break stereotypes and prove that women are just as capable as anyone else."* With the same view, P2 highlighted that: *"Being a leader has transformed how I see myself. It's empowering to challenge gender norms and show others that women can lead effectively."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"While leadership has helped me grow personally, it also comes with a lot of pressure and scrutiny. Sometimes I feel like I constantly have to prove myself to others."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"Leadership has definitely inspired me to empower other women in my community. I want to be a role model and encourage more women to step into leadership roles."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"It's been a transformative experience, but the increased attention and expectations can be overwhelming. Still, I believe it's worth it for the growth and impact I've gained."*

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

This paper explored the experiences of female student leaders occupying traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African university.

### *Gender-Based Stereotyping and Discrimination*

Findings revealed that female student leaders commonly encounter gender-based stereotyping and discrimination that undermines their authority and leadership capability. These accounts align with broader research showing that women in leadership often face doubt rooted in gender biases (Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). These accounts collectively illustrate how gender-based stereotypes and male-controlled attitudes continue to undermine women's leadership roles within university settings, reflecting persistent biases that question their competence and authority.

### *Navigating the Dual Burden of Leadership and Social Expectations*

Their feelings of exhaustion, stress, and potential burnout are consistent with research on the structural obstacles women face, including societal pressure to prioritise family obligations over leadership roles, which are reinforced by gendered norms and organisational environments that lack adequate support (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Thelma, & Ngulube, 2024). These challenges highlight the importance of resilience strategies and institutional support mechanisms, such as mentorship and leadership development, emphasised in the literature, which are essential for empowering women to navigate the dual burden and foster more inclusive leadership cultures in higher education settings (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Addressing these dual burdens requires targeted support systems and cultural shifts to empower women leaders to balance societal expectations with their leadership roles effectively.

### *Limited Institutional Support and Visibility of Policies*

The participants' calls for more targeted institutional support, such as mentorship and networking opportunities focused on women's leadership challenges, reflect the broader systemic barriers identified in the literature, including gender stereotyping, limited access to support structures, and organisational cultures that reinforce male-dominated paradigms (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Moodly, 2024). Their experiences underscore the need for enhanced visibility and accessibility of gender-responsive programs, which are critical for empowering women leaders to overcome societal and institutional obstacles and to foster a more inclusive leadership environment in higher education (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). Addressing these gaps aligns with the theoretical frameworks of Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theory, emphasising the importance of supportive networks and challenging societal norms to promote gender equity in leadership roles.

### *Resilience and Adaptive Strategies*

The resilience and adaptive strategies demonstrated by female student leaders, such as building peer support networks, seeking role models, and engaging in continuous self-improvement, align with the literature's emphasis on women's resourcefulness in overcoming systemic barriers rooted in gender stereotyping and organisational cultures that reinforce male dominance (Ngwira, 2021; Moodly, 2024). These strategies demonstrate how women navigate and challenge societal and institutional constraints, supporting the application of Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theories by highlighting the importance of empowerment, mentorship, and resilience in fostering effective female leadership within male-dominated environments (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Ultimately, such adaptive approaches are crucial for promoting gender equity and strengthening women's leadership efficacy in higher education contexts.

### *Impacts of Leadership on Self-Identity and Empowerment*

The participants' experiences of leadership as a transformative and empowering journey highlight how, despite facing societal scrutiny and gendered expectations, women leverage personal growth, role modelling, and resilience strategies to challenge norms and inspire others, aligning with the literature's emphasis on women's capacity for empowerment and adaptive leadership within male-dominated contexts (Ngwira, 2021; Moodly, 2024). These narratives underscore the importance of fostering environments that support women's leadership development, as emphasised by Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theories, by recognising women's agency in overcoming systemic barriers and promoting gender equity in higher education leadership (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Ultimately, such experiences demonstrate that resilience and empowerment are central to transforming individual identities and advancing women's leadership trajectories in challenging socio-cultural landscapes.

The paper underscores the importance of implementing inclusive policies and targeted support mechanisms within higher education institutions to promote gender equity in student leadership. Key recommendations include developing mentorship programs, gender-specific leadership training, formal networking platforms, strengthening institutional policies, and fostering an inclusive organisational culture. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered leadership dynamics in South African higher education. It offers practical insights to enhance support for female student leaders, thereby advancing gender diversity in campus leadership structures.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper concluded that gender-based stereotyping and discrimination remain significant obstacles, undermining female students' authority and confidence in leadership roles. Additionally, the paper underlines the ongoing impact of masculine attitudes and societal norms that limit women's opportunities and recognition in higher education leadership. Furthermore, the paper presumed that female student leaders face a dual burden, balancing their leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations. This often results in increased

stress, exhaustion, and a risk of burnout, emphasising the need for support systems that help women manage these competing demands. The participants' resilience and adaptive strategies, such as building peer networks and seeking mentorship, demonstrate their resourcefulness in overcoming these challenges. Fostering an inclusive and supportive organisational culture is vital for advancing women's leadership in universities. Implementing targeted policies and programs can help overcome systemic barriers, inspire confidence, and encourage more women to pursue leadership positions. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a more equitable, diverse, and dynamic leadership landscape in higher education, benefiting institutions and communities alike.

### *Limitations*

The sample size was small, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The qualitative nature of the study provides in-depth insights but does not allow for statistical validation or broader applicability across diverse contexts. Additionally, the study is confined to a single university, and cultural or institutional variations may influence the experiences of female leaders differently elsewhere.

## **7. Recommendations**

Based on the paper findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the experiences and support systems for female student leaders:

- **Develop Targeted Mentorship Programs:** Establish structured mentorship initiatives pairing experienced female leaders with emerging student leaders to provide guidance, role modelling, and support.
- **Implement Gender-Specific Leadership Training:** Design leadership development workshops and training sessions that address gender-related challenges, build confidence, and develop negotiation skills.
- **Create Formal Networking Platforms:** Facilitate regular forums, peer groups, and networking events focused on women's leadership to foster community and collective advocacy.
- **Review and Strengthen Institutional Policies:** Ensure policies explicitly promote gender equity, transparency in leadership appointments, and provide mechanisms to address discrimination and bias.
- **Promote Awareness and Accessibility:** Increase outreach about available support programs to women student leaders to enhance participation and impact.
- **Encourage an Inclusive Organisational Culture:** Sensitise the broader university community to gender biases and promote male allyship to support women leaders.

### *Recommendations for further research*

For future research purposes, the researcher wishes to promote the following:

- The current researcher conducted the research at one selected higher education institution in the Eastern Cape and therefore recommends that further studies be conducted across higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape Province.
- The researcher has employed a qualitative research approach in this paper and recommends that more studies use a mixed-methods approach in the future.

By implementing these recommendations, the university can build an enabling environment that supports and sustains female student leaders, contributing to a more equitable and diverse leadership landscape.

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