

Empowering Voices: The Lived Experiences of Women Leaders in Nonprofit Organizations

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This qualitative study aims to explore and understand the leadership experiences of women in mid-level roles in nonprofit organizations. By employing role congruity theory and intersectionality as analytical frameworks, the study aims to identify the unique personal, professional, and organizational challenges these women face. The research also seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how gender intersects with other social identities to shape the leadership trajectories of women in educational settings. The study identifies self-confidence and gender, and racial stereotypes as major challenges experienced by women leaders in mid-level roles. The research highlights how these stereotypes can undermine women's leadership effectiveness and limit their opportunities for career advancement. Overall, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge by addressing gaps related to the intersection of gender with other identities.

Keywords: leadership, nonprofit organization, women, intersectionality, stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, all United Nations member states adopted 17 sustainability development goals addressing various socio-economic, environmental, and technological development issues. As a result, gender equity and inclusion have become central themes in business and policymaking. While much progress has been made, gender inequality and discrimination continue to pose significant challenges for female workers, particularly those aiming for leadership roles. A substantial gender gap exists in attaining leadership positions across both developed and developing regions of the world as many women encounter significant obstacles that impede their progression into leadership roles. While earlier research has explored the leadership challenges encountered by women leaders, the research has primarily concentrated on senior level roles such as presidents and vice presidents. Using role congruity theory and intersectionality as frameworks, this study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on the leadership experiences of women in mid-level roles in K-12 school districts —specifically principals, assistant principals, deans, program directors— and not-for-profit organizations identifies their employment mobility challenges.

Over the past two decades, much has been written about women and leadership in education, including managerialism's effects on women's leadership aspirations (O'Connor & White 2011) and the persistence of gender inequalities and barriers to change (O'Connor, 2014; Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Despite the presence of comprehensive national anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies, along with organizational and institutional gender equality frameworks, women continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership in the United States (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). McKinsey and Lean In's Women in the Workplace 2022 report highlights the obstacles impacting the proportion of women in top leadership positions. For eight consecutive years, McKinsey has identified the persistent issue of the "broken rung" – fewer women are promoted from entry-level to managerial positions compared to men, resulting in a smaller pool of women eligible for advancement to senior management roles. As Goryunova and Madsen (2024) observed, "It is important to understand the current status of women leaders before exploring more deeply how to advance women and leadership theory, to understand girls' and women's individual motivators to lead, to overcome gender-based leadership barriers, and to promote more women leaders" (p. 2). According to Vinnicombe and Mavin (2023), "the impact of intersections of gender, ethnicity and class for women leaders is a high priority for women-in-leadership research to unable further theorizing and feminist progress" (p. 252). Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of women leaders in mid-level roles through the lens of intersectionality, focusing on their perceptions of the unique personal, professional, and organizational challenges they face as leaders in non-for-profit settings.

We contribute to the leadership literature in three ways. First, there is a need for more studies examining the intersection of leaders' identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Gooty et al. (2023) observed "research in well-established content domains could be reexamined with a more gender-inclusive lens" (p. 2538). Gooty et al. (2023) call for "research that focuses on the differential work experiences of women and persons of color in addition to disabled workers, LGBTQ+ employees, and members of other historically marginalized demographic subgroups" (p. 2539). In this study, we use intersectionality as a framework to help identify and understand concrete ways inequalities impact women's advancement to leadership position. Understanding these issues in this distinctive context contributes to our understanding of leadership. Second, much of the research on women leaders is conducted in larger business organizations.

More research is needed on gender and leadership outside of big business. The context for this study is school districts. Third, diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, among other characteristics, is important to one's identity and to the ways in which followers perceive leaders and the ways leaders perceive themselves. There is a significant body of research on the perceived dichotomy between the female gender role and leadership roles, and the resulting prejudice many women in leadership positions experience (e.g., Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Meister Sinclair, & Jehn, 2017). These biases may also influence how women leaders see themselves, what they believe they must do to be effective, and whether they should take on leadership roles (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis & Lord, 2017; Karelaia & Guillén, 2014). There is much we still don't know about the ways in which gender and racial stereotypes affect women seeking leadership roles (Eagly & Hellman, 2016). This study investigates the stereotypes some women leaders are confronted with in the workplace, and how these stereotypes have impacted their experiences as leaders. Fourth, the article explores the importance of mentorship and leadership development programs in supporting women leaders in education. This aspect of the study highlights the role of organizational and social support in overcoming barriers to leadership, which is critical for informing future policies and practices to promote gender equality in leadership roles.

This paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we present relevant literature on challenges faced by women leaders, personal attributes and leader effectiveness, and leader development; next, we present the theoretical framework; we then outline the methodology; next, we present the findings; finally, we present the practical implications of the study and outline some of the limitations of this study.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Challenges Faced by Women Leaders

Despite significant changes in the workplace over the past decades, the ideal image of a "leader" is still predominantly male, as perceived by both men and women. When discussing leadership traits, both genders tend to rate masculine attributes like assertiveness and risk-taking more highly and believe that men possess these qualities to a greater extent than women (Cuadrado, Garcia-Ael & Molero, 2015; Vial & Napier, 2018). Male leaders are often associated with higher status and competence compared to female leaders, and until recently, there was a preference for male bosses among both men and women (Alqahtani, 2020; Brenan, 2017). These perceptions contribute to both implicit and explicit biases, affecting who is promoted to higher positions (Alqahtani, 2020). Similarly, Benson, Li and Shu (2021) found that despite receiving higher performance ratings, women were less frequently promoted than their male counterparts. This disparity is attributed to the perception that women have less potential for future contributions to the organization. Benson et al. (2021) suggest that evaluations of an individual's potential, or their anticipated ability to benefit the organization in the future, are biased against women. Although women often score higher than men on various leadership skills (Zenger & Folkman, 2019), they tend to rate their performance more critically than men (Exley & Kessler, 2019). Additionally, women are perceived as less charismatic (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019), which may be interpreted as lower self-confidence. Both explicit and subtle forms of sexism continue to exist in the workplace, adversely affecting the development of women in leadership roles (Beaupre, 2022). Gender stereotypes also suggest that women are perceived as less agentic—meaning less assertive, active, and strong—than men. The stereotype of agency is particularly harmful to women in the workplace (Heilman, 2012). Traditional male-dominated roles often require agency, leading to the perception that women are less suited for these positions. Women who display competence may face social penalties for defying this stereotype (Heilman, 2001). Because women are perceived as less agentic, they are seen as less congruent with leadership roles compared to men (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011) and are therefore less likely to be recognized as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The emotional display rules for leaders typically align with those expected of men, but they conflict with the display rules commonly associated with women. In leadership roles, women face a discrepancy between the warm, expressive emotions expected of them due to their traditional social role as caretakers and the emotional restraint expected of them as leaders. This makes it difficult for women to determine how to express emotions at work. Specifically, women leaders must navigate two key challenges: identifying the right amount of emotion to display and determining the appropriate type of emotion to express. This includes finding ways to exert authority without showing emotions that convey power (Brescoll, 2016). According to Brescoll (2016), promising areas for future research include whether race and ethnicity interact with gender to produce a different set of beliefs, expectations, and evaluative standards for racial and ethnic minority women in leadership roles. Additional obstacles to women's career advancement include work-life imbalance (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), and social networking challenges (Meza-Mejia, Villarreal-García, & Ortega-Barba, 2023).

Conversely, the factors perceived to facilitate career growth include support from family and mentors, evolving employer mindsets, and the inherent competencies of women leaders. Examining these issues in the context of not for profit and education organizations enhances our understanding of this complex and significant phenomenon (Bush, 2022). Thus, the following research questions will be investigated in this study:

Research Question #1: What personal or professional leadership challenges do female leaders experience?

Research Question #2: What is the importance of mentorships in the professional advancement of female leaders?

Personal Attributes and Leader Effectiveness

Numerous empirical studies have linked various personality traits, such as intelligence (Judge et al., 2004), and emotional intelligence (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005) to leader effectiveness. In recent years, the relationship between the Big Five personality traits—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience—and leadership outcomes such as emergence, effectiveness, or transformational leadership has garnered particular interest (Judge & Ilies, 2002; Judge et al., 2002). Leaders with traits and skills that align closely with their role's demands are more likely to be effective. Leaders are deemed effective when their characteristics align with followers' mental models and expectations of a leader. Key attributes such as charisma, social intelligence, and behavioral flexibility are vital in shaping how followers view and support their leaders (Zaccaro, Green, Dubrow, & Kolze, 2018).

As perhaps the most apparent individual difference, gender has garnered a lot of attention in leader effectiveness. Much of the discussion on this question in gender-based leadership research focuses on whether men and women are equally effective as leaders (e.g., Romano, 2007; Sullivan, 2008). A comprehensive review of the literature by Eagly et al. (1995) concluded that overall leader effectiveness is not dependent on gender. However, their findings indicate that men and women leaders perform differently under specific conditions. While it is well established that effective leader behaviors can vary depending on the situation, there is limited consensus on the specific nature of these contingencies, and research on leader effectiveness across different situations is sparse. Situational aspects that have been identified as influential include the nature of the task, attributes of subordinates such as job and psychological maturity, subordinate effort and ability, information possessed by subordinates, and the type of work organization (Mesterova, Procházka, Vaculík, & Smutny, 2015). These factors are commonly cited as key situational variables that can determine a leader's effectiveness (Mesterova et al., 2015). The complexity of leader effectiveness makes it challenging to define, as it involves numerous factors, including various organizational conditions and a range of personal and interpersonal behaviors. This paper seeks to present different perspectives on leader effectiveness. Thus, the third research question investigated in this paper is the following

Research Question #3: What personal leadership attributes are associated with being an effective leader?

Leader Development

Leader development is defined as “the study of leader development focuses mainly on the acquisition of individual knowledge, skills, abilities (i.e., competencies) and enhanced holistic functioning that promotes more effective leadership, mainly for those in formally appointed roles” (Day & Dragoni, 2015, p. 135). Leader development is understood as expanding a person's capacity (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). Much of the leader development research focuses on recommendations for organizations to develop leaders and tools that can be used to accomplish that outcome (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Gipson et al., 2017; Hopkins et al., 2008). In contrast, this study examines how some women leaders experience the phenomenon of leadership and strategies they use to become successful in their leadership roles. Work experience linked to leader development is not limited to a single developmental event or activity (Dragoni et al., 2011). Leader development can come from formal organizational initiatives such as 360° feedback, coaching, mentoring, and action learning (Day, 2000), and from experiences outside of work (Ely et al., 2011; Hopkins et al., 2008). Koopmans et al. (2006) claim that 60-80% of the learning occurs in organizations through informal growth opportunities. The fourth research question this paper will investigate is therefore the following

Research Question #4: Describe how leadership styles may have changed since attaining their leadership position.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory serves as a guiding framework for understanding exclusion by emphasizing the significance of overlapping social inequalities, oppression, and discrimination to form a comprehensive view of diversity (Carbado & Crenshaw, 2019; Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz et al., 2011; Mor Barak, 2022). This theory challenges the simplistic view that social issues can be isolated to specific identity groups. It argues against framing discrimination in terms of separate categories, such as race or gender, without considering their intersections. Such an approach creates artificial boundaries and promotes exclusive interests, leading to intergroup conflicts (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; McKinzie & Richards, 2019; Wells et al., 2015). Intersectionality theory posits that each person's experience of bias is unique due to the interplay of their multiple and complex identities (Crenshaw, 1989; McBride et al., 2015; Remedios & Akhtar, 2019; Stitt & Happel-Parkins, 2019). Gender is not only a biological categorization but also a “set of assumptions and beliefs on both individual and societal levels that affect the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, resources, and treatment of women and men” (Bell Smith & Nkomo, 2001, p.16). According to Mor Barak (2022, p. 179), “it is the combination of identities that produces a particular outcome, and this experience may be unacknowledged if the two identities are examined separately. (...) Intersectionality theory helps us understand that the way people experience exclusion directly reflects their multiple, overlapping identities.”

Expectancy-Value-Cost Theory

The expectancy-value-cost theory is a motivational framework that explains an individual's motivation to engage in a task based on three primary components: expectancy, value, and cost. Expectancy refers to an individual's belief about how well they will do on a task. It encompasses the confidence a person has in their ability to perform a task successfully. Self-efficacy, past experiences, perceived difficulty of the task, and the support available influence this component. Higher expectancy generally leads to higher motivation and persistence. Value refers to the perceived importance or benefits of engaging in a task. Cost encompasses the perceived negative aspects or barriers related to engaging in the task. It considers the effort, time, and potential negative emotional impacts (such as anxiety or fear of failure). High perceived cost can decrease motivation, even if expectancy and value are high. It's an essential part of the decision-making process when individuals weigh the pros and cons of engaging in an activity (Barron & Hulleman, 2015; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

METHOD

Data Collection

A qualitative multicase study method was selected for this study. This method was selected because it explores a real-life, bounded system over time through data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). Through interviews, multiple participants described their leadership journey and stories based on individual experiences (Creswell, 2015). A multicase study method allows the researchers to gain insight from multiple participants, leading the researcher to establish common themes throughout the data collected.

Qualitative interviews are appropriate in this study because they allow new insights into the interplay between gender and ethnicity. A qualitative methodology provides the opportunity to better understand the meaning people make of their experiences and how their interpretations influence their reactions (Byrd, 2009). According to Becker (1970), to understand an individual's experiences, we must know how that individual perceives the situation, the obstacles the individual believes they face, and the available alternatives.

A total of 13 women participated in this study. Participants, who identified as Caucasian (5), African American (4), Asian (2) and Hispanic (2), held mid-level positions within school districts and nonprofit organizations. The participants were recruited through personal and professional contacts of the researchers. Seven participants are administrators in two urban school districts in Southern California, and 8 worked in

nonprofit organizations based in Los Angeles county (community centers, mental health agencies, and homeless shelters). Criteria to be included in the study were: being in a leadership position for at least 2 years and hold a mid-level management position in their organization. Participants were interviewed at a time and place convenient for them. The interviews ranged in time from one hour to an hour and half. The interviews were audio recorded, and the researchers took handwritten notes as well. Following the completion of interviews, recordings were transcribed by a third party. Participants were given transcripts of their interviews and sufficient time to read them for any comments or references that were taken out of context, misrepresented, or made them feel uncomfortable.

Data Analysis

After the participants reviewed their interview transcripts, clarifications were sent by e-mail back to the researcher before analysis. Researchers used two cycles of coding. In the first cycle, in vivo coding was used. This application of codes reflects a participant's actual language about perspectives or views (Saldana, 2009). Through this initial coding cycle, themes were developed. If necessary, a second cycle of coding was used. The need of a second cycle was to help in the development in organization, mainly categorical, thematic, conceptual, or theoretical (Saldana, 2009). If a second cycle was necessary, pattern coding was used. This method helps identify emergent themes, configurations, and explanation. After in vivo coding, similar themes were assembled together and analyzed to create a Pattern Code.

This qualitative multicase study used two main strategies to assure research quality. First, member checking is a strategy that establishes credibility about the researcher from the participants (Creswell, 2013). Participants were given transcripts of the audio recordings of their interviews. Participants were then given time to review these transcripts and give revisions to the researcher before final analysis. The second strategy to assure research quality was triangulation. This study triangulated data generated from participant interview questions to find themes that aligned.

FINDINGS

Participants shared experiences that provided unique perspectives on female leadership. The data helped the researcher identify connections among the participants' experiences. The data were organized based on themes from participant responses to each of the four sub research questions.

Challenges Experienced by Women Leaders

The major themes that emerged from this research question were as follows: (a) self-confidence and (b) stereotypes. While the context of the participants' experiences varied, most of the participants referred to challenges they had experienced in their position. The dominant theme here was the importance and challenge of gaining confidence. Second, participants shared the existence of gender and racial stereotypes. For instance, Participant 1 shared during the interview, "I feel that leaders do not always hire strong women; it seems they choose women they can keep under wraps.

Self-Confidence

This dominant theme emerged for five participants. It should be noted all participants interviewed were appointed to their principal position. While working as assistant principals, principal opportunities became available, and rather than apply and interview, all five participants were appointed by their superintendent. One participant stated:

I had to learn when I was the principal, or even as an assistant principal, like you can't please everyone all the time. I'm a people pleaser type of a person, so it was a growing experience for my confidence to be able to be okay with some people not being happy. I think the biggest thing I learned was you're never going to make everybody happy.

Stereotypes

These perceived stereotypes were inferred by most participants:

I'm like, "You chose her because she's going to do everything you say," and I even see the type of women that they choose. They don't choose women like me who have an opinion and are smart and I'm going to tell you when that doesn't sound good. That's ridiculous. Yeah, so I'm not that girl. I've not been asked to be on committees, because I'm an opinionated strong woman.

Another participant said that:

They were more inclined to listen to men than they were to women, and it was a prejudice that they had. It's not that they wouldn't hire women.

A third participant speculated women are not suited for principal positions in secondary schools because the children are older and may be more difficult to manage. In her words:

That's the motherly role, that's an age [elementary] that we feel comfortable with. Males tend to be less comfortable with smaller children, maybe. That's why you might see more female principals at the elementary level. When you start to get into secondary, I think that older children are harder to manage. So that may be something that males would tend to feel more comfortable in that type of environment. But also, there's the component of athletics.

In addition to gender stereotypes, several participants who identified as racial and ethnic minorities shared some stereotypes they experienced. For example, Participant 6, who identified as African American, believed that if African American women were too aggressive, abrupt, or did not understand organizational politics, their chances of attaining executive-level positions would immensely reduce. She conveyed that other African American women had told her that being both Black and female inherently disadvantaged them, making it more challenging to break into the "good old boy" system. Participant 7, an African American woman, did not recall facing challenges related to her ethnicity or gender but mentioned that other minority women were "blacklisted" due to their associations with individuals who were not seen as part of the in-group. She believed that minority women needed to be strategic and establish relationships with individuals in executive-level roles. Participant 8, an Asian woman, shared that many obstacles prevented minority women from advancing. She mentioned that the organization she worked for lacked mentorship programs. She felt constantly scrutinized and had to work twice as hard as her peers.

Additionally, she pointed out that in nonprofit organizations, upper management roles are often held for long durations, limiting job opportunities for many people. She also discussed personal challenges, stating that she faced difficulties because she was not fluent in English. Participant 11, who identified as Hispanic, believed that while her organization was diverse, it lacked mentorship programs to guide individuals in understanding the system and climbing the corporate ladder. Another participant, who identified as Asian, clearly recalled challenges in her career when she was passed over for a promotion because the hiring supervisor felt she lacked sufficient experience. This participant linked being overlooked for the higher position to discrimination, remarking, "It's unfortunate, but those who hire tend to choose people who resemble themselves." Participant 12, an African American woman, noted that African American women can sometimes be perceived as abrasive or abrupt, which in itself limits their professional advancement opportunities. She also mentioned that minority women often face stereotypes, requiring them to work harder than their peers to get ahead. Meanwhile, Participant 13, an Asian woman, did not recall encountering barriers in her career but mentioned that some co-workers initially saw her as naïve and disrespected her. She remarked, "My co-workers assumed I wouldn't stand up for myself, but they eventually learned they had to respect me." Several participants working in nonprofit organizations shared

that they were frequently disregarded in meetings, and that most senior positions were given to White men. One participant remarked, "There have been many times when my input was ignored in meetings. White privilege is significant; it seems like they hold all the credibility." Another participant observed "I feel that my contributions are not appreciated. Sometimes, someone of a different race and I will say the same thing, but their input receives more attention and support."

Power Dynamics

This study highlights how deeply ingrained societal expectations about gender roles create a challenging environment for women leaders. The expectation for women to be nurturing and communal can clash with the assertive and decisive traits often associated with effective leadership, creating a "double bind" for women. The experiences of the women interviewed illustrate how they navigate and negotiate these expectations, often feeling the need to adapt their leadership styles to conform to societal norms. Additionally, the study reveals systemic biases against women in leadership, particularly those perceived as "strong" or "opinionated." This bias highlights the power structures that favor certain leadership styles and traits, often associated with masculinity, while marginalizing others. Several participants noted that despite their qualifications, minority women had to put in more effort than their peers to demonstrate their abilities. However, all participants agreed that no matter how hard they worked, most top-level positions in nonprofit organizations were occupied by men, and the glass ceiling remained firmly in place

The Importance of Mentorships in the Professional Advancement of Female Administrators

The major themes that emerged from this research question were: (a) advice and (b) advancement. While the context of the participants' experiences varied, most participants discussed the importance of having a mentor and being a mentor. One participant stated, "I did learn a lot from others. I just think being around good administrators, good people doing good things, and you see great things happening."

Advice

Several participants mentioned the importance of receiving advice. For example, one of them stated:

My principal that I worked with, she's a superintendent now, we still connect all the time. We still run ideas by, I believe in, I don't have it together by any means, I'm always asking, or I have a great superintendent now, he's amazing.

Another one said:

I think as a professional you always have those people that are your go-to when you need something. I would say when I became a principal and for the discipline piece, the director of student services who oversaw discipline for the district was a huge mentor for me because that was an area that I was not familiar with, and I trusted her. So not only was she the boss, if you will, in that area, but gave guidance.

Advancement

Participants indicated that opportunities for advancement came from their mentors. One participant stated, "I think prior to becoming an administrator, the assistant sup, and the district when I was a teacher on special assignment that I worked for, he very much pushed me towards administration."

Personal Leadership Attributes and Perceived Leader Effectiveness

The major themes that emerged from this research question were as follows: (a) communication, (b) student driven, (c) relationship oriented, and (d) hard work. While the context of the participants' experiences varied, five participants referred to their personal leadership attributes that have helped them in their journey as a principal. During the interviews, participants all shared that communication and relationship orientation were key to their effectiveness. For example, one participant claimed, "I believe

that my greatest strength as a leader was derived from the belief that teamwork, relationship building, communication, and courage enable a leader to make the best decisions possible to create a positive, successful, and safe environment.”

Communication

All participants identified communication skills as key to success. The following excerpts from all participants’ interviews reveal the theme:

I like being transparent and communicating. I like being honest. I don’t like the manipulative side. It doesn’t work for me. Integrity and character mean too much to me. I’d rather just tell you that I can’t do it or we’re not going to do it and here’s why. And let you deal with the fact that you’re disappointed, hurt, or mad at me. Go ahead. I’m going to stay with the heart of it. At the very end of the day, if it’s really not good for kids, you’re not going to have me. I’m too much of an advocate.

Another participant said:

One of my biggest things is communication. I think that if you’re effective, you have to communicate to your staff, to the faculty, all the way down to, you know, anybody that’s working on the campus. You have to have a clear vision; people need to understand what that vision is. People need to trust you, and you need to communicate because when people feel out of the loop, they start speculating, things get out of control, and then you’re putting out fires.

Student Driven

This theme emerged for most participants who worked in school districts. One participant mentioned “I always tried to make decisions on what was best for students.” Another participant stated:

I tried to always be student focused, including checking every student’s schedule prior to school starting to be sure no one had more than two “poor” teachers. I believe that students are our business and their needs our primary focus with all decisions being first, “Is it good for kids?”

Relationship Oriented

This theme was mentioned by all five participants. Some of the participants said:

In some ways, like I put other people in front but then the managing of stuff, I thought I had to do it all myself, and now I feel like we have built a great relationship and rapport with the staff, that I don’t have to manage everything. I have great trust in everybody.

According to another participant,

Because I was already very familiar with the staff and they with me, having been in the trenches, I suppose, with them, it was easy to build those relationships... made the environment piece, and the culture and the climate sort of took care of itself. But the other advantage was that my own leadership style is really promoting autonomy for teacher leaders when they have shown promise to be able to do so.

Another participant attributed her success to her transformational leadership abilities as well as her ability to build a rapport with employees.

Hard Work

Participant 6 acknowledged that her Catholic upbringing helped her connect with and understand people from various ethnic groups and cultures. She believed that taking on visible assignments, hard work, determination, and strong communication skills with diverse individuals were crucial to her success. Participant 11 believed that minority women need to continuously prove themselves, work harder, stay motivated, and keep educating themselves to advance in their careers. She encouraged minority women to push through obstacles, stay persistent and determined, excel in various roles, go above and beyond, and not wait for opportunities to come to them.

Leadership Style Evolution

The major themes that emerged from this research question were as follows: (a) shared leadership, (b) gain in confidence, and (c) empowering others. While the context of the participants' experiences varied, five participants shared how their leadership styles have developed over time, mostly due to the idea that a principal's role is to be able to develop leaders around them. The themes of confidence and shared leadership were dominant, with five out of five participants mentioning their importance. In discussions about shared leadership, one participant explained, "I was creating a leadership team. I knew that for me to be a good leader on campus, I needed to surround myself with trusted people."

Shared Leadership

This was a common theme among all five participants. For example, one participant observed:

I'm working on realigning the umbrella of our school. All of the programs that go underneath it and making sure they're up and running with our leadership team supporting it. They [the school] haven't had a consistent principal over the years. In this season, I really want to make sure we're steady and we're going fairly well as team, working together.

According to another participant,

I feel like I am really good at building strengths in others. From the very beginning, as the principal here, I wasn't the one standing up in front of everybody always doing stuff; I would tap into this teacher or to that teacher. So we've created an environment of this shared leadership and responsibility, and it has served me very well here. So I don't know, I'm not the expert but I can tell you who can be an expert on any given situation and I could encourage them to get up in front and share their knowledge, so we've really created this culture here on our campus of just this continuance improvement.

Gain in Confidence

This theme was mentioned by most of the participants. One stated: "Something screws up your first year, everybody's looking to me, so I'm like, "I'll just do it myself because then if it messes up it's my responsibility." Now, I'm like ah, no big deal." Another principal shared the following:

I will tell you, my confidence is what changed my, I think, my aptitude to do the job well. That was everything, confidence. Also, you gain confidence, by recognizing that you don't have to have all the answers, it's really okay. When, you show your staff, if you can show them that vulnerability, they will follow you off the face of the earth, because one, they will trust you, and they know you're honest and they know you're human, but they also know that you're going to work really hard to find that answer, and that's, you do have to do that as well, right, you've got to put in the work, you've got to have the work ethic to find the answers or to seek out the answers, and usually the answers are right in front of you, sitting in that staff lounge. The more you recognize that, and the more you celebrate

that, the more they also gain confidence and step up, and man, then you guys are just on a fast-moving train.

Empowering Others

Most of the principal interviewed stated that empowering of others was important to the way they lead. One mentioned the following:

My confidence allowed me to really empower other people. Because sometimes it's really scary to empower other people, because I think our mindset sometimes is if we empower other people then it means that we don't know how to do it, so then of course there's our insecurities kind of billowing up to the surface, right? We don't know how to do it, but guess what, that math teacher, or that science teacher, or that language arts teacher, or that PE teacher, they've got experience that we don't have. Why wouldn't we tap into it? We are going to celebrate their expertise and bring them up alongside of us. We're still going to be in charge; we're still ultimately going to be responsible, but we are going to use the experts on our campus, because if we don't do that then we're never, ever going to get to where we could possibly go.

Another principal shared:

When you're trying to do something innovative or new programs that you want to adopt, or student services, different support systems, generally, those start with somebody's idea and wanting to run with it. I'm a firm believer that if you are passionate about something and are hardworking, and there are resources to promote you going after whatever that project is, then I will support [empower] you to do that. That's how new things would happen under my leadership.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews with female leaders in education and nonprofit organizations align closely with the experiences of women leaders in other fields, highlighting common challenges such as self-confidence and stereotypes, as well as the critical role of mentorship and effective leadership attributes. The struggle for self-confidence is a dominant theme for many women leaders, which can be linked to societal expectations and gender stereotypes. Studies have consistently found that women often struggle with self-doubt and imposter syndrome, which can impact their confidence in leadership roles. For instance, research in the corporate sector indicates that women are less likely to apply for promotions unless they meet all the qualifications, reflecting a lack of confidence compared to men (Zhao and Jones, 2017). The pressure to be both nurturing and assertive creates a "double bind," often forcing women to adapt their leadership styles. One participant highlighted the challenges women face in educational leadership roles, particularly concerning the perception of women as "opinionated" and "strong." The assertion that women like her are not chosen for committees due to these qualities reveals a systemic bias against assertive and confident women in positions of authority. Participants' narrative discussed stereotypes about the differences between elementary and secondary educators, attributing qualities like "kinder" and "gentler" to women and suggesting that men are perceived as more adept at handling older children or managing secondary school environments. These stereotypes reinforce traditional gender roles and contribute to the marginalization of women in certain leadership roles within the educational hierarchy. This is consistent with the current literature (e.g., Burkman, 2010). By interrogating societal norms, stereotypes, and institutional practices, we can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments that empower individuals regardless of gender identity.

The intersectionality lens further illuminates how race compounds these challenges. For instance, the perception that African American women are "aggressive" can heighten the scrutiny they face and make it

even harder to gain confidence and navigate leadership roles. The study highlights how power dynamics intertwine with gender and race. Women leaders, particularly those from minority backgrounds, often feel ignored or marginalized in decision-making processes. The absence of mentorships further reinforces these power imbalances. The lack of role models and advocates can make it challenging for women to advance, particularly those facing intersecting disadvantages due to their race or ethnicity.

While women leaders may initially feel the need to conform to traditional leadership styles, the data show an evolution toward shared leadership and empowering others. This shift reflects a conscious effort to challenge existing power structures and create a more inclusive leadership model. However, the intersectional perspective reminds us that women of color may face additional barriers in implementing such transformative leadership styles due to deeply rooted biases and stereotypes. The emotional and psychological cost of constantly adjusting to fit perceived leadership norms can be high, affecting their overall motivation and job satisfaction. As one participant noted, the pressure to please everyone is a significant cost that can impact their willingness to engage fully in their roles. Effective mentorship can help mitigate the perceived costs by offering strategies to navigate challenges and providing emotional support, thus reducing stress and enhancing motivation. Besides mentors, institutional support was also identified as important to these principals' success.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest a need for tailored leadership development programs that address the unique challenges faced by women in mid-level leadership roles. These programs should enhance self-confidence, overcome stereotypes, and foster communication and relationship-building skills. The study also highlights the importance of mentorship in the professional advancement of female leaders. Educational institutions and nonprofit organizations should implement structured mentorship programs that connect aspiring female leaders with experienced mentors to guide them through career challenges and opportunities. Additionally, these organizations should consider revising policies and practices that may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes or hinder the progression of women into leadership roles. This could include reassessing criteria for promotions and leadership assignments to ensure they are inclusive and equitable.

The study underscores the need for ongoing diversity and inclusion training. Such training can help address biases and stereotypes, promoting a more inclusive culture that supports the advancement of women leaders. Encouraging a shift towards a more supportive and collaborative organizational culture can help female leaders thrive. This includes creating an environment where both male and female leaders are encouraged to exhibit a range of leadership styles, including those traditionally seen as "feminine," such as nurturing and relationship-oriented approaches.

Future research should critically examine the dynamics between power, identity, and societal expectations within educational contexts in order to better understand how individuals navigate and negotiate institutional structures and cultural norms that shape their experiences and identities. Future research could also examine broader issues related to identity formation, agency, and the complexities of leadership within hierarchical systems.

LIMITATIONS

This study primarily focuses on gender, with limited exploration of how socioeconomic status intersect with gender and race to create unique challenges. Future research could delve deeper into how intersecting identities shape the leadership experiences of the participants.

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