

**GLASS CLIFF PHENOMENON: HOW DO WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP  
POSITIONS IN NIGERIA PERCEIVE THEIR LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE**

by

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## **Dedication**

I am dedicating this doctoral research first to God, for His strength and faithfulness over the years to achieve the conclusion of this research.

I am also dedicating this study to my family who have been there for me all through my study, encouraging me to keep going, and accomplish this feat.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this to all the women out there who have had to struggle to own their space, a space which should have ordinarily been theirs.

ABSTRACT

**GLASS CLIFF PHENOMENON: HOW DO WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP  
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This study explored the gendered experiences of women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria, with a focus on the “glass cliff” phenomenon — the tendency for women to be appointed to precarious leadership roles during times of crisis. Drawing on a critical theoretical lens, the research investigated how structural, cultural, and organizational forces shape women’s access to leadership, their experiences within male-dominated institutions, and their strategies for resisting and reimagining power.

Using a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty women across diverse sectors who occupy or have occupied senior leadership roles. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis was used to surface both anticipated and emergent themes within their narratives. Pre-interview questionnaires supported contextual understanding and triangulation.

Findings reveal that while formal barriers to leadership may be shifting, informal gatekeeping, cultural and religious norms, symbolic scrutiny, and emotional labor continue to restrict women's leadership experiences. The "glass cliff" was evidenced through patterns of appointment during organizational instability and expectations of unreciprocated emotional and symbolic labor. Despite these challenges, women demonstrated quiet but strategic resistance — mentoring others, advocating for institutional reform, and modeling authentic leadership on their own terms.

This research contributes to gender and leadership scholarship in African contexts by highlighting the persistence of hidden power structures and the agency women deploy to navigate and transform them. It calls for inclusive leadership policies, institutional reforms, and ecosystem-wide strategies to support and sustain women in leadership.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Introduction**

Gender leadership barriers to women in the workplace has been researched for over four (4) decades (Einarsdottir, Hoel and Lewis, 2018) with the advent of the first widely used metaphor, the ‘Glass Ceiling’ - transparent but real barriers, based on discriminatory attitudes or organizational bias and gender stereotypes, that impede qualified individuals, including (but not limited to) women, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled persons, from advancing into management positions (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). This phrase was coined in 1984 by Gay Bryant to describe the barriers women were facing in the workplace, this phrase or metaphor became the first in a series of metaphors that would be used to describe barriers faced by women in leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2006b). According to the Wall Street Journal (1986) there exists a ‘glass ceiling’ barrier which prevents women and other minorities from advancing into leadership positions. It is described as an ‘invisible barrier’ encountered by women on their way to the top (Ryan and Haslam, 2006). This was coined when a lot of ‘...women were reaching positions in middle management but unable to obtain senior and executive positions.’ (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014).

In the same vein mitigating strategies have been deployed over time to address this phenomenon, this includes attempts made by organizations and governments e.g. United

States Government (Federal Glass ceiling Commission, 1995) at helping women break through the glass ceiling, (Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014), women have finally been ‘allowed’ to occupy leadership positions in organizations (Ryan and Haslam 2005a; 2005b, 2007; Oakley, 2000) and in government. Some countries like France and Spain (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014), have the quota system applied to ensure a portion of political seats are given to women, and Nigeria have more women in government now than before (Luka, 2011). Member countries of the African Union, including Nigeria, signed the Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa in 2004 where they reaffirmed their commitment to gender equality (African Union, 2004), countries like Norway (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014), have 40% of the board seats reserved for women and a lot of other measures. Despite these interventions, little is known about the experiences of these women promoted to executive and senior positions. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). As Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam (2014, p.219) have argued “Gender Equality is not simply about the number of women and men in leadership roles, it is also about the types of leadership roles they attain...is not simply about increasing the quantity of women in certain positions, but also about their experiences within these roles...”

In this study, the researcher will review the ‘Glass cliff phenomenon- a subtle and by implication not universally accepted form of gender discrimination (Ryan, Haslam and Postmes, 2007) seen as a ‘second wave’ of discrimination experienced by women who occupy senior roles in organizations, (Ryan et al, 2007).

The Glass Cliff term was coined by M.K. Ryan and S.A Haslam (Ryan and Haslam 2005a), in research carried out in response to the article in The Times (Judge, 2003) questioning if women were a help or hindrance to the organizations who had appointed women to their board. Judge (2003) in this article stated that women were having a negative impact on companies' performance, arguing that the companies' performance took a plummet after women were appointed on the board of certain companies when compared to the performance of other companies who maintained an all-male board ensemble. Ryan and Haslam (2005a), working with the same data used by Judge (2003), had a contrary view from Judge. They argued that a fall in company performance preceded the appointment of women and not the other way round. Hence, according to Ryan and Haslam (2005a, 2005b,2007) the term 'Glass Cliff' was coined to depict the riskiness of the leadership positions offered to these women and with a further implication that women were more likely to be appointed to precarious leadership positions than men and such positions were Glass Cliff positions.

Ryan and Haslam (2005a,2005b, 2007) further argued that market share price, which is built on market perception, was not an objective performance measurement and recommended that accounting indices like ROA (Return on Assets) and ROE (Return on Equity) be used as measuring indices of organizational performance. The current situation at that time was that a link had been established between company performance and management turnover such that the board of directors are most likely to make changes when the stock performance is poor (Ryan and Haslam 2005a, 2005b). As such

directors from successful companies 'typically' move on to other positions while directors from failing companies appear, 'scarred for life,'. The argument was that stock performance should not be the basis for future decisions on company performance, (Ryan and Haslam 2005a). Situational factors, rather, are key when reviewing organizational and leadership issues. It should be noted that applying these indices [ROA and ROE]; in reviewing the same companies reviewed earlier by Judge (2003), Ryan and Haslam (2005a) did not find a lack of performance.

### **Limitations**

This research is not intended to look at the glass cliff as a barrier to other minority groups it is limited to the female gender (regardless of race) even though the glass cliff phenomenon applies to other minorities facing discrimination in the workplace (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a, 2007). The research questions for this study clearly shows that this study is not just about women but women who are presently occupying or have occupied Senior and Executive Management positions in Nigeria and not those in lower positions.

This study is also limited to the time and context of carrying out the study and where the methodology applied, which will be presented in detail, is replicable, the findings are constrained by the time and place of carrying out this study.

## 1.2 Research Problem

There have been interventions from the government and corporate organizations following the identification and confirmation of the Glass Ceiling phenomenon, however, not all areas have felt this impact, there are less changes in some sectors like Engineering and Technology (Cohen, Ross and Bennet, 2023), Architecture in relation to sectors like Human Resources, (Kovaleva, Ryan and Haslam, 2023). The ratio of women in top management is not growing as expected and it seems like these positions to be made for men, (Einarsdottir et al., 2018).

Furthermore, little is known about the experiences of these women promoted to executive and senior positions. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). As Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam (2014, p.219) have argued “Gender Equality is not simply about the number of women and men in leadership roles, it is also about the types of leadership roles they attain...is not simply about increasing the quantity of women in certain positions, but also about their experiences within these roles...” This is the focus of this study. The question is if the increased representation in leadership positions translate into resolution of the existence of these barriers women encounter or mean that men and women receive equal treatment in organizations? (Ellemers et al, 2012). Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt (2009) argue that the numbers [of women in leadership positions] are not enough simply because they do not provide enough information to assess the situation of women it is all statistics, no soul. These numbers do not inform us of the experiences of these women and if the efforts made to get women represented at the top has addressed

the issue of gender inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Hence, though research shows women moved into management positions in a greater number than before (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), there is a perceived lack of acceptance and support by women in the management culture at the top (Simon, 1996; Chovwen, 2006).

The glass cliff phenomenon has become quite robust and widespread (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014). Though not visible in every female leadership situation, its veracity has been argued to be established by various experimental studies showing that it exist in the IT sector (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006), legal field where hard to win cases are left for women, (Ashby, Ryan and Haslam, 2005), higher education (Peterson,2015), student leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2008) , politics, where unwinnable seats are left to women, ( Ryan, Haslam and Kulich, 2010), youth leadership for a music festival with declining popularity (Ryan and Haslam, 2006b, 2006c) and in business (Ryan and Haslam, 2006a) .

Ryan, Haslam and Postmes (2007) however note that even though the robustness of the glass cliff phenomenon has been demonstrated it is likely to be seen as controversial as many organizations and the government have taken steps to correct this imbalance because as we have shown above. United states government set up the 21-member bipartisan team under the umbrella of the Federal Glass ceiling Commission to identify and mitigate glass ceiling barriers (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995), the African Union signed a declaration to reaffirm their support gender equality (Africa Union, 2004), as well as other management practices and policies, to promote gender diversity in

the workplace. Furthermore, Nigeria [and other African countries] have been involved with issues of women empowerment following the Beijing conference 30 years ago in 1995, (Omoyibo, Obaro and Akpojivi, 2010). This also throws more light as to why little is known about the experiences of women at the top of the ladder, (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). The reluctance to speak about their experiences and create any controversy necessitates the purpose of this study which is to contribute to the research of the glass cliff phenomenon particularly in Nigeria with a bid to gaining insight into women's experience in senior and executive management positions and its effect on their career choices subsequently.

The glass cliff phenomenon has little or no research evidence in Nigeria and this will be the researcher's major contribution to the knowledge and practice, as this study in its fullness will be looking at the experiences of the women already in senior positions or who have occupied such positions and the impact of this on career choices made after this level. The outcome of this research, therefore, be to provide a concerted report which will extend the knowledge on the barriers facing senior female executives especially in the Nigerian corporate world and is expected to aid women in making career selections in Nigeria, especially for potential female leaders who will have the benefit of more senior female leaders first hand and diverse experience, while for those women already occupying such senior positions, the experience of other women will facilitate their understanding of their own experiences and subsequent career decisions which may, in both cases, lead to an alternative route; Entrepreneurship, perhaps?

As Ryan and Haslam (2006b) argued, women working on the edge in glass cliff positions would exit the organisation at some point and discourage other women from such positions. Their experiences draw out feelings of a lot of hard work and being unappreciated, (Einarsdottir et al., 2018). So, the purpose is also aimed at benefiting organizations, contributing to the knowledge on the impact of the glass cliff effect on their talent pool. As diversity is one of the driving forces of organizational success and women's potentials should be valued and not ignored, (Chowwen, 2006; Danjuma et al, 2011, Cook and Glass, 2015). Research has demonstrated that an increase in female employees can impact positively the growth of SMEs especially if they are paid well, with job security, (Marconatto et al., 2022).

### **1.3 Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study partially rests on Ryan and Haslam,p.46-47, (2006) argument that subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as the glass cliff, are often a key reason why women decide to leave organizations or why their careers stagnate, “...our research suggests that it is often an outcome of the particular forms of stress that women confront as they pursue their career ambitions...” Hence this research would investigate the applicability of the glass cliff theory to the experiences of Nigerian women in leadership positions, to understand the experiences of these women from their perspective and show if there is any link between the presence of the glass cliff and the career decisions women make at varying points in their careers. Career decisions that often leads to women exiting the organisation after working on the edge (Ryan Haslam

and Postmes, 2007; Ryan and Haslam, 2006), under stress and without job satisfaction for so long. This further discourages other women and even the women who currently occupy these positions in seeking future opportunities and many times take alternative routes like entrepreneurship.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Considering that little is known about the experiences of these women, there is an argument that women get to the top of the ladder they are constrained to speak about their experience and any other form of discrimination and rather downplay their experience, that is, adopt the queen bee disposition (Ellemers et al, 2012) and as such feel alone in their struggles.

Reading and connecting other women's stories about their own specific experiences will help such women to understand their own current or future situations. This research thereby confirms [or not] the reality of their own experiences as the glass cliff theory will help us make some sense out of the reason why, women face more challenges as leaders than men. Majorly because the Glass cliff is said to be a form of gender discrimination which shows that women do break through the glass ceiling but however are offered risky and precarious opportunities, in relation to their male colleagues (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a, 2007; Ryan, Haslam and Postmes, 2007) and are thereby faced with more criticisms. In terms of the implication and significance of this study to the organization and the importance to practice, it is worthy to first note that the glass cliff phenomenon has the ability to exacerbate the challenges been faced by organizations in maintaining

gender equality in top management, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) and the last thing any organisation wants or needs is to have leaders who are termed as failures. This is because, employees and their skills are an organization's greatest assets it would be unwise to deplete any portion of that, (Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014).

Furthermore, women working on the edge in glass cliff positions end up stressed, burnout and unhappy which can lead to sick leaves, and other absences leading to staff attrition. All this come as a cost to the women's careers and the organisation; recruitment and training cost as well as productivity lost due to the absences and unhappiness on the job, (Ryan and Haslam, 2006; Hardaker and Ballantyne, 2023). Their experiences draw out feelings of a lot of hard work and being unappreciated, (Einarsdottir et al., 2018). So, the purpose is also aimed and benefiting women, the organizations, contributing to the knowledge on the impact of the glass cliff effect on the talent pool. As diversity is one of the driving forces of organizational success and women's potentials should be valued and not ignored, (Chovwen, 2006; Danjuma et al, 2011, Cook and Glass, 2015). Research has demonstrated that an increase in female employees can impact positively the growth of SMEs especially if they are paid well, with job security, (Marconatto et al., 2022)

### **1.5 Research Objective**

The proposed research will provide a better understanding of the leadership barriers women who have broken through the glass ceiling face at the senior level of leadership. It will investigate into if women who get to the top of the ladder are constrained to speak about their experience and any other form of discrimination and would rather downplay

their experience, that is, adopt the queen bee disposition (Ellemers et al, 2012) and as such feel alone in their struggles. This research will thereby confirm [or not] the reality of their own experiences and the applicability of the glass cliff theory to the Nigerian context.

The research has the following sub-objectives.

- To understand this phenomenon, the Glass Cliff and its applicability to the Nigerian context as perceived by women in senior leadership.
- To deep dive and understand how these women perceive the impact of the glass cliff phenomenon on their career choices
- To explore how these women perceive the Nigerian Cultural and Societal Norms, the role of government or corporates Policy and Gender-Inclusive Leadership Practices contributed or not to their experiences?
- To provide recommendations for mitigating the Glass Cliff Phenomenon that will impact women's leadership experience, organizational performance and the ultimately Industry practice.

## **1.6 Research Design and Questions**

The purpose of this research is to understand how these women in Senior leadership positions in Nigeria view their experiences and the resultant actions they take following their interpretation of their experiences. This study will adopt qualitative research methodology research design. Qualitative research embraces a very different philosophical view of how human behaviour arises, why people do the things they do in various social contexts (Symon, Cassell, Duberley and Johnson, 2012)

Qualitative research design further explains and justifies the requirement to collect certain forms of data in a particular way, in this case qualitative data collection and analysis methods, interviews and thematic analysis respectively.

The research deductively established some themes following the interrogation of the literature. These themes were aligned with the themes inductively constructed during the verbal interview questions for twenty (20) women occupying and previously occupied Senior leadership positions in Nigeria.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the primary data from the interview sessions. The expectation is to understand the perception these women have of their lived experiences, the impact it had on their careers. The study linked the themes in the research evidence to the results of the thematic analysis. Looking for similarities, difference and embracing all results. The study was not aimed to prove which experience is superior but to enable these women understand their journey, enable other women or organizations share in this journey and its likely impact on the individual and organizational decisions thereof.

### **1.6.1 Research Question**

The main research question of this study is, ‘How do women in Senior Leadership Positions in Nigeria perceive their leadership experience and its subsequent impact on their careers?’

The sub- research questions emanating from the Main Research Question of this study are.

- What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?
- How do women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?
- In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge, or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?

The motivation for this research draws from the fact that despite the research evidence of action taken by the government and corporate organizations to stem the tide on the effect of the glass ceiling on women’s careers, little is known on the experiences of these women who are now occupying leadership positions. This study will focus on the experiences of women who currently occupy or have occupied senior roles in corporate organizations, their perception of their experiences, to see if these barriers met on the way up, just evaporated when they got to the top, and if not, what impact this had and still has on women and their careers. This research will take a closer look at those women who have smashed through the metaphorical glass ceiling specifically reviewing

the glass cliff phenomenon in a bid to understand if it captures the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions and their perception of their experiences. Senior roles used in this context, means Senior and Executive Management positions.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study draws from Ryan and Haslam, p.46-47, (2006) argument that subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as the glass cliff, are often a key reason why women decide to leave organizations or why their careers stagnate. To address the problem of why in spite of attempts over the years by organizations and governments e.g. United States Government (Federal Glass ceiling Commission, 1995) at helping women break through the glass ceiling, (Bruckmüller et al, 2014) women have finally been ‘allowed’ to occupy leadership positions in organizations and (Ryan and Haslam 2005a; 2005b, 2007, Oakley, 2000) in government .Some countries like France and Spain (Bruckmüller et al ,2014) have the quota system applied to ensure a portion of political seats are given to women, and Nigeria have more women in government now than before(Luka, 2011), countries like Norway (Bruckmüller et al, 2014) have 40% of the board seats reserved for women. However, little is known about the experiences of these women promoted to executive and senior positions. (Wilson-Kovacs et al, 2006). Does the increased representation in leadership positions translate into resolution of the existence of these barriers women encounter or mean that men and women receive equal treatment in organizations?

(Ellemer et al, 2012). Is it possible that once women get to the top of the ladder they are constrained to speak about their experience and any other form of discrimination and rather downplay their experience, that is, adopt the queen bee disposition (Ellemer et al, 2012) and as such feel alone in their struggles.

This research would, therefore, be to see the applicability of the glass cliff theory to the experiences of Nigerian women in Leadership positions. To understand the experiences of these women from their perspective and show if there is any link between the presence of the glass cliff and the career decisions women make at varying points in their careers.

This research was carried out within the Nigerian context. To support this, research evidence shows that Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, whereby, men are more favoured than women and have more domination (Alliyu, 2014). Where division of labour is by gender (and age), (Omoyibo et al, 2010). So according to Omoyibo et al, (2010), views about women is based on their positions in the family so they depend on their fathers and from there move on to their husband's house and later in life depend on their sons and brothers (Alliyu, 2014). Though Alliyu, (2014) has excluded lifetime spinsters, daughters of single mothers and single mothers themselves as well as mothers without sons, it is still relevant to our study as it shows the perception of women in the society, dependents. Ryan and Haslam's (2007p.g 564) also claim which is that it is expected that the glass cliff will be more apparent in the societies that 'endorse traditional patterns of gender-based division of labour, because gender

discrimination and sexism are more institutionalized'. Nigeria is seen by some as a place where gender stereotypes are culturally constructed (Ogege, 2011) and are extended into the workplace (Omoyibo et al, 2010). Majority of the research evidence is centered largely on the occidental region and therein lies the contribution of this research work to practice and knowledge in gender studies, leadership and management.

This research will be undertaken from a critical theorist perspective, highlighting the feelings of exploitation, unfairness, repression and injustice experienced by these women in senior leadership positions while looking at the implications on women's careers in general and try to compare this with mitigating strategies both tried and suggested to understand if there is hope for the future female leader in terms of gender equality in the workplace and career growth. Though it seems logical to adopt the feminist approach, considering that the researcher is speaking of gender inequality and barriers, the researcher has chosen not to identify as a feminist. This study will review the oppressions women face which do not necessarily come from only men or male managers but also from women themselves (Bruckmüller et al, 2013), especially when they believe in the Social Role theory – this will be discussed later in this study This study will deconstruct certain social constructs which tend to support the Social Role theory that believes women are expected to perform certain feminine roles and any deviation is frowned at and seen as atypical. (Eagly,1982, 1987; Vogel et al, 2003). In selecting the relevant literature, the researcher was particular about research that

traced the origination of the glass ceiling and the several iterations and interventions that have happened over time. There was also a focus on the experiences women who have consistently faced gendered leadership barriers have gone through before and after the interventions, the actual interventions and the impact, positive or negative, these have had and where the impact has been felt. Research evidence reviewing the resultant actions women take in the face of the gendered leadership barriers.

The research evidence gathered has been structured to first show a review of archival evidence describing the glass cliff phenomenon and critically review the explanations for its existence, highlighting the underlying theory or beliefs supporting their existence, the taken for granted assumptions that have fueled these social constructs. Finally, a review the implications for women's careers and the organisation reviewing mitigating strategies adopted and yet to be adopted in this regard. The chapter of literature review will be aligned in the following structure guided by the questions below.

- (i) What is this Phenomenon, the Glass Cliff?
- (ii) What explanations/ reasons are there for its existence?
  - What underlying theories explain this situation?
- (iii) Are there implications of the glass cliff phenomenon on women's careers?
  - What are the Implications on the organisation?
- (iv) What mitigating strategies are recorded as been adopted?

- Are there recommended strategies?

There are four key theories help explain this study: Glass Cliff Theory, Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1982), Role Incongruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), and Implicit Theories of Gender and Leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b). A deeper look is taken in the next few sections.

## **2.2 What is this Phenomenon, the Glass Cliff?**

Like Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt (2009) argue, the numbers of women in leadership positions are not enough simply because they do not provide enough information to assess the situation of women rather it's all statistics, no soul. These numbers do not inform us of the experiences of these women and if the efforts made to get women represented at the top has addressed the issue of gender inequality and discrimination in the workplace. In trying to understand what the glass cliff phenomenon is, we will look at the definitions of this phenomenon and the evidence demonstrated by archival and experimental research so far. Tracing this phenomenon back to its origins, in 1984, a phrase was coined by Gay Bryant to describe the barriers women were facing in the corporate world, this phrase or metaphor is the 'The Glass Ceiling' which became the first in a series of metaphors that would be used to describe barriers faced by women in leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2006b). The Wall Street Journal (1986) also claimed that there existed a 'glass ceiling' barrier which prevented women and other minorities from advancing into leadership positions. It is described it as an 'invisible barrier' encountered

by women on their way to the top (Ryan and Haslam, 2006a). This was coined when a lot of ‘...women were reaching positions in middle management but unable to obtain senior and executive positions.’ (Bruckmüller et al,2013). The ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon generated reactions from the government (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995), member countries of the African Union, including Nigeria, signed the Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa in 2004 where they reaffirmed their commitment to gender equality( Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa , 2004), organizations, the media and individuals, (Ryan, Haslam and Postmes 2007). Women have however moved into management positions in a greater number than before (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), however there is a perceived lack of acceptance and support by women in the management culture at the top (Simon, 1996; Chovwen, 2006).

The glass cliff term was coined by M. K. Ryan and S.A Haslam in research carried out in response to the article in The Times (Judge, 2003) questioning if women were a help or hindrance to the organizations who had appointed women to their board. Judge (2003) in this article categorically stated that women were having a negative impact on companies’ performance. Ryan and Haslam (2005a), worked with the same data used by Judge (2003) but had a contrary view from Judge's argument that the companies’ performance took a plummet after women were appointed on the Board of certain companies when compared to the performance of other companies who maintained an all-male Board ensemble. They argued that a fall in company performance preceded the appointment of women and not the other way round. Hence, according to Ryan and

Haslam (2005a, 2005b,2007) the term ‘Glass Cliff’ was coined to depict the riskiness of the leadership positions offered to these women and with a further implication that women were more likely to be appointed to precarious leadership positions than men and such positions where Glass Cliff positions.

Ryan and Haslam (2005a,2005b, 2007) further argued that market share price, which is built on market perception, was not an objective performance measurement and recommended that accounting indices like ROA (Return on Assets) and ROE (Return on Equity) be used as measuring indices of organizational performance. There has been established a link between company performance and management turnover such that the board of directors are most likely to make changes when the stock performance is poor (Ryan and Haslam 2005a, 2005b). As such directors from successful companies ‘typically’ move on to other positions while directors from failing companies appear’, ‘scarred for life’, hence stock performance should not be the basis for future decisions on company performance, (Ryan and Haslam 2005a). Situational factors, rather, are key when reviewing organizational and leadership issues. It should be noted that using these indices to review these same companies reviewed by Judge (2003), Ryan and Haslam (2005a) did not see a lack of performance.

The glass cliff phenomenon has become quite robust and widespread (Bruckmüller et al, 2014). Though not visible in every female leadership situation, its veracity has been argued to be established by various experimental studies showing that it exist in the IT sector (Wilson-Kovacs et al, 2006),legal field where hard to win cases are left for

women, (Ashby et al, 2005), higher education (H.Peterson,2015), student leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2008) , politics, where unwinnable seats are left to women, ( Ryan, Haslam and Kulich, 2010), youth leadership for a music festival with declining popularity (Haslam and Ryan, 2006, Study 2 and 3) and in business (Haslam and Ryan, 2006a, Study 1). Ryan, Haslam and Postmes (2007) however note that even though the robustness of the glass cliff phenomenon has been demonstrated it is likely to be seen as controversial as many organizations and the government have taken steps to correct this imbalance because as we have shown above, United states government set up the 21-member bipartisan team under the umbrella of the Federal Glass ceiling Commission to identify glass ceiling barriers and mitigate (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995) and the African Union signed a declaration to reaffirm their support gender equality( Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, 2004) ), as well as other management practices and policies discussed later in this paper, to promote gender diversity in the workplace. Furthermore, Nigeria [ and other African countries] have been involved with issues of women empowerment following the Beijing conference 20 years ago in 1995, (Omoyibo et al, 2010).This also throws more light as to why little is known about the experiences of women at the top of the ladder, (Wilson-Kovacs et al, 2006), the reluctance to speak about their experiences and create this controversy mentioned above, hence, the purpose of this study which is to contribute to the research of the glass cliff phenomenon in Nigeria with a bid to gaining insight into women's experience in senior and executive management positions in Nigeria and its effect on their career choices subsequently.

## **2.3 What explanations/ reasons are there for its existence? What underlying theories explain this situation?**

### **a. The Glass Cliff Theory**

Here we will attempt to gain some understanding with regards to explanations or reasons contained in the archival research in this regard. The lay and experimental explanations put forward (Chowwen, 2006; Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) include lack of support and information from immediate team, effective networks of support (Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014; Williams and Foster, 2024), being set up to fail. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006, Ellemers et al, 2012), management practices and policies whereby gender stereotypes are created and acted upon (Chowwen, 2006)

Ryan and Haslam (2007, p.558) also argue that ‘...glass cliffs arise from a confluence of social- psychological and social-structural factors’ ranging from deliberate actions to those arising from our belief system both benign and malignant, (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). However, like Ryan and Haslam (2007) stated care must be taken to avoid prioritizing or overemphasizing one explanation over the other.

Archival and experimental evidence indicate that women are appointed to management positions under different circumstances than men with women occupying supporting leadership roles like personnel, training, or marketing rather than the critical operating or commercial roles (Ryan and Haslam 2005a) due to their interpersonal traits (Hoyt and Burnette, 2013; Gartzia and Martinez, 2024). The

service sectors are also included in this list. The price to be paid to occupy these critical operating and commercial roles is for women to take over companies with poor performance. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). Accepting these positions in companies with poor performance invariably leads to risky and precarious positions and thereby being exposed to a glass cliff situation (Ryan et al,2011), consciously or unconsciously.

For further sense making of the reasons underlying the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon, the Social Role theory, Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice and Implicit theory of Gender and Leadership will be reviewed for this purpose.

#### **b. The Social Role Theory**

The Social Role theory (Eagly 1982) assumes that men are expected to be agentic and women communal, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) because it is perceived that there exists a link between the activities that people carry out daily and their perceived social roles. So, women are traditionally perceived as the homemakers in the society and men as the bread winners and this supports the stereotypes in the mind of the perceivers (Eagly, 1982, 1987) with regards to the roles they play. There are by extension, specific roles men and women are expected to display and any deviations from this perception of gender stereotypes are frowned at and are followed with criticism (Vogel et al, 2003)., Any display contrary to these gendered beliefs or stereotypical attitudes is not looked upon favourably.

Gender Stereotypes are in effect used to define successful stereotypical

leadership qualities. When female leaders display these so-called agentic qualities, there is a feeling of disappointment and public crucifixion of the female gender describing her as being too harsh. In fact, this contrary behaviour is termed as 'gender violation,' (Eagly and Karau, 2002), hence the Role Incongruity Theory of prejudice (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

**c. The role Incongruity Theory of Prejudice**

The role incongruity theory of prejudice was developed by Eagly and Karau, (2002) and grounded in the social role theory, and it says there is a mismatch between the traits required by leaders and the traits displayed by women. This perceived incongruity/mismatch between the female gender role and leadership role leads to two forms of prejudice against women in leadership where the first instance, women are seen not to have the potential to be leaders and secondly women who are leaders, are expected to behave in line with the stereotypes which if any deviation is seen, is followed by criticism.

The first part of this prejudice is contradictory to the glass cliff phenomenon because in terms of risky and glass cliff positions this incongruity between the feminine traits and leadership roles seem to disappear and women are perceived more suitable for this role even though we cannot confidently say women are viewed more favourably than the men. The second instance of the prejudice against women and the social role theory explain why organizational decision makers tend to hire women for risky and precarious leadership positions, as women are perceived to be communal in

nature and expected to display these feminine qualities and traits, qualities that are regarded as similar to the transformation leadership style (Eagly and Carli, 2003).

**d. Implicit Theories About Gender and Leadership**

Implicit theories about gender and leadership are also another important basis for sense making and reflection of women's experiences in the workplace, (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b, pg., 177). However, ‘.... there is no simple or universal implicit theory of what it means to be a leader that is likely to inform perception and action across all situations.’ (pg. 179). Which is why the glass cliff phenomenon is not seen in every situation. ‘These Gendered leadership beliefs create stereotypes about leadership (Ellemers et al, 2012) as people have priori implicit theories (Hoyt and Burnette, 2013), that guide this type of thinking, (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Ryan and Haslam, 2007). These gendered leadership beliefs (Ellemers et al 2012) can be traced to the social constructs which we are fed from when we are little which guides the way we tend to perceive what we term ‘normal’ and otherwise. We then create stereotypes of what we expect a manager to look like and act like (Ellemers et al,2012), where men are said to be agentic, and women are said to be communal (Eagly,1987). Furthermore, because of the implicit theories individuals have within them that determine what they believe to be the roles and characteristics of the male and female gender (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b) and so sees the congruity between the feminine trait (communal) and the leadership role of women who are leaders.

Gendered leadership stereotypes influence women's appointment to high-risk leaderships roles even when their performance metrics are superior, (Lomas and Day 2024). These communal characteristics are reported to include being affectionate, kind, sympathetic, gentle while the agentic characteristics ascribed to the male gender comprises of being assertive, controlling, confident, aggressive and ambitious. To be accepted in the society, men and women must live up to these perceived roles, thereby confirming the gender stereotypes, bringing a never-ending cyclical gender leadership barrier.

The Social Role Theory, Role Incongruity Theory and The Implicit theories of gender and leadership have similarities and thus all point to the fact that women are perceived as communal in nature due to gendered leadership beliefs arising from the link between the activities carried out on a daily basis and the social roles of the male or female gender (Eagly,1982, 1987).

e. **Other Theories**

Research evidence also shows that in time of crisis, the communal traits are required especially to manage people and take the blame for failure (Ryan et al, 2011) so by implication women as communal leaders are preferred at the time of crisis as they are believed to have what it takes to pull this off, but this increases the likelihood of failure and can limit women's success, (Mendelson and Hung, 2023). So, when an organisation has successful times, men are the default leadership choice (Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2010), we have what is called the 'Think Manager, Think Male'

associations and for those times women are chosen as leaders we have what is called, 'Think Crisis, Think Female' (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Gartzia et al 2012, Bruckmüller et al, 2014).

Looking closely at the 'Think Manager, Think Male' association, there is a seemingly incompatibility between the beliefs of what it means to be a good leader and what it means to be a female. The earlier work by Schein in 1973 and 1975 and the 92 descriptive attributes of male and females set the stage for what attributes were termed feminine or masculine and the similarity between the attributes of successful managers and those for the male gender. Fifty years on from this study, it continues to reflect on what determines a successful manager and supports why women are offered glass cliff positions. Have we considered reviewing those ninety-two (92) descriptive terms in the light of the world we live in today? Where is the place of the transgender in all this? Do we review them as women or men, as they have noticeably switched from one gender to another? These questions must be considered by researchers in this field to ensure organizations are making well-informed decisions commensurate with the time and day we live in today.

On the contrary research evidence however argues that women are in crisis times seen as more compatible with leadership roles than men. This is because they are seen as communal i.e., affectionate, friendly, helpful, empathetic (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Haslam and Peters, 2012), in other words women are perceived by most men and women as more sensitive and encouraging leaders than men, (Elmuti, Jia and Davis,

2009). This is the very argument necessitating this review in this paper. Here we seek to understand the type of leadership positions given to women, if by any chance there are still barriers at this level, specifically the glass cliff barrier. This is where the social role theory comes in as it explains why women are perceived in this way.

Ryan and Haslam (2007) support this view by arguing that what is required from a leader is different in a time of crisis and hence the female (or female-like) candidates has been demonstrated to be preferred in a time like this due to interpersonal/communal oriented abilities, leadership that supports collective processes and participation, i.e. transformation leadership traits (Gartzia et al 2012). Eagly and Carli (2003) in their evaluation of the female leadership advantage theory show that there is a potential advantage (Vecchio, 2002) in looking at women as leaders as their transformational leadership style is particularly effective in supporting organizational change. So, men are said not to be suited to handle these challenges (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a, 2007; Bruckmüller et al, 2014; Gartzia et al, 2012) though some argue that women are therefore chosen not because they are necessarily better, but that men are not suitable for the role (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). This is concisely the, 'Think Crisis, Think Female' association. Rink, Ryan, and Stoker (2012) and Ryan and Haslam (2007) point out that the existence of the glass cliff is not because of women's failure to recognize the riskiness of these positions but rather depends on the selection process. Hence Gender discrimination is not necessarily intentional as it can be a result of an unconscious bias...' (Powell and Butterfield, 1994).

There are some departures from this, studies like Wilson-Kovac, Ryan and Haslam (2006), despite arguing that their study confirm the existence of the glass cliff situation, did not show that a crisis preceded the appointment of the women interviewed. It was more of a case of incompatibility between their bosses and themselves, a case of injustice and repression, perhaps. There are other cases whereby crisis period does not lead to recruiting female leaders (Ellemers et al, 2012).

Despite the argument for preference for women in times of crisis, the reality is that majority of the organizations are still being led by men, crisis and all, especially in Nigeria where men are expected to be successful and women are expected to be supportive (Chovwen,2006). The explanation for this could be linked to the study by Gartzia et al (2012), which argues that in a company whose business is stereotypically masculine, that is, if the organization rests on the Male Leadership Role Model (MLRM) women or men who display largely interpersonal traits are not considered in crisis times. So, women are less likely to be recruited as leaders. This study was carried out in a bid to look at further evidence of the ‘Think crisis, Think female’ association.

This study expanded sexism as an explanation for the existence of the glass cliff situations that is the ‘Think crisis, Think female’ association (Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Ellemers et al., 2012). However, sexism alone cannot, as a standalone factor, explain why these positions exist as there are situational factors that affect the role of sexism in the selection of women in times of crisis. (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). In Gartzia et al (2012) study, Male Leadership Role Model (MLRM) states that if sexism is high or

low, the organization will neither employ a female leader or require people-oriented leaders whether male or female. Gartzia et al (2012) have by this study assumed that all female leaders have interpersonal or communal leadership traits. Gartzia et al (2012), further argues that where MLRM does not exist and sexism is low, then women and people-oriented leaders (male or female) stood a chance of being recruited in times of crises. However, if sexism was high in this scenario, then the masculine agentic traits were highly desirable and sought after. In summary, MLRM hindered this stereotype, the 'Think crisis, think female' association, with sexism laying a vital role, i.e., women and women-like leaders will only be recruited in crisis period as far as MLRM was not salient and sexism is low.

On further consideration of the reasons underlying the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon, group dynamics and in-group favoritism shows up, (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Historically, decision makers in an organizational setting were typically male and there is the argument that there are some in-group discriminations on the part of these decision makers (Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Ellemers et al, 2012), expressed as glass cliff, taking the form of in- group favoritism, to the extent that the 'cushy' jobs are kept for the fellow in-group members [males]. Ryan and Haslam's (2007) argument are that women are seen as expendable and can be given such unstable positions. The researcher extends it further to say that in a place like Nigeria, where gendered leadership beliefs still exist, (Ogege, 2011), beliefs which see women roles in the workplace as commensurate to their roles in the family unit (Alliyu, 2014; Omoyibo,

Obar and Akpojivi, 2010). Women are reluctantly 'allowed' into leadership roles most times to satisfy the numbers requested (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006) not necessarily because the decision makers believe women are qualified for the position. However, in some cases in Nigeria where a woman has distinguished herself by keeping away from the internal politics of the organization, has shown high competence in her field, demonstrated hard work (Muhr, 2011) and dedication, such a woman seen to have the suitable qualifications for the job, (Chovwen, 2006) and probably 'accepted' as part of this group. So, in-group favoritism can extend to not recommending these positions to men. Men are less likely to find themselves on the glass cliffs than women (Ryan, Haslam and Postmes, 2007) because members of their gender –based in-group direct them away towards other more secure positions (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Men are said to have privileges of turning offers down, (Peterson, 2015). The notion of 'men's jobs' tied to their social role, (Eagly, 1982) is accepted as a social construct which allows for the survival of 'in group favoritism'.

Another reason for this is an attempt by the organization to signal change. Ryan and Haslam (2005a, p.86) demonstrated that, '...in a time of a general financial downturn in the stock market, companies that appointed women had experienced consistently poor performance in the months preceding the appointment....'. Appointing women was seen to signal change and probably instill confidence in the public (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014).

So, women find themselves in these positions because they are not men and not necessarily due to their perceived abilities (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), especially as the organisation at that point believes they have nothing to lose and this signals to both the internal and external stakeholders that the organisation is embracing change (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). So, they are seen as a "last ditch effort" that is attempted only when the situation "is really dire." (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b, p.189; Simpson and Wright, 2023)

In terms of acknowledging the existence of this phenomenon, research shows that people tend to deny the existence of any form of discrimination, for instance in Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam's (2014) review of the reactions of men and women to the glass cliff phenomenon, men and senior level *women* leaders were seen not to acknowledge its existence. For those who acknowledged, they proposed benign reasons for its existence, like strategic decision making by the company, women's suitability for difficult leadership tasks. The acknowledgement of the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon was by junior and mid-level women and there was an inclination towards malignant reasons for its existence. This reason why senior female leaders did not acknowledge the existence of the glass cliff may be as a result of trying to downplay their bad experiences, (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), that is the queen-bee effect, (Ellemer, Ryan and Haslam, 2012), where women downplay their gender identity and display masculine traits in order to be and remain successful as leaders which may hinder other women in spite of the fact that it positively affects the individual woman/queen bee.

The next section will be a review of archival and empirical evidence concerning the impact occupying glass cliff positions has on women, especially on their careers. In building themes for future research on how women perceive their senior leadership experience in Nigeria and its impact on their careers.

#### **2.4 Are there implications of the glass cliff phenomenon on women's careers?**

##### **For women's careers? For the Organisation?**

Once women get to leadership positions, research evidence shows that their performance is placed under remarkably scrutiny and questioned due to entrenched gender stereotypes (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Chung and Choi, 2023). This hardly yields a positive performance result, there are negative evaluations (Ryan and Haslam 2005a), even when performing the same leadership role as men (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). This is likely to be because of many men and male managers not being convinced about how effective women are at leading or because people tend to prefer male supervisors, (Ryan and Haslam 2005a). Another reason could be because men are expected to play the social role of the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker, perceived to only be working out of choice (Eagly, 1982, 1987). To that end having women as leaders in the workplace distorts the expectation of the role of such women.

The positions are dangerous for women's careers, (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006) as rather than looking at the situational factors (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a), all the negative attention attracted to such companies in crisis can be attributed to women's personal abilities [or lack of], (Ryan, Haslam and Postmes,

2007; Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014). This was seen in Judge's (2003) claim of women creating havoc rather than being of help to the organizations who appointed them.

When reviewing women's performance as leaders, there is a perceived lack of fit, and women are thereby seen to be unsuitable as leaders (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Hence Ryan and Haslam (2007) summarized the fact that womenfolk are often in a 'lose-lose' situation where they are regarded as pushy if they display masculine (agentic) traits and unsuitable if they display feminine (communal) traits (Vogey et al, 2003). Unsuitable because these communal traits are not compatible with the traits expected of leaders, hence the 'think manager, think male' associations.

Some women seek these positions out consciously or unconsciously as they can be seen as an opportunity to 'shine' if successful or gain some popularity, (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006)- no matter how 'cheap' the popularity or 'expensive' the cost?... one may ask. It begs the question.... why if this is seen as an opportunity, does it not appeal to the men folk?' The high stress and strain (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014; Ryan and Haslam, 2006b) on working on the edge will not only be detrimental to one but to other women who will come after as it's more difficult to lead in times of crisis (Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014). It sets a very unnecessary and unwanted precedent. Future leadership positions are mortgaged at the feet of the success of the present precarious leadership position (Ryan and Haslam, 2006). Even though Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, (2014) says it might be due to scarcity of

leadership positions, so women tend to make-do with the rejects of the male leaders.

Succeeding in this role can portray women as problem solvers and thereby confirming the stereotype, 'Think Crisis, Think Female.' And this can lead to a long trail of glass cliff positions for women. (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Also being successful can also mean the experiences are downplayed or looked at positively as a challenge. However, failing in this role can make these women disenchanted and demotivated (Ryan and Haslam, 2007) and can also be a demotivation for other women considering such or any leadership position considering it negatively affects future leadership roles, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014). While some women who are in these positions may exit the organisation, dissatisfied after a long struggle, (Ryan and Haslam, 2006), younger women or mid-level female managers may see alternative career routes like entrepreneurship rather than go on the long and seemingly tortuous journey to senior leadership.

In terms of the implication of the glass cliff phenomenon on the organisation, it is worthy to first note that the glass cliff phenomenon has the ability to exacerbate the challenges been faced by organizations in maintaining gender equality in top management, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) and the last thing any organisation wants or needs is to have leaders who are termed as failures. This is because, employees and their skills are an organization's greatest assets it would be unwise to deplete any portion of that, (Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014).

Furthermore, women working on the edge in glass cliff positions end up stressed,

burnout and unhappy which can lead to sick leaves, and other absences leading to staff attrition. All this come as a cost to the organisation; recruitment and training cost as well as productivity lost due to the absences and unhappiness on the job, (Ryan and Haslam, 2006; Hardaker and Ballantyne, 2023)

## **2.5 What mitigating strategies are recorded as been adopted and what recommended strategies are not yet adopted?**

Women have different leadership styles from men and as such diversity should be encouraged (Ellemers et al 2012) because different genders bring on varying qualities and diversity which is amongst the driving forces of organizational growth, (Chowwen, 2006). In a study carried out by Hardaker, Woods and Fields (2023) there is an implication that effective leaders are androgynous which is a combination of agentic and communal traits, so it makes little sense to discriminate against any gender, male and female leaders alike should be encouraged to display both traits.

Management and government mitigating measures focus on creating policies on gender equality as shown by the United States government (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995), however, to create opportunities for women means more than creating new policies, it means changing the existing organizational and government practices. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). The focus should be on organizational practices or cultures that may lead to glass cliff situations to ensure we are not unconsciously biased, (Powell and Butterfield, 1994). Creating awareness of the subtle forms of gender discrimination to develop strategies to combat this. The

organizational provisions which will enable women survive if they are faced with this situation is next to non-existent (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006) and this can lead to women exiting the organisation after unsuccessfully attempting to function as a leader.

The promotion process can be reviewed in organizations to instill uniformity, (Powell and Butterfield, 1994) and making decision makers accountable, also recruiting qualified candidates across gender and groomed for senior positions. Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, (2014).

Organizational performance measurement should be based on accounting-based measures and not subjective measures like stock performance (Ryan and Haslam 2007; Bruckmüller Ryan and Haslam, 2014). This will eliminate our gendered leadership beliefs from beclouding the actual performance of women in senior positions as stock market prices are market perceived measures.

The right framing and gender sensitivity (Okafor, Okafor and Chukwuemeka, 2011), in handling diversity and leadership programs (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011) without focusing the interventions on women and stereotypes alone will have more impact as otherwise handled can enhance gender stereotypes and legitimize gender inequality, (Bruckmüller et al, 2014)

Female entrepreneurship has been offered as an option for women to avoid both the glass ceiling and the glass cliff even though there exist other barriers which are not the focus of this paper, (Buckalew, Nelton and Ervin, 2012). This route can be seen as an

attractive exit from the stress of working on the edge, combating discrimination and gender inequality in the workplace

## **2.6 Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, an attempt was made to understand what happens to those women who do succeed in breaking through the glass ceiling to occupy senior and executive management positions. Specifically reviewing the glass cliff phenomenon as a ‘second wave’ discrimination or barrier faced by women at the top of the corporate ladder. Its implications on women’s careers as well as on the organisation in a bid to prepare the way to research into how women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria perceive the glass cliff effect on their careers.

This chapter started off by defining what the glass cliff phenomenon and tracing the origin of this term from archival and experimental evidence and which showed that the glass cliff was coined by M.K Ryan and S.A Haslam in 2005 in a bid to refocus evaluation of female leaders from the numbers only approach to the context surrounding their appointments. Their research findings showed that crisis preceded the appointment of women and not the reverse. Hence, they established that women were more likely than men to be recruited into risky and precarious positions. The robustness and generalization of this has been shown in the legal field, politics, student leadership, higher education and in business most especially as this is relevant to this study

To understand what causes the glass cliff phenomenon and the underlying

theories which can be used to make some sense out of the whole situation, there was a review briefly of the social role theory, role incongruity theory of prejudice and the implicit theories of gender and leadership. Research evidence shows that there are some similarities surrounding societies perception of gender related social roles and these act as building blocks for the implicit theories of gender and leadership one carries within them. These fuel the gendered leadership beliefs that inform the judgement of decision makers in selecting women for risky and precarious leadership roles. The belief is that women are communal in nature by the very activities they traditionally perform daily. In times of poor performance, transformational leadership style is preferred, which is characterized with communal traits like interpersonal skills, affections, etc., as such women are seen as suitable in times of crisis or poor performance (Hunt-Earle, 2012). There are some departures from this, where if the Male leadership Role Model (MLRM) is employed in an organisation, and sexism is high or low, or sexism is high in a non-MLRM environment, the chances of hiring women is extremely low to non-existent.

These positions do not happen without having some impact on the careers of women. There is research evidence that women are negatively evaluated due to the poor performance that majorly accompanies these companies under crisis to which women are appointed to lead. This often leads to women exiting the organisation after working on the edge (Ryan Haslam and Postmes, 2007; Ryan and Haslam, 2006), under stress and without job satisfaction for so long. This further discourages other

women and even the women who currently occupy these positions in seeking future opportunities and many times take alternative routes like entrepreneurship.

Finally, looking at mitigating strategies, those currently employed and recommended, though the focus is not on how successful these strategies are, a few were reviewed. One key strategy, being the diversity programs and the right framing of these programs in a bid not to reinforce the gender stereotypes especially when these programs are made to focus exclusively on women.

From the foregoing, the next chapter will focus on the methodology and research design undertaken to understand this analyses from the perspective of the women who occupy senior leadership positions in Nigeria especially, and as Ryan and Haslam, (2007) argue, the glass cliff will be more apparent in the societies that endorse traditional patterns of gender-based division of labour and structural/ institutionalized inequality and underrepresentation (Okafor and Smith, 2024; Gilbert and Garcia, 2023).

CHAPTER III:  
METHODOLOGY

**3.1 Overview of the Research Problem**

We are faced with the problem of what the experiences of women are once they break through the gendered leadership barriers, the proverbial glass ceiling, and if they land on the glass cliff, ie on precarious leadership position. Some research evidence claims that once women get to the top of the ladder, they are constrained to speak about their experience and any other new form of discrimination and rather downplay their experience. There remains a possibility that they adopt the queen bee disposition (Ellemers et al, 2012) and as such feel alone in their struggles.

There is also evidence of women working on the edge end up stressed, burnt out and unhappy which can lead to sick leaves, and other absences leading to staff attrition. All this come as a cost to the women's careers and the organization, (Ryan and Haslam, 2006). This research is focused on identifying the experiences of these women in senior leadership in Nigeria, their understanding of it, the power plays, if any, that continue to persist in keeping them in this state of tensions where they migrate from glass ceiling state to possibly these glass cliff positions enabled through by symbolic representation or crisis moments.

### 3.2 Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

To bridge theory with interview-based inquiry, this study operationalized core constructs from critical theory into concrete data collection and analysis strategies. Abstract concepts such as the glass cliff, symbolic leadership, emotional labor, and gendered power relations were translated into interview questions, coding tags, and thematic categories. This operationalization ensured that the theoretical lens informed not only the interpretation but also the design of the research instrument and analytical framework.

Table 3.1: Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

Theoretical Construct	Interview/Coding Focus	Themes	Operational Tag / Code
Glass Ceiling	Barriers to entering leadership; access through networks or gatekeeping	Leadership Access and Representation	[LAR]
Glass Cliff	Appointments during crisis or instability; reputational risk	Gendered Barriers and Crisis Appointments	[GBCA]

Theoretical Construct	Interview/Coding Focus	Themes	Operational Tag / Code
Symbolic Leadership	Lack of real authority; representation over decision-making	Emotional Labour and Symbolic Leadership	[ESL]
Emotional Labor	Expectations to manage emotions, support others, or be role models	Emotional Labour and Symbolic Leadership	[ESL]
Gendered Expectations	Double standards, scrutiny, and behavioral regulation	Workplace Norms and Performance	[WNP]
Resistance	Redefining leadership, mentoring others, asserting change	Resistance and Reimagination	[RR]
Institutional Power Structures	Calls for reform, equity metrics, succession planning	Institutional Reform and Equity Futures	[IREF]

### 3.3 Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study partially rests on Ryan and Haslam,p.46-47, (2006) argument that subtle forms of gender discrimination, such as the glass cliff, are often a key reason why women decide to leave organizations or why their careers stagnate, “...our research suggests that it is often an outcome of the particular forms of stress that women confront as they pursue their career ambitions...” Hence this research would investigate the applicability of the glass cliff theory to the experiences of Nigerian women in leadership positions, to understand the experiences of these women from their perspective and show if there is any link between the presence of the glass cliff and the career decisions women make at varying points in their careers. The claim is that glass cliff positions lead to women exiting the organization after working on the edge (Ryan Haslam and Postmes, 2007; Ryan and Haslam, 2006), under stress and without job satisfaction for so long. This further discourages other women and even the women who currently occupy these positions in seeking future opportunities and many times take alternative routes like entrepreneurship. One of the implications of this research is that the findings of this research is expected to provide insight into the major contributor to women attrition from the workplace, the implication or not to the organization’s performance or opportunity cost lost from not embracing diversity and ensuring there is gender equality and representation across an organization. The other implication to enable other women draw inspiration from other women’s experience and their journey to to senior leadership, understand they are not alone and make better career decisions. A third implication is forming a foundation for future research and work for the researcher

and other researchers. Future work which may include initiatives to share more women experiences and other mitigating strategies emanating from the findings as well as working with organizations to reform and adopt short- and long-term measures to fostering power - sharing.

### **Research Questions**

- What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?
- How do women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?
- In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge, or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?

### **3.4 Research Philosophy and Design**

This research is underpinned by a critical theory philosophical framework, emphasizing the role of power, inequality, and social structures in shaping human experiences and societal outcomes. Critical theory is particularly concerned with challenging dominant ideologies, amplifying marginalized voices, and seeking transformative change (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011) and therein lies the rationale for this choice. So this study challenges traditional, positivist assumptions of objectivity and positions knowledge as socially constructed and shaped by power relations (Symon et al., 2012). The paradigm is particularly suitable for research focused on gender, leadership and institutional structures as it emphasises the need to interrogate and deconstruct

systemic inequities. Critical theory prioritises the lived experiences of marginalised groups and views research as a tool for social transformation. This philosophical stance aligns with the study's objectives to go beyond documenting gender disparities to examining how power, norms, and institutional structures continue to shape leadership opportunities and expectations even after women have 'broken through' the proverbial glass ceiling.

Within this philosophical stance, a qualitative research design has been chosen. This is appropriate within this paradigm, as it allows for in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of women in senior leadership, especially as they relate to systemic barriers, organizational cultures, and gendered expectations. Qualitative research methodology enables deep engagement with participants' narratives and a thematic analysis approach (Symon et al. 2012). The intention is not only to understand these experiences but to critically interrogate the broader structures and practices that influence them. This approach aligns with the emancipatory aims of critical qualitative research, which seeks to uncover hidden power dynamics and contribute to social justice.

#### **3.4.1 Philosophical Underpinning Justification**

Considering our philosophical assumptions have a practical consequence on the way we research in terms of topic, focus, and what we see as data, how we collect, analyse and theorise and finally how we write up it is key for the researcher to be aware of these commitments and options open to them, (Symon et al., 2012). In knowing this the researcher knows both their epistemological and ontological stance, knowing what is

‘truth’ and how they ‘validate ‘truth’(Symon et al., 2012) This study therefore is put together from an objectivist ontological position, acknowledging that there is a reality out there, the power plays and the gendered leadership barriers exist out there. However, through a subjectivist epistemological stance, our interpretations are subject to our experiences, context and environment, hence why the researcher has chosen to understand the subjective understanding of the experiences these women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria have of the power plays, barriers and reforms or changes that need to occur to support women in leadership positions in Nigeria.

This research is most appropriately grounded in a critical theoretical paradigm, even though it draws on qualitative methods common to interpretivist and constructivist traditions such as in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The critical theoretical perspective is justified as the path chosen by the researcher as according to Alvesson et al. 2009 referenced in Symon et al., (2012) it focuses on the connection between politics, values and knowledge and thereby provokes a deeper consideration of the politics and values that underpin and legitimise the authority of scientific knowledge. At the core of this research is the aim is to interrogate and challenge the systemic structures that shape the leadership experiences of women in Nigeria. The study moves beyond exploring how women make sense of their experiences (interpretivism) to also focuses on exposing how power, gender norms, and institutional biases contribute to the phenomenon known as the glass cliff. By highlighting the socio-political dynamics that marginalize women in executive leadership roles—particularly in crisis contexts—the research aligns with the

emancipatory goals of critical theory, aiming to disrupt hegemonic norms and contribute to transformative organizational practices. The researcher is concerned with how systems can be transformed to enable emancipation, which involves a lot of self reflection (Johnson and Duberley, 2000), in the first instance, by the women under fire and the bigger ecosystem in creating systemic and structural changes and long term reforms to move women for gender representation to true power -sharing. This is part of this studies contribution to practice.

Ultimately, this philosophical underpinning ensures that the research is not only descriptive but also reflexive and transformative (Johnson and Duberley, 2000), highlighting how women navigate, challenge, and seek to reshape leadership with the gendered institutional frameworks.

### **3.5 Population and Sampling Technique**

Considering the research questions this study is investigating, it indicates that the selection of population will be very deliberate to ensure women in senior leadership in different industries are selected. A clear research design was first designed, participant selection criteria drawn up ahead of seeking access, which industries they will be selected from and what mode of engagement will be used. This was important to ensure the right data is collected and the research aim is reached. (Symon, Cassell and Saunders, 2012).

To this effect a non-random sampling method was decided on, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify women who can offer rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. This technique is appropriate when the researcher

seeks depth of information from a specific subset of the population (Palinkas et al., 2015). Diversity in sector, industry, and leadership trajectory was considered during selection to enhance the transferability of the findings. Participants were recruited through professional networks, women's leadership forums. Even though easily identifiable, access to this population was also restricted due to the nature of their roles in the organisations, as women in senior and executive management (Symon, Cassell and Saunders, 2012), there were time and availability constraints. To mitigate this risk, as a secondary measure, snowball sampling was also administered, wherein early participants recommended additional qualified individuals who fit the persona of the women required for this study. Participant selection for interviewing was stopped when themes collected were reoccurring and data saturation had been reached, (Symon, Cassel and Saunders, 2012)

### **3.6 Participant Selection**

A total of 20 women were interviewed and as recommended by Bertaux(1981) and Kvale and Brinkmann ( 2009) quoted in (Symon, Cassel and Saunders, 2012),15 is the minimum size for qualitative research and 5-25 for interview based inquiry.

Furthermore, even though the participants came from diverse industry, the diversity of industry has no material impact on the purpose of the research which is to see if there is applicability of the glass cliff in Nigeria, and report on wherever it is seen. Hence, this is a homogenous group of women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria, with the terms 'senior leadership' and 'Nigeria', uniting them in this homogeneity. As Symon,

Cassel and Saunders, (2012) referenced Guest et al(2006); Kuzel (1992) and Romney et al. (1986), 4-12 is the recommended sample size when considering a homogenous population.

Fourteen (14) of these participants were selected across Education and Academia, Finance and Banking, Technology, Branding and Communciations/Advertising, Healthcare, Public Sector (Government), through purposive sampling based on their levels at work. Each participant had to have all of the following requirements;

- Currently occupying or have occupied a senior or executive position.
- Should have moved across leadership positions from the bottom to the very top within corporate Nigeria.
- Size of company where their senior and executive experience occurred should defined as medium to large in size by Nigerian standards.
- Should have worked in a dual-gendered company as a senior or executive leader.

The next set of participants, six (6) additional participants, were then recommended by early participants through the snowball sampling method. They were also accepted based on the same selection criteria applied to those selected via the purposive sampling method.

All 20 participants selected and recommended were first given an introductory letter giving an overview of the research topic, the purpose of the reasearch and the role expected of them. New and research spcific terms were also defined to enable each selected participant to understand the concepts fully and make an informed decision to

participate or not. They were also assured that ethics will be employed and assured that anonymity would be maintained all through the process. The introductory letter also contained two links, one was a link to a pre-interview questionnaire shared via google forms to enable them to willingly fill and demonstrate their consent to go ahead with the interview. The second link was a meeting link connected to the researcher's calendar, to book a one-on-one virtual call with the researcher for a deeper semi- structured interview session of 45mins to 1 hour duration. Again, by self booking an interview session via the researcher's calendar, demonstrated their sustained consent to be interviewed and participate in the study.

### **3.7 Instrumentation**

Two instruments were applied in data collection: a 2 open-ended and 8 closed-ended question pre-interview questionnaire and a 12 open -ended questions assemi structured interview guide.

#### **The pre- interview questionnaire:**

This was broken into three parts;

- Demographics and Context: Which focused on the role, industry and years in leadership of the participants.
- Structural Experience Indicators: This focused on the confirmation [or not] of appointment of the participants during crisis, access to mentorship, experience of exclusion, performance standards comaprison, leadership influenced by systemic vs individual factors.

- Critical Insights Ahead of Time: This was a teaser on the main interview questions, questioning if they were encouraged to change leadership styles, if they considered leaving their jobs due to culture or gendered expectations.

This instrument was kept short and presented via google forms allowing easy completion and accessibility, it was kept analytically powerful to touch on all the themes identified- exclusion, crisis roles, and system attribution and acted as a teaser to the main interview session. It complemented the next instrument, the 12- question interview guide.

### **The Interview Guide**

The 12 questions were carefully chosen to reflect the purpose of the research and the aims and objectives of the study. This study accepts that gender barriers exist, but seeks to investigate whether they persist after a woman breaks the glass ceiling and whether the glass cliff accurately describes the nature of leadership roles women are appointed to.

Table 3.2: 12 Interview guide questions addressing the research aim

S/N	Research Goal	Interview Question	How it Achieves This Goal
1. 1	Confirm Persistence of gender barriers post entry into leadership.	1. What gender-specific barriers have you encountered in your leadership journey?	These probe whether barriers shift form and continue after breaking the glass ceiling.

S/N	Research Goal	Interview Question	How it Achieves This Goal
		<p>2. What are the implicit expectations around how women should lead in your context?</p> <p>3. Have you ever felt pressure to conform to a dominant leadership model that did not reflect your values?</p> <p>4. Have you ever felt that leadership opportunities were restricted by unspoken norms or politics?</p>	
2. 2	Investigate symbolic roles and performance pressures	1. Have you been expected to carry emotional or relational labor in ways	These explore symbolism vs substance, a core concern of my study-

S/N	Research Goal	Interview Question	How it Achieves This Goal
		<p>that male leaders are not?</p> <p>2. Do you feel your presence in leadership was ever used as a form of symbolic representation rather than substantive influence?</p>	<p>do women gain power or are they seen as optics?</p>
3.	Examine glass cliff dynamics ( high risk appointments)	<p>1. Do you think women are more likely to be appointed to unstable or high-risk leadership roles? Why or why not?</p> <p>2. Can you describe your journey into senior leadership? What were</p>	<p>These questions are directly rooted in the glass cliff theory, allowing participants to confirm, challenge or reframe that narrative</p>

S/N	Research Goal	Interview Question	How it Achieves This Goal
		the key moments or turning points?	
4.	Identify acts of resistance and redefinitions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How have you used your leadership position to advocate for others or promote equity?</li> <li>2. In what ways have you redefined what leadership looks like for yourself or others?</li> </ol>	These allow the participants to push back againsts dominant expectations and articualte their own leadership identity
5.	Surface reform strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What systemic or structural changes would better support women in leadership in Nigeria?</li> <li>2. What long-term reforms are needed to move from</li> </ol>	These seek not just diagnosis, but solution-building and institutional critique based on lived experience.

S/N	Research Goal	Interview Question	How it Achieves This Goal
		gender representation to gendered power-sharing?	

These questions are informed by a critical theoretical lenses, inviting deep reflection. The number of questions are informed by this, as considering the participants need to reflect, critique and narrate experiences, all of which take time, hence the nos of question were kept to 12 in a 45 to 60 mins session, guarding against surface level responses or interview fatigue.

### **3.8 Data Collection Methods**

Interviews have become a primary way of of gathering information and getting to know people, (Symon, Cassell, Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). Interview data collection method was identified as the best approach to gathering the information required through the critical theorist lenses to enable, critique, narration of experience.

#### **Planning Phase: Participant Recruitment and Consent;**

Each participant received a briefing/introductory letter, explaining the purpose of the research and their expected roles. The letter also defined some terms which might be new and strange to particiapants to ensure deeper understanding that will enable the

participant to make an informed decision to participate in the research. They were also given a link to fill a pre-interview questionnaire and another link to book a one-on-one interview session with the researcher. This was to ensure the participant consent during the participant recruitment exercise. A sample is attached as Appendix B

Data was collected in two phases using a hybrid approach:

### **Phase 1: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Close-Ended)**

Participants first completed a short questionnaire google forms, thereby getting a teaser and insight into the pattern of questions and direction of the followon interview. The following information was collected:

- Demographic information (industry, years in leadership, role type),
- Yes/No and multiple-choice responses about experiences related to leadership access, support, exclusion, and performance scrutiny.

This phase provides quantitative context to supplement qualitative insights and inform interview tailoring. A sample is attached as Appendix A

### **Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews (Open-Ended, Critical Questions)**

Following the receipt of the consent by the participants to participate in the interview sessions and their voluntary booking of an interview virtual session. Each Participant had a 45-60 minutes semi-structured interview session with the researcher. Each meeting was virtual and recorded with Fireflies.ai which is an AI-powered meeting assistant that automatically records, transcribes, summarizes, and shares notes from online meetings ([www.fireflies.ai](http://www.fireflies.ai)). Transcripts and audio-recording of the interview

sessions were downloaded and stored in word and .mp3 format respectively for data analysis through thematic analysis.

The semi-structured interview guide integrated:

- Thematic reflection (e.g., leadership journey, mentorship, crisis experiences),
- Critical questions (e.g., symbolic roles, emotional labor, gatekeeping, institutional reform),
- Narrative space to share personal accounts, disruptions, resistance, and redefinitions of leadership.

### **3.9 Data Analysis Methods**

Data gathered through the pre-interview questions support background analysis and case comparison, but don't require codes for open thematic analysis. However the data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using Thematic Analysis informed by a critical-theoretical perspective. This analysis is a combination of deductive strategies (informed by existing literature and theoretical constructs such as symbolic leadership, emotional labour, glass cliff, reforms) and inductive analysis based on new insights from participants' narratives. This was also guided by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis involved:

- Familiarization with literature in the first instance then transcripts, audio recording and preliminary notes: This involved listening to the audio records and reading every pre interview questionnaire as well as the transcripts from the interview audi recording. The transcripts and audio were both respectively transcribed and recorded with Fireflies.ai

which is an AI-powered meeting assistant that automatically records, transcribes, summarizes, and shares notes from online meetings ([www.fireflies.ai](http://www.fireflies.ai)). The transcripts were printed out and annotations were made by the researcher on the margins with initial thoughts, interesting quotes and contradictions. The initial themes deduced from the literature were searched for within the transcripts to identify alignment and discover any new themes emanating inductively from the interview notes.

- Initial coding using both deductive codes from the conceptual framework (e.g., glass cliff, symbolic leadership, gendered expectations) and inductive codes emerging from participant narratives; The researcher created a codebook this was a combination of the existing codes eg LAR, GBCA, WNP, ESL, RR, IREF and inductive codes emanating from the interview transcripts. This involved highlighting excerpts and maintaining them in Microsoft Excel, each excerpt was tagged with the relevant code.
- Collating codes into themes that reflect both lived experiences and systemic patterns: the next step was a search for themes, grouping codes into bigger ideas (themes). The researcher reviewed the codes to identify the patterns emerging from the responses from the participants. An excel spreadsheet was created linking these codes to the subthemes that emanating.
- Interpreting themes through a critical lens to expose hidden power relations, structural barriers, and cultural scripts: to check that the themes are coherent and distinct, align the names of the themes as well as a documented a brief definition

of each theme, explaining what each theme means and how it links to the research study.

Themes generated from the literature review were compared with emergent themes from participant narratives, allowing for both confirmatory and exploratory insights. The aim was to represent a spectrum of leadership experiences without prioritising one over another, thus maintaining interpretive integrity.

In line with critical theory, the analysis also considered the structural and systemic conditions reflected in these themes, highlighting power asymmetries and institutional practices that may reinforce gender-based disparities.

Table 3.3: Thematic coding framework, mapping the 6 major theme derived from this research

S/N	Theme	Subthemes	Code
1.	Leadership Access and Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal Gatekeeping and Networks</li> <li>• Sponsorship vs meritocracy</li> <li>• Cultural and Religious Role Expectations</li> </ul>	LAR
2.	Gendered Barriers and Crisis Appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Glass ceiling Experiences,</li> <li>• Crisis based Appointments (Glass Cliff),</li> <li>• Symbolic Inclusion/Tokenism</li> </ul>	GBCA

S/N	Theme	Subthemes	Code
3.	Workplace Norms, and Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyper visibility and Scrutiny,</li> <li>• Double Standards and Bias,</li> <li>• Gendered Communication Norms</li> <li>• Leadership Style Policing</li> <li>• Burnout and Over compensation</li> <li>• Role Conflict and Isolation</li> </ul>	WNP
4.	Emotional and Symbolic Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregiving and Nurturing Expectations</li> <li>• Emotional Regulation and suppression</li> <li>• Burden of Representation</li> </ul>	ESL
5.	Resistance and Reimagination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring and Sponsorship of Others</li> <li>• Strategic boundary settings</li> <li>• Advocacy through Visibility</li> </ul>	RR
6.	Institutional Reform and Equity Futures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy Innovation and HR reform</li> <li>• Building Female Talent Pipeline</li> <li>• Systems level Reimagination</li> </ul>	IREF

### 3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from each participant.

- Provided with informed briefings with a consent proceeding indicating their acceptance by willingly and proactively filling a pre-interview questionnaire then booking a meeting for a virtual interview session,
- Assured of anonymity and confidentiality,
- Allowed to withdraw at any point without consequence,
- Protected in the storage and handling of sensitive data.
- All data was stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

### **3.11 Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To ensure rigor in qualitative research, the study adhered to the principles of:

- Credibility: by using rich, triangulated data and participant validation,
- Transferability: by describing context and participant demographics in detail,
- Dependability: by documenting methodological decisions and changes transparently,
- Confirmability: through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing during analysis.

### **3.12 Researcher Positionality and Bias**

The researcher also acknowledges their bias and role their identity and interpretive lens play in shaping the research process. As a researcher who is also a woman in senior leadership in Nigeria and with professional experience in gender leadership spaces, reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to ensure integrity and transparency. The researcher draws comfort from their theoretical stance, as a critical theorist their role is to critique the dominant

management discourse, to create an opportunity for change and as expected the outcomes are influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and their mode of engagement 'hence the researcher is no longer a neutral observer'. (Symon, et al., 2012).

### **3.13 Research Design Limitations**

The researcher has assumed, that the sample made up of 20 women represents a the total population of women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria. Furthermore, that their experiences represent the experiences of similar women who occupy or have occupied senior leadership positions in Nigeria.

The research design is also limited by how honestly the interview questions were answered by the participants as well as how well the participants understood the questions in the interview session.

Conclusively, the research is limited by how willing and how far each of these women interviewed were willing to express their feelings or interpretation of their experiences and even how much they reflected and understood their experiences.

### **3.14 Conclusion**

This study employed a qualitative research design, interview-based approach underpinned by critical theory to examine the gendered experiences of women in senior leadership roles in Nigeria. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and pre-interview questionnaires, the study generated rich, contextualized data from twenty (20) participants. The data collected through questionnaire and semi structured interview

sessions underwent a rigorous thematic analysis and the use of a codebook, integrating both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (emergent) codes, strengthened analytical depth and validity. Steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and transparency of the process.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. All participants were fully briefed, gave informed consent, and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

Having established the methodological framework of the study, chapter four presents the research findings, organized by research questions, themes and sub-themes supported by coded participant quotes, interpretative commentary, and critical narrative insights

## **CHAPTER IV:**

### **RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter is focused on presenting the results and findings from the responses to the pre-interview questionnaires (see results in Appendix D) and interviews conducted with women who are currently or were previously in leadership positions in Nigerian corporate world. Using a thematic analysis approach laced with a critical theoretical perspective to explore structural barriers, symbolic leadership, gendered expectations and more, this chapter is presented along the three core research questions aligning and grouping the themes and sub-themes applicable to each research question under each question. Each section begins with the research question followed by the relevant theme and underlying subtheme, supported by the participant narratives and researcher's interpretative insights of the results presented by the participants. This is arranged this way for clarity and logical flow of the results or findings.

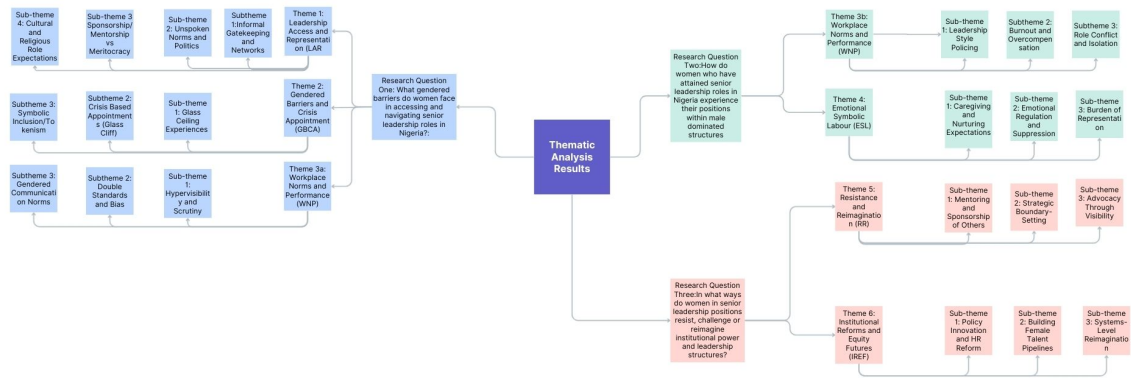


Figure 4.1. Deductive and Inductive Themes and Subthemes derived from the research and illustrated by the researcher.

## 4.2 Research Question One

### What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?

The research question explores the barriers women face as they access leadership especially senior leadership as well as those they face while navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria, if any. Interview Questions 1–6 were mapped to this RQ (See Appendix C for full interview guide listing the 12 interview questions), covering confirmation of the persistence to gender barriers even post entry to senior leadership, access pathways, cultural limitations, and male dominance in decision-making and more. To uncover any existing gender imbalance in powers, exclusions by male dominated circles, that women experience as they access and navigate senior leadership. The themes deducted from the literature and reconfirmed inductively from the interview responses are presented below.

#### **4.2.1 Theme 1: Leadership Access and Representation (LAR)**

This seeks to examine how control of leadership access is gendered or politicized. To reveal the unwritten norms that shape inclusion/exclusion of women in senior leadership or those waiting to access senior leadership and explore informal network access and embedded gatekeeping.

##### **4.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Informal Gatekeeping and Networks**

Reveals how exclusion from traditional decision-making circles - often male dominated - limits access to leadership, reflecting systemic gendered power imbalances. Amongst the 20 women interviewed, a couple of participants did not believe there were any informal gatekeeping, that kept them away from senior leadership, they claimed that the gates were open to all who sought it, except they did not seek it, it came to them in some instances.

*“I would say that for me I sort of just naturally climbed the ladder... The CEO position is one that is open for those who are interested to apply..... Leadership somehow found me. I didn't really have to break any glass ceiling, so to speak.”* - Aisha, Healthcare Senior Leader, North-West Nigeria

*‘I am probably one woman that did not experience the ceilings... it was almost what I call a level playing field...’* Yemi, International Development Program’s Director, South-East Nigeria

On the contrary other participants did not actively seek leadership and were 'surprisingly' appointed into these positions, following male colleagues' endorsement during some crisis in their organizations.

*'I didn't want it. I'm a woman in the North, in a place where there are lots of men...given the idea that I hadn't been mentored...I hadn't been given other positions...'* - Miriam, Academic Leader/Professor, Northeast

*'My journey to leadership just happened ...I can't say that I strived for leadership. I was just doing the best that I could in whatever situation I found myself in..'* - **Zara,** Academic Leader/Professor, Northeast

*'My journey into leadership was circumstantial... there was some kind of vacuum within the team that needed to be filled'* - Chinenye-Advertising and media Senior Leader, South-East Nigeria

Another account from the participants focused on the being technically capable as the factor that made access to leadership possible for them.

*'I trained myself ahead of opportunities that may open for me. So, I make myself available to knowledge in the space that I have so that when there's opportunity for leaders, I'll be able to occupy...'* Kemi, Fintech Senior Leader, Southwest

Others who wanted and sought out leadership, experienced the informal gatekeeping

*'I missed a promotion to leadership because I was on maternity leave'* -Nkechi, Advertising and Media Senior Leader, South-East).

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

These contrasting perspectives reflect the complex positionality women navigate in senior leadership. There seems a balance in the contrasting experiences of the women interviewed on how they got into senior leadership, in terms of no of women interviewed. A couple of the women did not bother to strive for leadership so probably could not judge if there were informal gatekeeping or not as they stayed away from leadership deliberate quest, they however had to be endorsed by others most especially men to get appointed into those leadership position. Those who wanted leadership or noticed the tension on the way up-things like being a woman with natural occurrences like pregnancy -had promotion kept away from them which is also close to the experiences of those who sensed there would be barriers and decided to be technically capable to ensure they were ready for leadership. It is safe to say that these women had experienced informal gatekeeping in one-way or the other.

#### **4.2.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Unspoken Norms and Politics**

There are unspoken norms, and politics which play a major role across board in shaping access to leadership it reveals unwritten norms that shape inclusion/ exclusion. For the women interviewed they all had one experience or the other of the unspoken norms which affected them or other women around them in accessing leadership.

*' I was challenged with the fact that I was a woman, and I had a family, .... for wanting to leave work 'early' [no overtime] ...it was almost always indicated that if I did, that suggested I wasn't as committed to the work as I should be ...-*

**Chinwe, Financial Services Leader, South-East**

*‘When I was growing, very few women had held managerial positions. It was mostly men.*

*So that's why I never believed that I could’. -Miriam*

*‘There are roles that seem to be reserved for the men. As I said, it's not overt, but you feel it because no woman has been appointed in those roles...’ [why she only entered*

*leadership when it found her? - Zara.*

*‘Maybe because of our own culture here men have already prepared men to lead’-Kemi*

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

These outspoken norms tainted their perception of leadership and created self-doubt on their capacity to lead. Incidentally the two participants, Zara and Miriam who kept away from seeking leadership till it landed on their laps, have been clouded by the unspoken norms that leadership was reserved for men, especially leadership in major sectors or positions. Also emanating from this theme is that some women believe that men were prepared from inception to be leaders and to be one as a woman, you had to prepare adequately in both technical and leadership skills, in more ways than the men. Other women had to bear with the pain of accepting or not accepting these unspoken norms and moving forward with taking leadership positions.

#### **4.2.1.3 Sub-theme 3 Sponsorship/Mentorship vs Meritocracy**

Interrogates the tension between actual competence and the need for male endorsement, challenging the myth of neutral merit-based system

None of the women I interviewed believed they experience endorsement without meritocracy.

*'...I could make certain decisions most people...my contemporaries...' could not make...was appointed to lead'- Chinwe*

*'I think for women leadership positions in medicine in Nigeria is more of you have the capability'-Aisha*

*'I'm the dean of my faculty, and again, I did not actively seek out this position. I was appointed because, first and foremost, I was the only available qualified candidate'- Zara*

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Even though, some of the women had received endorsement to be selected for leadership positions they did not vie for, they also believed they were qualified first before the endorsement could stand. What is not clear from their narration is if their experience is if the men were given leadership positions with meritocracy considered as a foundation or just endorsement from the male dominant circles

#### **4.2.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Cultural and Religious Role Expectations**

This explores how gendered, cultural and religious norms construct leadership as a male domain, limiting women's legitimacy even before performance.

Some women however believe that this works differently for them, in their favor.

*'So, my leadership start journey started very early ...as a first child of family, already you take the lead, in leading your siblings.'*- Yemi, International Development Leader, Southwest Nigeria

*'I often wondered whether we females, due to cultural norms, had already been socialized not to take on things, not to respond to certain roles and the same time '-*

Yemi

*'It was a thing that I never dreamt of having because I didn't see myself in that slant ...that I'll ever be in the managerial position I'm a woman ...from the North and not married' – Miriam*

*'Some women in the banking have defied the odds... you don't want to know what, how it gladdens my heart and the fact that when I read the biography of some of them, they are married women with children. Because in my early banking days all those that you know, were in that seemingly high-level positions were mostly single ladies or single mothers-*

Tomi

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Cultural expectations of women and positions in the family in Nigeria especially Northern Nigeria affects how women view themselves and other women around them. They either have a lot of self-doubt about their ability to lead or must fight to defy the odds to take up leadership positions especially in areas reserved for men. Their 'doggedness' as Yemi put them got them into their positions where access to leadership was 'easy.

#### **4.2.1.5 Theme Summary**

The LAR theme shows there exist informal gatekeeping that keep women out of leadership without endorsement by the dominant male circle. There were also unspoken

norms that fueled this ranging from the belief and practice that some roles were reserved for men and being a man was synonymously with being a leader. Norms that culminated into cultural and religious norms especially for Muslim women from the Northern end of Nigeria, with revealed experiences where women limited themselves and as seen in the GBCA theme limited themselves through self-limiting barriers generated because of the social constructs these women have been fed since they were young. Even though meritocracy was acknowledged as a key based for gaining access, it was also acknowledged as likely to be proceeding sponsorship, but they had never felt they were sponsored because they were women. Despite the confirmation that there were leadership access and representation issues, a few of the women refuted having met with any of these outspoken norms, cultural and religious barriers nor informal gatekeeping.

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2: Gendered Barriers and Crisis Appointment (GBCA)**

This unpacks systemic disposability and patterning of appointments in crisis situations, seeking to highlight the specific barriers faced by women in accessing or navigating leadership positions as well as the appointments they get into precarious positions. Positions men would ordinarily not touch due to its nature as a make-or-break positions

##### **4.2.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Glass Ceiling Experiences**

Highlights the invincible institutional and ideological ceilings that cap women's progression even in inclusive -seeming environments.

*'I didn't fit their idea of a senior person because they needed me to do things that I was unwilling to do even though they had no bearing to my job performance... it eventually led to my losing my job'. -Chinwe*

*'I was denied promotion once because I went on maternity leave. And someone who was much junior to me was promoted above me because he was a guy and he had no skills, nothing compared to what I brought to the table. And until I fought back, nothing was going to be done about it- Chinwe*

*'I think I was the one that was making most of the barriers myself -Miriam*

Two contrary views on this, show a different experience consistent to their earlier views of no gatekeeping on their way to senior leadership.

*'I just never experienced it that I could not or was not able to do [anything] or I was not given something because I, I was a woman'- Yemi*

*'Off the top of my head. I really don't think I have encountered any [barriers]. Maybe because the nature of our training, you know, has one clear set of rules for all. It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman. You're expected to learn certain skills'- Aisha*

*'Any kind of hindrance came from other aspects, but not for the fact that I was female in that leadership position- Zara*

Zara had a different view about gender barriers as the interview went on and there was more awareness of the topic and self-reflection.

*'When you climb up the academic ladder, when it comes to dean, heads of department, deans, directors, there are a few women appointed, only those call them the 'iron ladies'*

*that actually stood their ground, you cannot question the fact that they should be there.'* -

Zara

*'The men are favoured for thriving projects while the females are given the dead-end projects'* - Kemi

Some women had fortunately worked in environments that were deliberate in ensuring women were not hindered from getting into leadership positions.

*'My place of work likes to pride themselves in is the ability to be very inclusive... my leadership team favors the women than the men'* - Chinenye

Other participants interviewed have also faced discrimination in appointment to an agreed position one was also passed over for a position and it was given to the male who was not as qualified while another lost a promotion because she was pregnant and away from work.

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Glass ceiling experiences seemed common amongst the women either personally or some other woman close to them. A couple of women believed they did not experience any glass cliff barriers, which is consistent with their experience of no barriers to accessing leadership, while others lost their jobs, promotion or given tougher projects to handle than their male counterparts. A distinct reason for the barriers shared by Miriam showed she believes she experienced '*self-created barriers*'

#### **4.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Crisis Based Appointments (Glass Cliff)**

Examines how women are elevated during organization crises, suggesting they are seen as expendable or symbolic figures for risk periods. They are less volatile in decision making because they come to decision making a bit with more EQ than just the logic of it.

*'Men don't want to destroy their careers while women are willing to take the risk because what do we have to lose? And I think that's one of the reasons why they nominated me for head of department as well.'* - Miriam

*'Don't forget we are used to handling crisis at home, family, even in the office. When there's a crisis, we just either react, or we just sit back and watch and try and calm things down.'* -Miriam

*'I don't think they are likely to be appointed to high-risk leadership roles. I think that in times of crisis, women fare better because women generally can multitask'* - Chinwe

Some participants contracted themselves in the same breath by saying they did not face glass cliff situations but referred to a crisis time they had to step into to quench the fire.

*'Based on experience and knowledge is that women too often are not the ones that are selected to go when there is a fire to kill out the fire'* Yemi

*'I remember this crisis we had in the organization a few years ago during COVID and I had to step into that role of leading the organization during a very difficult time. And my goal was to create stability'* - Yemi

*'I think the key moment for me was the COVID pandemic ... whole world was taken, by surprise and had to step up and redesign our hospital'* -Aisha

*'There was an issue that management felt I could handle at that time' - Zara*

*'They know that women are multifunctional...family excuses about children and all and not being available for them to work with.'* - Kemi

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Together these narratives illustrate a shared experience of appointment of these women into leadership positions during crisis situations, that is, glass cliff appointments, for many reasons including scapegoating of or symbolic representation of these women or a recognition of qualities in women that enables them to handle such high-risk positions with the emotional intelligence required to succeed. This does not take away from the fact that some comments from a couple of women who though they said they had not been appointed to high risk or crisis situations, either agreed that women should be hired to these positions or narrated an appointment that clearly showed they had been through glass cliff appointments. It seemed like even though these women had passed through these experiences, they do not seem to have connected to these situations as a barrier or otherwise.

It is worthy to note that 17 out of 20 participants accepted in their pre-interview questionnaire, that they have been appointed during a crisis or instability period.

4. Have you ever been appointed to a leadership role during a crisis or period of instability?

20 responses

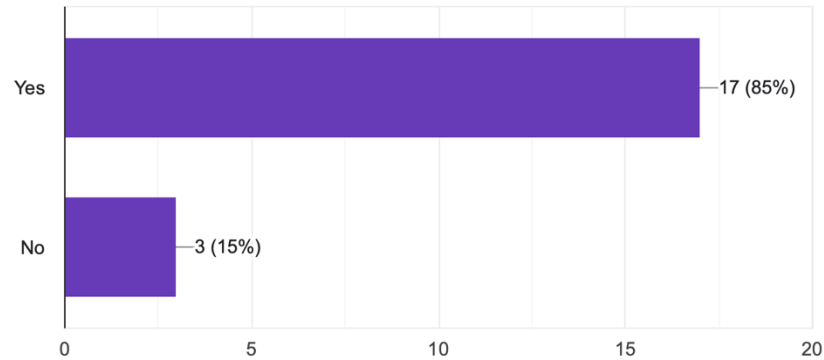


Figure 4.2: Pre-interview Questionnaire, Question 4

#### 4.2.2.3 Subtheme 3: Symbolic Inclusion/Tokenism

Unpacks how women are placed in leadership for appearance's sake, while real decision-making remains male dominated

The participants all felt they were not appointed as part of a quota for their leadership positions while in service.

*'I never felt I was meeting a quota in accessing and navigating senior leadership... I felt I deserved to be wherever I was at any point in time ...however I'm getting recent board positions and it's clear to me that it's because the boards need a woman in board positions -Chinwe*

*It's just one set of rules that applies to all [in medicine], both men and women.' has never felt as a symbolic representation- Aisha*

*'Honestly, I don't believe they put me in any position. I never looked for it, I never asked for it. I got it. So, I want to believe that I earned it. They wouldn't because I'm a woman. In fact, in the Northern Nigeria, they wouldn't give you because you're a woman. They'll give you because they want to get you into trouble.'* - Miriam

Some women had been part of initiatives to have women as symbolic representation of base don company policy.

*'That was where I saw an intentionality, you know, for women inclusion. There was a gender policy that states that not less than 40% of the beneficiaries we work with must be women...'* - Yemi

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Most of the women interviewed don't believe they have ever been appointed for symbolic purpose or part of a quota system. Incidentally in their pre-interview forms most of the participants agreed they had experienced been excluded from decision-making or leadership pipelines. They however accepted in the interviews that women are indeed appointed from symbolic purposes as well as been kept away from decision - making.

#### **4.2.2.4 Theme Summary**

Taken together the subthemes under this theme reveal, that many women do go through gendered leadership barriers even though some may believe it did happen in their case either because it did not happen or they did not recognize it for what it was. It turns out that some women were made to believe, so roles were reserved for men, so they had no

access to those roles except if endorsed or you fought for those roles to distinguish yourself as in the previous theme, LAR where you had to be capable technically and be endorsed first. Glass cliff appointment during unstable times in an organization was a very common subtheme across board even though it was clear that though they all responded in the questionnaire that they were appointed during unstable times, a few acknowledged it indirectly during the interview. It is worthy to note that symbolic representation or tokenism was not acknowledge amongst the participants as a personal experience, this could also be because the very senior level of the women interviewed has probably eliminated the women who would settle for such appointments without qualifications.

#### **4.2.3 Theme 3a: Workplace Norms and Performance (WNP)**

This explores workplace cultural reinforcement of Norms that threaten the positive experiences of women accessing and navigating senior leadership in Nigeria.

##### **4.2.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Hypervisibility and Scrutiny**

Analyses how women in leadership roles are constantly monitored and critiqued with their competency always under review

*'If you want to be taken seriously [as a woman], then you always must be better than everyone else in the room. You have to be more technically sound, emotionally intuitive, understanding and performance driven, than everyone else. Otherwise, you are treated like a 'woman', being given something irrelevant to do.'* - Chinwe.

*'We are expected to do more than a man. A man is allowed to go to work every day late, but a woman is expected to be there on time and in time... I have to admit that I had professors that said, you cannot be playing truant and get away with it. It won't work.'*

*'Proving oneself due to scrutiny, not want to be seen as emotional or feminine, act like a man without any feelings, stereotypes of how women are to act, expected to be soft so tries to prove otherwise, She has been overtaken by the stereotypes of how women should act and do act, also had personal bias on female bosses' - Tomi*

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The experiences shared by the participants shows they have all been subjected to heightened scrutiny and having to work doubly hard to prove their worth as leaders. Divorcing themselves from their emotional feeling not to act as 'a woman' so as not to be treated as 'a woman' which they see as negative when compared side by side with leadership expectations.

#### **4.2.3.2 Subtheme 2: Double Standards and Bias**

Surfaces how behaviours celebrated in male leaders are problematized in women, often linked to stereotypes of assertiveness or likeability. Demonstrating different standards of performance applied to women and men, with it favouring the men.

*'Being a patriarchal society, you find out that there are expectations of women are supposed to be submissive, they are not supposed to be so aggressive or so forward.'*

Aisha

*'Women must always come with their A game.... the expectation and the reality are that what men can get away with ...you can't do it as a woman. Therefore, you must have more to bring in terms of skills, held to a much higher standard simply because you can't do certain things as a woman'-Chinwe*

*'You see men doing whatever they like, traveling and going places [and playing truant], and nobody says anything to them. But this is different for a woman. It's double standard, as a result women must be strong to succeed...most of the women that have succeeded around me are strong women. Some of them are quietly strong. Some of them are openly strong ... more is expected out of it if you want to succeed.'* - Miriam

*'You see a male colleague excuse of car trouble as a reason for coming late to work accepted with sympathy over a female's excuse of taking her child for a doctor's appointment'- Chinelo, Tech Entrepreneur, South-East.*

*'I think women, must work much harder than men to achieve the same things because they are expected to have results, but not use the same tactics - Aisha*

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The experience of being subjected to double standards came up strong amongst most participants, including those who had mentioned earlier they felt no form of discrimination, like Aisha and Yemi.

#### **4.2.3.3 Subtheme 3: Gendered Communication Norms**

Examines how tone, language and expression are policed differently for women, reinforcing stereotypes of being 'too emotional' or 'too cold'

Some women experienced being schooled on how to talk and behave as a woman in leadership.

*'I had a colleague [male] gave me a talk on how to function as a woman in a senior position-* Chinwe

Some felt stereotypes of who women really are fuels this behaviour.

*'Women are the softer sex, so you will be more amenable to certain things. The woman will not be expected to be confrontational, to go against management and so on. So, she's expected to just, you know, be docile. If women go against this stereotype and display something opposite, they are viewed as aggressive'-* Zara

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

*These women also experienced having their language and manner of communication under scrutiny as well. They were expected to follow a stereotype of being emotional or soft. As women are expected to be docile and not seem aggressive. This behaviour also guides the expected language and tone to be displayed by women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria.*

### **4.2.3.4 Theme Summary**

This theme, WNP, aligns with the workplace culture norms that underpin the experiences of these women. Making these experience negative and limiting access to leadership as well as hindrances navigating leadership in Nigeria.

The components of this theme cut across the hypervisibility and scrutiny women are subjected to and end up highly critiqued and constantly monitored and are forced to prove

themselves always especially as they are subjected to double standards. Double standards where men are held to different standards than men for same task. Behaviour celebrated for men are problematized women, sadly. There are cases where women are spoken to by men before they take over leadership, on how to speak, function and communicate. This idea of gendered communications norms is fueled by gender stereotypes that of how women are expected not to be confrontational, but soft spoken and docile even when correcting erring team members.

### **4.3 Research Question Two**

**How do women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?**

This question seeks to understand the post access experiences of women in senior leadership in Nigeri. How are the male dominated structures treatign them as they naviagate leadership. Interview Questions 5-8 were mapped to this RQ (See Appendix C for full interview guide listing the 12 interview questions), covering the workplace cultures and practices that affect the leadership experiences women post access to leadership. It also would unearth the emotional and symbolic labour women in senior leaders are expected to display to fit into some preconceived mode set for women.

#### **4.3.1 Theme 3b: Workplace Norms and Performance (WNP)**

*(Also seen in Research Question 1 but experienced differently post access)*

How do workplace cultures this time are experienced once women have accessed leadership. What barriers and experiences in forms of leadership policing, burnout and

other incidence shape their reactions and decisions about their careers and continued stay in the positions

#### **4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Leadership Style Policing**

Highlights how women's leadership styles are scrutinized more harshly, especially if they deviate from gender norms

Leadership policing has led to working on the edge and burn out sometimes,

*'I had a loss of job same year I won best staff award twice only because I refused to compromise my leadership standards on a task given by my line manager'. - Kemi*

*'I was told by two male colleagues ..., not to speak when I go for meetings. Don't talk, don't argue, don't do this, don't do that'. - Zara*

There were times they fought back.

*'There were sometimes where people expected me to do things, but I didn't. I. I'm not a very good conformer'-Miriam*

*'I've had cases where I've gotten feedback that, I have to lead in a certain way, I have to be tough, I have to position myself or speak in a certain way'. - Chinenye*

*Women not expected to be confrontational. Or get upset even at a non-performing staff, not expected to display emotions (negative) '- Nnechi*

#### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Women interviewed shared had a common experience of having their leadership style scrutinized, policed and in some cases faced dire circumstances like a loss of job or been

told off. In some cases, they the men who were policing their leadership style came off as the men were the women's superior.

#### **4.3.1.2 Subtheme 2: Burnout and Overcompensation**

Surfaces the emotional and physical toll of having to constantly prove legitimacy and survive hostile norms

*'Women must fight to survive, you have to fight the home front, you fight the office front, you fight every front. But I think we need to be given [a break], believe in us.'* -Miriam

Some of the women spoke about what actions they had to take due to this burnout

*'I had to exit the bank because of the targeted attack from her line manager'* - Tomi

Some women are constrained to display agentic behaviour to escape the intense scrutiny that leads to this burnout.

*'Felt pressured to conform to dominant leadership.... I felt that it's a way of trying to prove that we are not weak and that you are up to the task. We don't want to be seen as being feminine or emotional.'* - Tomi

*In fact, I've even had a real-life example where a member of my team had to eventually resign because he felt I shouldn't be leading him and stuff like that.*

#### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The women's experience in leadership suggest they go through a lot of physical and emotional toll to keep up with leadership. Some feel pressured and, in some cases, have

to leave their jobs, some must keep fighting yearning for a break to catch their breath and have a normal experience as a leader.

#### **4.3.1.3 Subtheme 3: Role Conflict and Isolation**

Reveals how women often feel torn between confirming to leadership ideals and remaining authentic- resulting in loneliness or self-silencing

Some women self-silenced themselves and avoided taking up leadership roles for the fear of isolation and been torn between expectations of their socially constructed roles and their abilities to lead.

*‘Women, sometimes they have family issues, and in the Northern Nigeria, you have to ask permission from your husband before you do things’- Miriam*

*The first person that I called was the lady. She's a senior person in my department. And asked if she wanted to be the team lead...She said no.’- Miriam*

*‘There are expectations to be tough and show that you can indeed, fit into these leadership shoes. ... you're pressured to be a certain way’-Chinenye*

The emotions of being torn were real for some women that they had to compromise their values to certain extent

*‘There are certain things that I've had to, I've had to in quote, compromise.’- Tomi*

#### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The conflict the women experienced kept them on the edge, some caved in and sacrificed remaining authentic and true to themselves, under pressure and compromised.

Some other avoided leadership roles and self-silenced themselves. The others

continuously struggled to fit in and designed a coping mechanism to ensure they remained authentic to themselves and excel in their leadership roles

#### **4.3.1.4 Theme Summary**

The subthemes bring into focus the workplace cultures and norms present post access to leadership for women in Nigeria, revealing the lived experiences of these women and possibly other women when faced with leadership policing, a different form of hypersensitivity and scrutiny. They are subjected to living on the edge, loss of jobs for non-conformers who have decided to stay true to themselves. This theme also reveals emotional and physical toll women in senior leadership face, the burnout and overextension of these women. The constant fight to prove their legitimacy, to stay true to themselves or compromise as a couple of women did under pressure. Under the weight of trying to conform to the socially constructed role for women or remaining authentic leads some women in self-silencing and possibly rejecting leadership positions to avoid living through this dilemma

#### **4.3.2 Theme 4: Emotional Symbolic Labour (ESL)**

Reveals invisible labour and performance pressures tied to gender. Women are expected to carry emotional and relational labour in the workplace in ways men are not simply because they are women.

##### **4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Caregiving and Nurturing Expectations**

Explores the burden of being expected to mother, mentor, or emotionally support colleagues as part of leadership, without recognition.

Some of the women embraced the fact that they were expected to carry this emotional burden as they saw it as a strength.

*'I felt that there was a lot more expectation, not from the management, but from the staff on the team, that they could come and unburden to me because I was a woman... I think it's a positive because you are now more able to balance expectations, you know, how to manage your team around their peculiar challenges and dynamics' - Chinwe*

*'Yes. I think just being a woman makes you more approachable....we can't divorce the fact that you are a woman, you are a mother, a sister, a wife..., which I think is not so much as a burden, as much as it is a plus for us because it makes our own leadership strong, more humane than the men' – Aisha*

Some women on the other hand recognize the nurturing nature of women and draw the line and choose when to carry emotional labour and to what extent and some just don't display at all, drawing a firm line.

*Women are nurturers... what you find is that people in the organization engage based on that nurturing.... I draw a line.....on the expectation of emotional labour, I engage {at will} because I expect it of myself' – Yemi*

*I have experienced is just a normal thing for them to put women in welfare. We're in Africa. It's expected of you...avoid them.' I don't want to be stereotyped' - Miriam*

Chinenye is also aligned to drawing a line believes women are the ones who apply more pressure in carrying the emotional labour which could be traced to the upbringing as girls

to be maternal first to their fathers and brothers and later to their spouses and this sets the foundation for how they approach leadership.

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

This stereotyping was prevalent across board in the experiences of the participants. Some women embraced the attribute as a plus to their leadership style while some other preferred to draw a line.

#### **4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Emotional Regulation and Suppression**

Reveals how women are pressured to appear agreeable and emotionally contained, silencing dissent or ambition.

Some women had experienced been silenced or relegated to the background as a form of suppression

*'Maybe that's why I was pushed to the side for a long time because they know I won't conform to standards against my value's'- Miriam*

Other participants were transferred to remote branches and this led to her resignation...

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Within this sub-theme and other sub-themes presented earlier, the participants had experienced suppression especially when they refused to conform and appear agreeable.

This was shared more by the participants who had mentioned they have faced barriers in accessing and navigating senior leadership.

#### **4.3.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Burden of Representation**

Analyses the isolation of being 'the only one' and having to carry collective expectations of all women

The women apparently survived by being strong.

'Most of the women that have succeeded around me are strong women. Some of them are quietly strong. Some of them are openly strong...you must be strong to bear this burden gracefully- Miriam

'I believe strongly that women still struggle with that pressure to be tough, it's almost like you wear that persona when you come into the workplace... I think it takes a lot of intentionality and a lot of self-awareness to get there- Chinenye.

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

To bear the burden of being one of the few women in senior leadership, it seems women had to groom themselves to be strong, even when they struggle with the burden of representation.

### **4.3.2.4 Theme Summary**

These are a collection of the invisible labour and performance pressures to gender faced by these women as part of their lived experiences. It revealed that women are expected to carry emotional and relational labour or burden ranging from caregiving and nurturing in the workplace, in ways tied to their gender and not expected from the male gender.

In the case of some women who present as being strong, bear the burden of representing many women in the roles few get into and stay.

The women who lived through this see it as a plus and a strength in balancing their leadership styles. Some other women had to draw a line

#### **4.4 Research Question Three**

**In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge, or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?**

This looks to highlight ways women have fought under the yoke of discrimination. How they resisted, challenged, reimagine, leadership and institutional power and structures for themselves and how they have advocated for others along the same lines. Interview Questions 9-12 were mapped to this RQ (See Appendix C for full interview guide listing the 12 interview questions). Additionally, this will reveal the reforms, short and long terms, that would bring systemic changes and shift the leadership dynamics from gender representation to gender power sharing.

##### **4.4.1 Theme 5: Resistance and Reimagination (RR)**

This theme explores taking agency, subversion against the unspoken and spoken norms and critical reimagination of the women's leadership positions

###### **4.4.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Mentoring and Sponsorship of Others**

Demonstrates how women resist institutional norms by creating alternative paths and advocating for others

Most of the women had deliberately created or being a part of some advocacy initiatives to create paths for others especially the younger women.

*'I had several young women bankers that I mentored when I was, when I just recently left banking.... I'm in a group ... It's a women leadership thing and we do have a mentorship program for young people.'* - Chinwe

*'We used to be only two women in my department, but now we are like five, six of them in my department, recruited them under my watch'* - Miriam

*'I've tried to push employment for as many women as possible. As I told you, the department Initially with only two females amongst 13 males, I was able to appoint about five other women to come into the department'* - Zara

*'3 out of 6 of my staff are women, I recruit women for their ability to stabilize the team'* - Kemi

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

Having gone through their narrated experiences, seeing the gaps as they accessed and navigated senior leadership, the participants were keen on mentoring and sponsoring more women and advocating for them. This included also creating and recruiting more women into jobs that will ensure pipelines are filled in readiness for leadership

#### **4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Strategic Boundary-Setting**

Explores how women reclaim times and agency by setting limits that protect them from overextension

*'I've never given people the opportunity [to overextend me] I just tell you the way it is. And I don't take rubbish from men .... I think people are a little bit scared of me and*

*reluctant to do certain things towards me because they know how to react immediately'* – Miriam.

*'I've redefined leadership, to always be to engage with people on their own terms and, try and ensure that everyone that engages with me has some relationship with me goes away with a decent experience'* -Chinwe

*'My own leadership style is leadership for the greatest good.... as opposed to maybe pandering to the interests of what maybe the top management committee or maybe the board members want.'* -Aisha

*'Leadership is a lifestyle' so she defines what type of leadership she believes in.'* -Tomi  
*'I ensure that as I receive feedback [on conformity], I still process it and execute in a way that is still true to me ...When I find myself in those situations, I try so much not to compromise my values or who I am.'* - Chinenye

#### Interpretation

The notion of setting boundaries and reclaiming agency of their careers, preventing themselves from being overextended and burnt out was handled by these women in various ways. Redefining what leadership means for them and staying true to themselves not caving in to pressure from the dominant male circle or opinion. Furthermore, some of the women also ensure they do not give opportunity to for anyone to mount pressure on them or manipulate them.

#### **4.4.1.3 Sub-theme 3: Advocacy Through Visibility**

Illustrates how occupying space visibly becomes an act of political resistance  
reshaping norms of leadership

Some of the women in their experience owned their space as a form of resistance and redefined what it means to them.

*'Reshapes leadership by redefining myself...I believe integrity...whatever you do, you should do it with integrity. And I insist anybody that's around me, if you do something that I believe is wrong, I'll talk to you.'* - Miriam

*My preference is always to work with women. And I'll give you a reason why. I think women are efficient. I think they will commit to doing the very best job they can do'* - Chinwe

'I've had cases where I've noticed unfair treatments and I've taken it upon myself to speak to the leadership' - Chinenye.

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

These responses, illustrate resistance to structural inequality by these women decided to visibly advocate, occupy and own their space, reshaping what leadership means to them, unapologetically. By choosing whom they work with, how they show up authentically, that is- and speaking up for others when they see others going through similar ill treatment.

#### **4.4.1.4 Theme Summary**

Taken together the subthemes reveal resisting and reimagining what leadership should be for them. Taking agency of their situation and that of other women through

mentorship/sponsorship, advocacy through visibility and strategic boundary setting to ensure women can stay true to themselves and not be pressured by the dominant powers.

#### **4.4.2 Theme 6: Institutional Reforms and Equity Futures (IREF)**

This centers on institutional reforms, critique and paths towards systemic changes in the short and long terms that will support women and move towards the point of power-sharing, away from gender representation.

##### **4.4.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Policy Innovation and HR Reform**

Captures formal efforts to redesign hiring, performance evaluation and promotion in more equitable ways

*‘This starts with the heads of organizations. It's not something you can affect it as government policy. Organizations have just got to do better in terms of supporting women in leadership’ - Chinwe*

*‘There is a way to make these things easier for women as they are moving up the ladder to be able to manage the different dimensions of our lives. Professional coaching should start early in women’s careers and not when they get to Senior leadership’ - Yemi*

*‘I’m not happy with the percentage we're given. We should not be allocated a percentage It should be open. We should have a fair playing field.’ -Zara*

##### **Subtheme Interpretation**

This subtheme exemplifies how organizations should reform the future of women in leadership. The policy changes that need to happen as well as the ultimate goal of a mindset shift from gender representation to gender power-sharing.

#### **4.4.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Building Female Talent Pipelines**

Shows how women intentionally cultivate future generations, creating sustainable shifts

Some of the accounts believes it starts from the beginning, mindset shift of the male and female child and the women and men bringing up these children

*'We, the women bring up men, we train men, we guide men... We must change our mindsets from the beginning... I'm thinking it's from childhood. We must train them to let them respect the female child from the beginning.'* - Miriam

*'I'm Muslim, from the northeast, of Nigeria which is even more conservative. And there's an early marriage high rate and our girls only go as far as secondary school, .... we go out and advocate and bring them into the university and then mentor them.'* - Zara

*'Believes companies should embrace diversity and build capacity for women to lead'*-

Kemi

#### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The above quotes suggest that to build female talent pipelines as a long-term measure of reforming the futures of women leadership and resist the dominant voice, we need start with the girl and boy children, have companies embrace diversity and its impact on their company performance, ultimately be intentional.

#### **4.4.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Systems-Level Reimagination**

Articulates broader visions for restructuring the entire concept of leadership and institutional power itself

*'You first must be intentional about getting women representation. Once you have done that, and it is now in the DNA of any organization culture, it now becomes automatic that there is power sharing...there has to be cultural re engineering when it comes to women. Even amongst us women,' -Yemi*

*'I think if we have a [reformed] justice system in place, you know, when our legal system, our courts give justice, when our policemen and all the various security agencies protect the interests of persons[women] -Aisha*

*'Men must know that women have changed. They're not the old type of people- [stay- at - home, do -everything, manage- everything and take -all -the -crap -that -you -give -them - kind of people anymore]. Women are strong. Women know their rights. Women believe in themselves. Women are willing to do anything, be it for their family or for work, do anything to make sure that they get there and survive' -Miriam.*

*'We must, empower, first, we must teach, because I'm a teacher and I believe in teaching and mentoring and bringing them up. What we have nowadays is that the girls, sometimes, no matter how educated or the young woman, they don't believe they have something to bring to the table.' -Zara.*

*'Put in structures that support women without it been like a handout, a recognition of peculiarities as a woman...for soft landing' - Chinenye.*

### **Subtheme Interpretation**

The above quotes suggest ways to restructure leadership and institutional powers. The importance of ensuring women can seek justice and redress in the courts in Nigeria

which today is a major systemic issue that silences women and isolates them in their struggles.

#### **4.4.2.4 Theme Summary**

This theme highlights all areas of institutional reforms; short and long term focused on promoting equitable promotion and performance evaluation through policy innovations and HR reforms that show the organisation has a key role to play in these reforms. Systemic changes including justice system and other systems within the ecosystem necessary to transform gendered leadership experience in Nigeria. The roles these women have played or can play in reforming the leadership experience of women through female pipeline initiatives.

#### **4.5 Summary of Findings**

This chapter presented the findings of the study, drawing directly from the narratives of ten women in senior leadership roles across various sectors in Nigeria. The analysis was structured around the three research questions, with themes and subthemes inductively and deductively developed through thematic analysis of interview data and pre-interview questionnaires.

For the first research question, findings revealed that gendered barriers remain deeply embedded in the structures and cultures that govern access to leadership. The data highlighted unspoken gatekeeping norms, male-dominated sponsorship circles, and sociocultural narratives that position leadership as a male domain. Women also described

the presence of religious and regional biases, especially among Northern Muslim participants, which shaped both access to leadership roles and internalized expectations. The “glass cliff” phenomenon was identified across participants’ experiences, often emerging during organizational crises. Though meritocracy was emphasized, it often appeared to operate after endorsement or external validation.

The second research question illuminated the nuanced and often invisible challenges women face once they have entered senior leadership positions. Women described heightened scrutiny, emotional and relational labor, symbolic representation, and the constant negotiation between authenticity and survival. These accounts revealed the exhausting demand for hyper-performance, the psychological toll of being a “representative” rather than an individual, and the emotional costs of navigating narrow behavioral expectations. The presence of leadership policing and gendered communication expectations reinforced how institutional cultures continue to exert symbolic control over women leaders.

The third research question showcased how participants exercised agency within and against these structures. Findings demonstrated that resistance was not always loud or confrontational; it often appeared as boundary-setting, mentorship, sponsorship, visibility, and internal advocacy. Participants spoke of intentionally redefining leadership styles, supporting female pipelines, influencing HR policy, and pursuing broader

systemic reforms. These practices illustrated the emergence of transformational leadership rooted in justice, inclusion, and structural change.

Across all three research questions, participants' stories provided insight into the persistence of patriarchal norms, the resilience and resourcefulness of women in leadership, and the subtle ways in which power is maintained and challenged. The findings suggest that while barriers persist, women are both navigating and transforming the terrain of leadership in Nigeria. These insights lay the foundation for the critical interpretation and theoretical analysis presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V:

## DISCUSSION

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the major key findings from the interviews with women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria. It goes beyond the participants narrative interpretations presented in chapter 4 to explore how these findings align with , challenge, or extend existing literature and theory- particularly through a critical theory lens.

In terms of structure, this chapter is presented by research questions, summarising all themes and relevant findings under each research question. Each section weaves together the findings from the participants narrative, its alignment or not to existing literature and the researcher's critical theoretical interpretations, presenting a holistic analysis of the experiences of women in senior leadership in Nigeria, limited to the context of this study.

### **5.2 Discussion of Research Question One**

#### **What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria**

The findings under RQ1 revealed that gendered barriers to leadership remain a strong undercurrent in the professional journeys of many women, even at the highest levels, confirming Ryan and Haslam's (2007) claim, that greater numbers of women have

moved into leadership positions, however there is this a perceived lack of acceptance or support for women in the management culture at the top, (Simon, 1996,; Chovwen, 2006) A key insight was the prevalence of informal gatekeeping mechanisms, where entry into senior leadership roles was often contingent upon endorsement or sponsorship from dominant male networks. Leadership itself was framed, either implicitly or explicitly, as a space for men, with culturally embedded assumptions shaping who is seen as legitimate, aligning with the 'Think Manager, Think Male' theory association where the attributes of the men is closely aligned with the attributes of a leader. The implicit theories about gender, though it also explains it does not mean it gives succor to the women. It justifies the fact that people have implicit theories within them that helps them decipher what is truth to them, in this case who fits the role of a leader, men or women, and the gender expectations of both genders.

Participants from Northern Nigeria especially highlighted the influence of religious and cultural norms on leadership access, with several describing the ways these external expectations became internalized. This aligns with the argument by Aliyu, (2014), that says that Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where men are more favoured than women, and division of labour is based on gender, with views about women based on their positions in the family, (Omoyibo et al, (2010). Many shared how early socializations created invisible boundaries around ambition, resulting in self-limiting beliefs or the need for external validation before aspiring to leadership roles. Aligning with the research evidence that shows that the oppression women face in the workforce

do not come only from men or male managers but also from women themselves, (Bruckmüller et al, 2013). Furthermore the social role theory also provides insight into why these women had been socialized early in life that has resulted in this self-limiting positions and the need for external validation. The theory argues that women are expected to carry out feminine roles and results in a lack of acceptance if there is any deviation from the norm, (Eagly, 1982;1987).

Although meritocracy was frequently referenced, there was also a shared understanding that technical competence alone was rarely sufficient. While sponsorship was seen as important, none of the participants attributed their leadership appointments to tokenism or symbolic inclusion. Instead, they presented themselves as having earned their positions through visible performance and competence. This may reflect a form of internal distancing from narratives of symbolic representation, and just as research evidence says, downplay their experiences and adopt the queen bee disposition, (Ellermers et al, 2012). It could also be a filtering process whereby only those who resisted such roles progressed to the level of seniority included in this study.

Additionally, many women described being appointed during moments of crisis or organizational instability — though not always in overt terms. These crisis-based leadership transitions were sometimes normalized, with few participants identifying them as strategic placements or recognizing the additional risk burden they entailed. This subtle acknowledgement points to a wider pattern of leadership appointments being framed as opportunity, despite the hidden costs attached. The overt terms used by the

participants to confirm or not, their appointment during unstable or crisis periods buttresses the findings in the literature that says that men and senior level women were seen not to acknowledge its existence or where they did, explained it away as a strategic or some positive move by the organisation. Ryan and Haslam, (2014), in their study of the reactions of men and women to the glass cliff, argue that junior and mid-level women were most likely to acknowledge its existence and attribute grave reasons for its existence.

Lastly, participants spoke about the pressure of being constantly watched, evaluated, and held to standards that differed from their male counterparts. This is aligned to existing literature that argues that the performance of women get to leadership is placed under remarkably scrutiny and questioned due to entrenched gender stereotypes (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Chung and Choi, 2023), even when they are executing the same leadership role as men (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). This hypervisibility was accompanied by rigid behavioral expectations, particularly around communication and emotional expression. Women were expected to be authoritative yet non-confrontational, assertive yet not aggressive — a balancing act that added a layer of emotional labor to their leadership roles.

Together, these insights suggest that while structural barriers to leadership may appear to have shifted, many gendered expectations and exclusions have simply taken more subtle forms. Access to leadership remains unevenly negotiated through networks, the dominant male circles, social conditioning, unspoken cultural and religious norms that create barriers for women as they access and navigate senior leadership positions in

Nigeria. They are left with feelings of exploitation, repression and injustice as they are treated differently from men, fostering double standards and unfairness, hence there is the ongoing demand to prove legitimacy in spaces where women are still seen as the exception.

### **5.3 Discussion of Research Question Two**

#### **How do women who have attained senior leadership in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?**

The findings under RQ2 show that women in senior leadership roles continue to encounter male-dominated environments that impose heightened visibility, performance expectations, and identity-based pressures. Their lived experiences reveal that reaching the top does not remove gendered dynamics — instead, it reshapes them into more covert but equally demanding forms. The oppression continues even post access to senior leadership.

A key aspect of their experience was the constant need to justify their presence, competence, and leadership style. Many participants spoke of a form of “leadership policing,” where their behaviors, tone, and even personality were subject to ongoing scrutiny. Unlike their male counterparts, they were expected to maintain composure, balance assertiveness with warmth, and navigate a narrow band of acceptable leadership expression.

These women also described a sense of living on the edge — knowing that any deviation from these unspoken expectations could result in marginalization or

professional consequences. The stakes of nonconformity were high, and in some cases, women described job loss, burnout, or the decision to self-silence to survive in their roles.

A recurring theme was the emotional and relational labor expected of them — a burden that extended beyond formal responsibilities. They were expected to mentor, nurture, and emotionally support others in the workplace, especially because of their gender. These demands were rarely made of male leaders and added to the invisible weight they carried. Buttressing again the social role theory and implicit theories of gendered leadership. Women are perceived as communal and traditional homemakers (Eagly, 1982, 1987) and men agentic and breadwinners, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014). This explains why the women had the experience of being expected to carry the emotional and relational burden in addition to their jobs.

For women perceived as “strong,” an additional symbolic burden emerged: they were viewed not just as individuals, but as representatives of all women in leadership. Their success or failure was interpreted as a signal of women’s general capability, placing added pressure on their performance. While some embraced this role as a form of purpose or strength, others found it limiting and emotionally draining. This is indicative of the high stress and strain Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, (2014) spoke about, that comes from working on the edge. `this is not only detrimental to the women experiencing this but create a narrative of acceptance of this imbalance in power and double standards for the women yet to get into senior leadership.

These experiences suggest that women in male-dominated leadership spaces face a complex negotiation between authenticity and conformity. Some chose to resist, redefine, or reframe the expectations placed upon them. Others established boundaries to protect their well-being. Regardless of approach, their leadership journeys were marked by a continual balancing act — navigating between expectations, power structures, and their own values.

#### **5.4 Discussion of Research Question Three**

##### **In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?**

The findings under RQ3 reveal that women in senior leadership are not merely navigating existing power structures — they are actively reshaping them. Through intentional acts of resistance, strategic positioning, and long-term reform efforts, these women are creating alternative leadership pathways and expanding what leadership can look like within male-dominated institutions.

One of the most immediate forms of resistance observed was the effort to redefine leadership on their own terms. Many participants described choosing to lead authentically, setting clear boundaries, and modeling a leadership style rooted in empathy, collaboration, and values — even when this deviated from institutional norms. This form of quiet defiance allowed them to maintain their integrity while asserting new possibilities for what effective leadership could be.

Another critical mode of challenging power came through mentorship and sponsorship. These women deliberately created support systems for younger or mid-career women, not just to guide them professionally, but to shield them from the very systemic biases they had encountered. By opening doors for others, they shifted the culture from within — expanding the leadership pipeline and embedding a sense of continuity in gender equity efforts.

Participants also engaged in advocacy through visibility — consciously using their positions to spotlight systemic injustices, speak on behalf of underrepresented groups, and make space for other women’s voices. For many, visibility was a strategy, not a reward — a tool to normalize women’s presence in powerful roles and challenge stereotypes of what leadership should look like.

Beyond individual strategies, several participants pushed for institutional reforms. This included championing fairer promotion systems, revising gender-biased performance evaluations, and advocating for policy reforms within their organizations. The right framing and gender sensitivity focused, (Okafor, Okafor and Chukwuemeka, 2011; Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). These actions were not framed as acts of rebellion, but as strategic interventions to transform how leadership operates — making it more equitable and inclusive. Embracing diversity as research has implied that effective managers are androgynous, a combination of agentic and communal traits (Hardaker, Woods and Fields, 2023). With a diversity-based HR policy, it makes is easier to onboard

both traits on your team than look for individuals with a good combination of both types of traits.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of ecosystem-level changes, such as justice sector reform or educational policy shifts, indicating that their advocacy extended beyond the walls of their institutions. These leaders were not only shaping internal cultures but also working to dismantle broader systemic inequities affecting women's leadership journeys in Nigeria.

Altogether, the findings show that resistance is not always loud or confrontational — it can be strategic, quiet, and embedded in everyday decisions. These women are both surviving and subverting the status quo, using their leadership not just to occupy space but to **transform it**.

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter provided a critical discussion of the key findings from the study, organized by the three guiding research questions. Drawing from the lived experiences of women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria, the discussion unpacked the persistent and evolving gendered dynamics that shape their leadership journeys.

The first research question revealed the ongoing existence of gendered barriers to leadership access and navigation. Despite individual merit, many women encountered informal gatekeeping mechanisms, unspoken norms around male legitimacy, and cultural or religious constraints — all of which collectively reproduced exclusionary leadership pathways. Even for those who had “broken through,” the presence of precarious

appointments and behavioral double standards highlighted how access to leadership did not always equate to inclusion or autonomy.

The second research question shed light on how women experience leadership within male-dominated institutions. Their narratives revealed heightened scrutiny, symbolic burden, emotional labor, and constrained behavioral expectations — all of which demanded careful negotiation between authenticity and institutional survival. These patterns underscore the hidden costs of leadership for women and the need to question whether equality in position reflects equality in experience.

The third research question demonstrated that women in senior leadership are not merely passive actors within rigid structures — they are actively resisting, reframing, and redesigning leadership on their own terms. Through mentorship, visibility, policy advocacy, and institutional reform, they are creating space for others and shifting the leadership paradigm. Their strategies reflect a move from adaptation to transformation — signaling new possibilities for inclusive leadership in Nigeria and beyond.

Taken together, the findings reaffirm that women's leadership in Nigeria is both constrained and catalytic. The journey to the top is marked by exclusion and resilience, surveillance and innovation. Through the lens of critical theory, these findings expose how power continues to operate through symbolic, institutional, and emotional mechanisms — even amid progress. Yet they also reveal that women are not merely surviving these conditions; they are actively reshaping them.

This chapter has contributed to a deeper understanding of gendered leadership dynamics in Nigeria and opened new insights into how women navigate, endure, and transform power structures. The next chapter will present a synthesis of the study, explore implications for theory, policy, and practice, and offer directions for future research.

## CHAPTER VI:

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 Summary and Implications

The glass ceiling has been researched for over four (4) decades since the term was coined in 1984, measures have been deployed by governments and organisations over the years to 'fix' this problem of invisible barriers preventing women from getting into leadership positions and for some time it worked, or so it seemed. Research evidence showed that women had now been 'allowed' to get into leadership positions, in larger numbers than before, but therein was the problem. Little or nothing was known about the experiences of the women who had accessed the leadership position to ascertain if the barriers had disappear following the interventions. What was their experience in navigating senior leadership. Why there was radio silence in the literature of how they fared or if they were constrained to speak, as a coping and defense mechanism. Self-silencing themselves and adopting the persona of a 'strong' woman bearing the burden of representing other women. This was the purpose of this research, to find out how women in senior leadership positions, current and past, had accessed and navigated their way through. How the second wave of the glass ceiling, that is, the glass cliff phenomenon- a position that claims that women were most likely to be appointed into precarious positions especially during crisis or unstable times in an organisation or establishment- was applicable to the experiences these women went through in Nigeria.

The glass cliff theory has not been seen to manifest in all situations of crisis and instability and has little or no research in the Nigerian context.

The objectives of this research are ;

- To understand this phenomenon, the Glass Cliff and its applicability to the Nigerian context as perceived by women in senior leadership.
- To deep dive and understand how these women perceive the impact of the glass cliff phenomenon on their career choices
- To explore how these women perceive the Nigerian Cultural and Societal Norms, the role of government or corporates Policy and Gender-Inclusive Leadership Practices contributed or not to their experiences?
- To provide recommendations for mitigating the Glass Cliff Phenomenon that will impact women's leadership experience, organizational performance and the ultimately Industry practice.

The research questions guiding the literature review and subsequent data collection and analysis are.

- What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?
- How do women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?
- In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge, or

reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?

The research methodology was based on a qualitative research design underpinned by a critical theorist philosophical perspective, with a firm believe that this approach was suitable to not only interpret the experiences faced by the participants bit to delve deeper and unearth the underlining power imbalance, oppressions and unfairness by way of symbolic representation, gender barriers, hyper scrutiny and double standards which women go through which is not experienced by their male colleagues, both executing same job.

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method in the first instance to identify the women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria, who had risen through the ranks with the Nigerian corporate workforce and considering the levels of these women and the time/availability constraints they have at this level of leadership, the snowball sampling method was also applied. Women who had been selected through the purposive method recommended a candidate who also had to fit the criteria required to partake in the study.

Pre-interview questionnaires and semi structured interview guides were both used to collect data, and these were analyzed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method, generating six (6) themes and twenty-two (22) subthemes , aligned with the intial six (60 themes deductive generated from the literature earlier.

The major findings in response to research question 1 is that gendered barriers to leadership still existed as women accessed and navigated leadership, they had only

changed their forms grounded in unspoken norms, symbolic representation and informal gatekeeping where even if you were technically sound as a woman, there was still a need to have male endorsements to be given access to leadership – though not overtly executed but there nonetheless.

With reference to research question two, the result of the data collection and analysis unearthed themes of emotional and symbolic labour as well as workplace norms and performance standards that did not favour women, rather they burdened and left women burnt out, subjected to leadership policing and role conflict. Most times the research evidence showed the women lost their jobs, promotion or just voluntarily exited the organisation.

The results of research question three showed that some women had decided to resist the pressure and redefine what leadership meant for them and those around them. Acting as a catalyst to reforming the systemic issues underlying this disparity in leadership experience for both genders. Mentoring and sponsoring other women to not only create opportunities for more women, but to dismantle the bias they met on their way and ensure the younger women do not have same experience.

These experiences show that structural power imbalance and institutionalised gender exclusions are still evident in the workplace. Double performance standards applied to women unlike the men and the emotional labour women have to carry in addition contribute to many women working on the edge. Torn in between staying true to themselves or conforming to the pressure of the dominant male circles.

## **Implications**

The implications of this research and major contribution to knowledge and practice is to provide insight into the major contributor to women attrition from the workplace, the implication or not to the organization's performance or opportunity cost lost from not embracing diversity and ensuring there is gender equality and representation across an organization.

The other implication is to enable other women draw inspiration these women's experience and their journey to and in senior leadership, understand they are not alone and make better career decisions. A third implication is to build a foundation for future research and work for the researcher and other researchers. Future work which may include initiatives to share more women experiences and other mitigating strategies emanating from the findings.

### **6.2 Recommendations for Future Research**

This study had unanswered questions which emanated from the data gathering and supported by the limitations of this study. In this study only 20 women participated in this study as participants, even though they were from all regions of Nigeria and from different industries, there is a need to expand the study to include more industries and women in senior leadership in Nigeria to continue to investigate its applicability to the experience women go through at that level.

Secondly, there is an opportunity to carry out this study for women in the early stage of their career to understand their current experience and their perception of what lies

ahead of them. A comparative and longitudinal analysis across levels of leadership, across industries and a study men's perspective on the institutionalized reforms ongoing and recommended.

In operationalizing the contribution of this research to knowledge and practice, the researcher plans to in future research develop and execute the recommended institutional reforms including mentorship/sponsorship initiatives to especially advocate visibly, equipping women to understand how they can resist the pressures and join in transforming the systemic issues in the workplace including the wider ecosystem issues.

## APPENDIX A

### **PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE AND COVER LETTER**

Pre-Interview Questionnaire- Women in Senior Leadership in Nigeria

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study on the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria.

This short questionnaire will help us better understand your leadership context and tailor the upcoming interview to your unique experiences. It takes approximately 3–5 minutes to complete.

Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. You may skip any question you are not comfortable answering.

This form is part of a larger study that combines personal narratives and critical analysis to explore how women navigate, challenge, and reshape leadership structures.

You will be contacted shortly to schedule a 45–60-minute interview.

1. What is your current leadership position?
2. How many years have you worked in a senior leadership role?
3. What industry do you work in?
4. Have you ever been appointed to a leadership role during a crisis or period of instability? (Yes/No)
5. Do you feel women in leadership are held to different performance standards than men? (Yes/No/Not sure)

6. Have you experienced exclusion from decision-making or leadership pipelines?  
(Yes/No)
7. Have you had access to mentorship or sponsorship during your leadership journey? (Yes/No/Somewhat)
8. Have you been encouraged to change your leadership style to fit dominant expectations? (Yes/No)
9. Have you ever considered leaving leadership due to gender-related challenges or workplace culture? (Yes/No)
10. Has your leadership experience been shaped more by systemic challenges or individual performance factors? (Systemic/Individual/Both)

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT BRIEFING LETTER WITH INFORMED CONSENT

#### **Invitation to Participate in Research: Women in Senior Leadership in Nigeria**

**Dear [Name of Participant]**

I hope this message finds you well. I am conducting a research study exploring the leadership experiences of women who have held or currently hold senior leadership roles in Nigeria. This study aims to examine both the personal journeys and the structural contexts that shape women's advancement in leadership roles.

#### **About the Study**

This research combines reflective storytelling with a critical analysis of gendered leadership experiences. It investigates how women access leadership roles, the expectations placed upon them, and the challenges they face—especially in high-risk or symbolic appointments. At the same time, it values the ways women resist exclusion, redefine leadership norms, and contribute to institutional reform. The goal is to document how women navigate and transform their leadership environments while advancing equity and inclusion.

#### **Purpose of the Research**

- To understand the lived experiences of women in leadership, including challenges, opportunities, and turning points.
- To identify patterns of exclusion, symbolic leadership, and emotional labor.

- To spotlight acts of resistance, advocacy, and pathways to institutional reform.

### **Key Concepts You May Encounter**

To support our conversation, here are some of the terms and themes that may come up during the interview:

- Glass Cliff – Situations where women are appointed to leadership roles during high-risk or crisis periods, often with limited support.
- Symbolic Leadership – Roles that emphasize visibility or representation without providing real influence or decision-making power.
- Gendered Expectations – Unwritten norms about how women should behave or lead, including standards of likability, emotional labor, or humility.
- Emotional Labor – The added expectation that women manage relationships, team dynamics, or workplace morale beyond their formal duties.
- Resistance and Advocacy – How women push back against exclusionary cultures or policies and advocate for change.
- Redefining Leadership – How women reshape traditional leadership models to align with inclusive, equitable, or transformative values.

### **Your Participation**

You are invited to:

1. Complete a brief pre-interview questionnaire (for demographic and contextual insights), [ [Pre-Interview Questionnaire: Women in Senior Leadership in Nigeria](#) ] and

2. Participate in a 45–60-minute semi-structured interview, either virtually or in-person, depending on your preference.

Your insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of gender, leadership, and equity in Nigerian organizational contexts. All responses will be confidential and anonymized, and participation is voluntary.

### **Next Steps**

If you are open to participating, please reply to this email or schedule your interview directly via the following link: [[Book time with Onyekachi Ginger-Eke: Women in Senior Leadership in Nigeria](#)]

### **Thank you**

Your voice and leadership matters. I appreciate your time and willingness to contribute to this important research.

Warm regards,

Onyekachi Ginger-Eke

Doctoral Researcher

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Open- ended Interview Guide – 12 Core Questions**

12 core open-ended questions drawn from the six thematic areas and maintains a balance between critical inquiry and reflective storytelling, designed for a 60-minute semi-structured interview.

**A. Leadership Access and Representation**

1. Can you describe your journey into senior leadership? What were the key moments or turning points?
2. Have you ever felt that leadership opportunities were restricted by unspoken norms or politics?

**B. Gendered Barriers and Crisis Appointments**

3. What gender-specific barriers have you encountered in your leadership journey?
4. Do you think women are more likely to be appointed to unstable or high-risk leadership roles? Why or why not?

### **C. Workplace Norms, and Performance**

5. What are the implicit expectations around how women should lead in your context?
6. Have you ever felt pressure to conform to a dominant leadership model that didn't reflect your values?

### **D. Emotional and Symbolic Labour**

7. Have you been expected to carry emotional or relational labor in ways that male leaders are not?
8. Do you feel your presence in leadership was ever used as a form of symbolic representation rather than substantive influence?

### **E. Resistance and Reimagination**

9. How have you used your leadership position to advocate for others or promote equity?
10. In what ways have you redefined what leadership looks like for yourself or others?

### **F. Institutional Reform and Equity Futures**

11. What systemic or structural changes would better support women in leadership in

Nigeria?

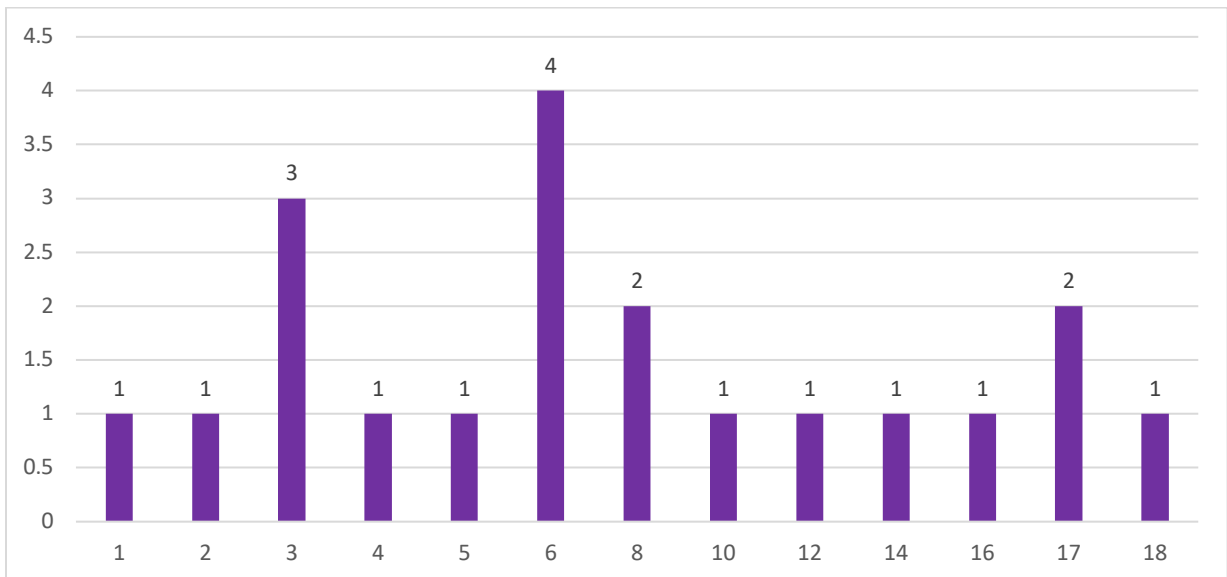
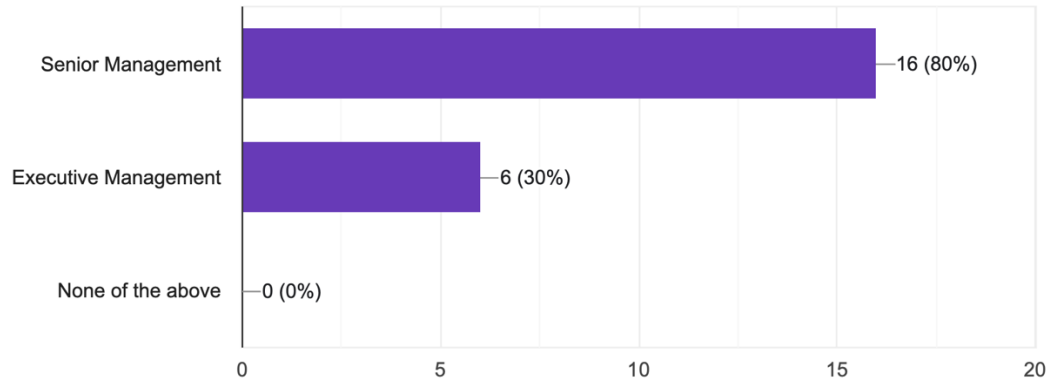
12. What long-term reforms are needed to move from gender representation to gendered power-sharing?

## APPENDIX D

### PRE-INTERVIEW RESPONSES

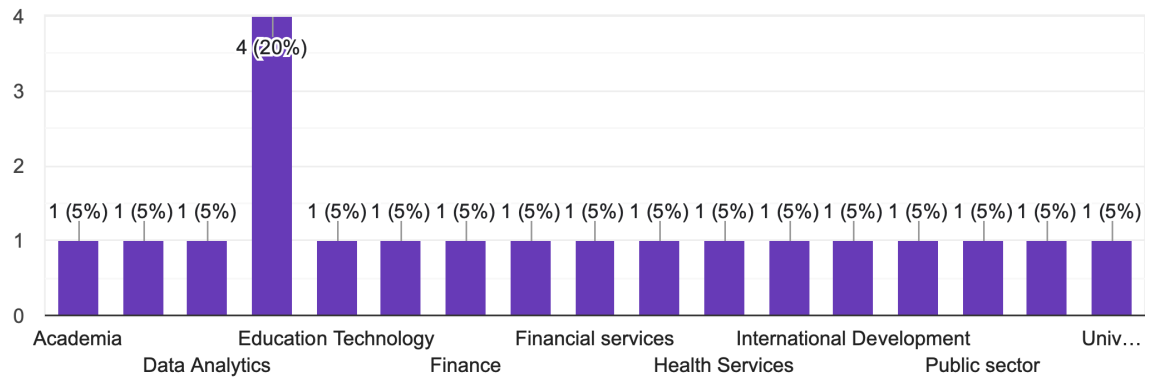
#### 1. What is your current leadership position?

20 responses



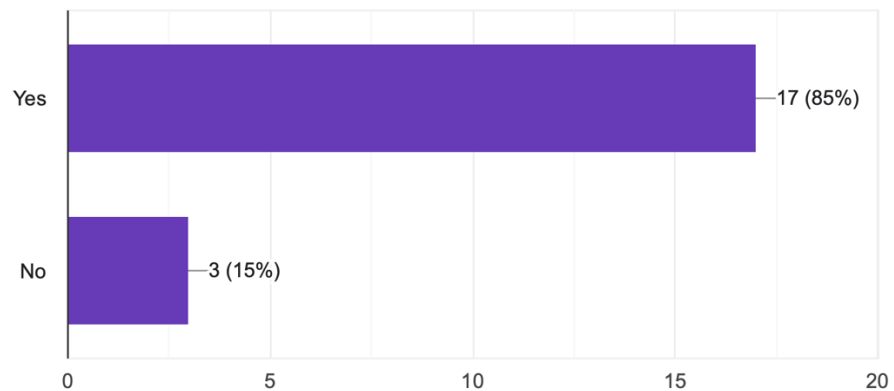
### 3. What industry do you work in?

20 responses



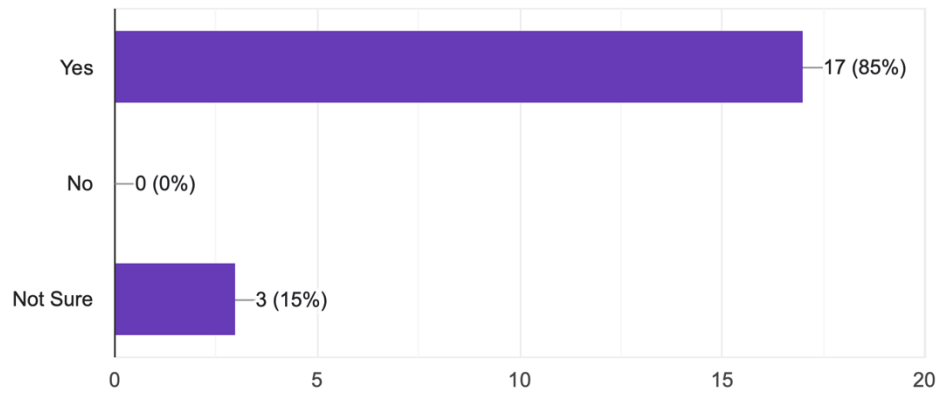
### 4. Have you ever been appointed to a leadership role during a crisis or period of instability?

20 responses



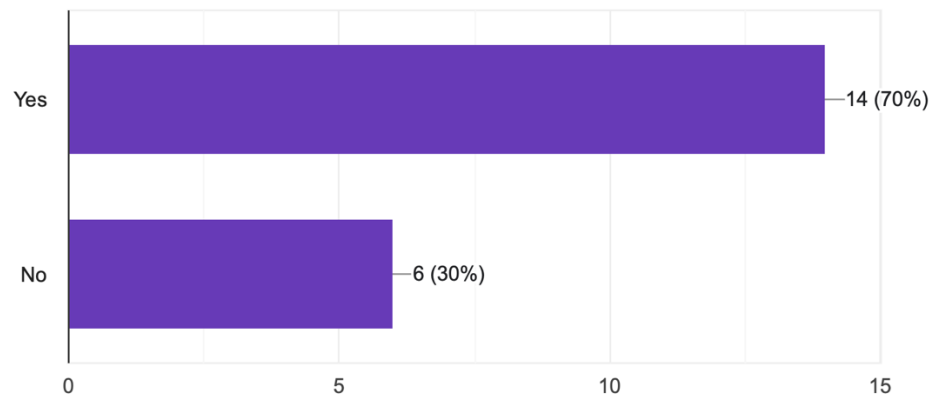
5. Do you feel women in leadership are held to different performance standards than men?

20 responses



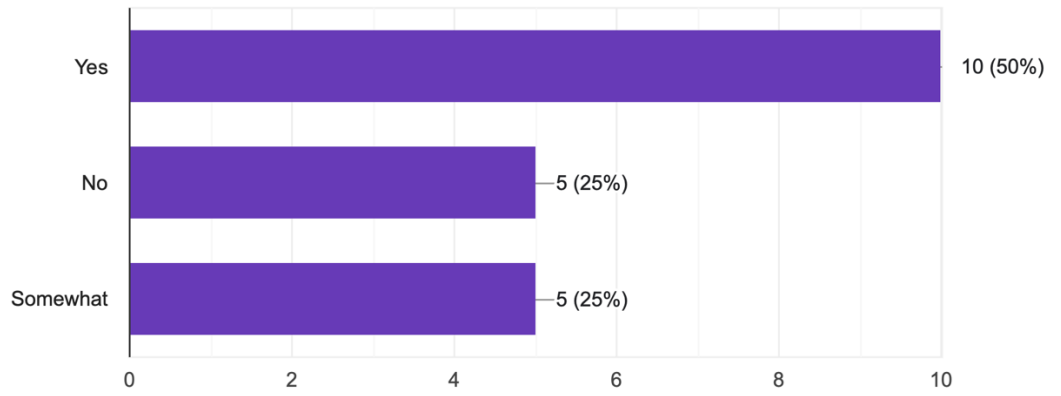
6. Have you experienced exclusion from decision-making or leadership pipelines?

20 responses



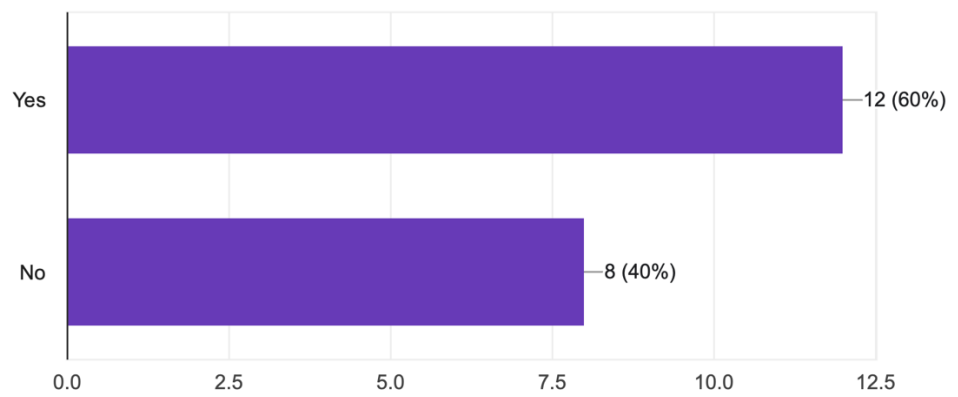
7. Have you had access to mentorship or sponsorship during your leadership journey?

20 responses



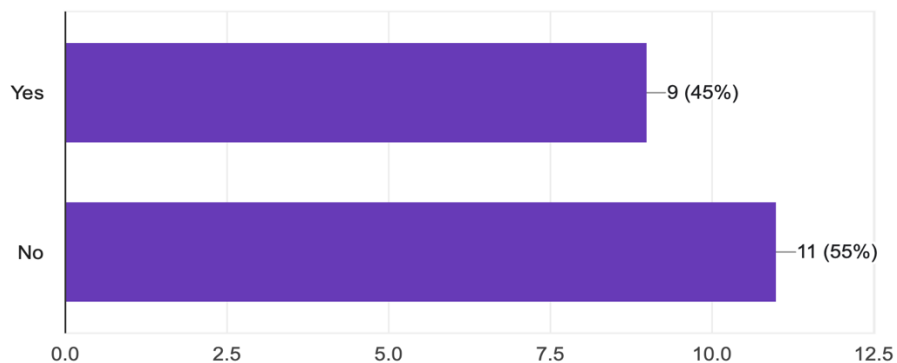
8. Have you been encouraged to change your leadership style to fit dominant expectations?

20 responses



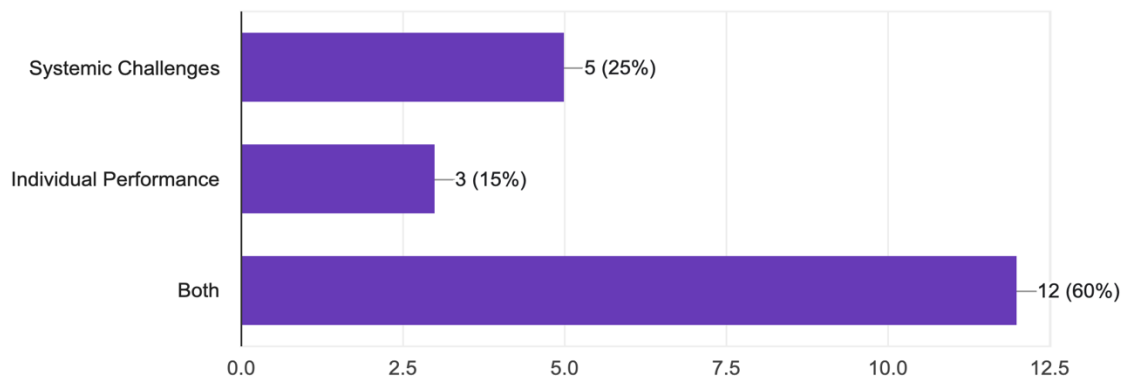
9. Have you ever considered leaving leadership due to gender-related challenges or workplace culture?

20 responses



10. Has your leadership experience been shaped more by systemic challenges or individual performance factors?

20 responses



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