

GENDER DIVERSITY AND MENTAL HEALTH: ANALYZING THE IMPACT ON
MENTAL HEALTH OF FEMALE LEADERS DUE TO GENDER BIASES IN
ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

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Dedication

To my 12-year-old son who has been a constant source of motivation in my career journey.

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ABSTRACT

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Gender diversity in organizational leadership has received increasing attention; however, the psychological implications of gender bias experienced by women in leadership roles remain underexplored. This study examines the impact of gender biases on the mental health of female leaders, with particular focus on stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression. The research aims to identify the forms of gender bias encountered by female leaders, evaluate their psychological consequences, explore coping and resilience strategies, and propose organizational interventions to support mental well-being. The broader objective of the study is to contribute toward making female leadership sustainable and not merely representative within organizational structures.

A mixed-methods research design was used for this research. Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey administered to female leaders across multiple organizational sectors, measuring perceived gender bias, mental health outcomes, coping

strategies, and organizational support. Statistical analysis was conducted to identify patterns and relationships between variables. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with female leaders to explore lived experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions of organizational culture. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and underlying mechanisms linking gender bias and mental health.

The findings indicate that gender bias in leadership is frequently experienced in subtle and systemic forms, including heightened scrutiny, role incongruity, and exclusion from informal decision-making networks. These experiences were found to be significantly associated with psychological distress, particularly emotional exhaustion and burnout. Female leaders commonly employed individual coping strategies such as emotional regulation, overcompensation, and selective support-seeking, although these approaches often contributed to sustained psychological strain. The study further highlights the limited availability of structured organizational support for addressing gender-related mental health challenges.

The research concludes that gender diversity initiatives must extend beyond representation to include psychological sustainability in leadership roles. Addressing gender bias requires organizational interventions such as bias-aware leadership evaluation, structured sponsorship and mentorship, recognition of emotional labour, and normalization of mental health support. By linking gender bias to leadership well-being, the study contributes to leadership research and provides practical recommendations for creating inclusive and psychologically sustainable organizational environments.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 Historical Context of women in Leadership

The evolution of female participation in leadership roles within corporate and organizational contexts is a critical issue in both gender studies and organizational psychology. Historically, leadership spaces especially in the corporate, political, and industrial domains have been overwhelmingly dominated by men. The systematic exclusion of women from these spaces has been the result of long-standing patriarchal norms, legal limitations, and cultural constructs that positioned leadership as inherently masculine (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The early 20th century marked the beginning of change, coinciding with broader feminist movements and shifts in educational and labor market opportunities. However, women's entry into leadership remained minimal for decades. In the United States, it was not until 1972 that Katharine Graham became the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, a milestone that remains emblematic of the gender barriers in executive roles (Lublin, 2011). Legislative interventions such as equal opportunity laws, maternity protections, and affirmative action policies have since provided structural support for women's advancement, although with varying degrees of effectiveness across regions.

In recent decades, global awareness campaigns and gender equity movements have further promoted the inclusion of women in leadership. The introduction of gender quotas in political and corporate governance in countries such as Norway (2003), France (2011), and India (2013) represents attempts to institutionalize gender diversity (Terjesen et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these legislative efforts have often encountered cultural resistance and implementation challenges, which suggests that structural change must be accompanied by cultural transformation.

1.1.2 Current State of Gender Diversity in Organizations

Despite incremental progress, gender diversity in leadership remains an uneven achievement. Data from the World Economic Forum (2024) reveals that while women represent approximately 50% of the global workforce, they occupy less than 30% of senior leadership positions. Among Fortune 500 companies, women CEOs accounted for only 10.6% as of 2023 a historical high, yet still indicative of significant underrepresentation (Catalyst, 2023). Disparities are even more pronounced when intersected with race and ethnicity; women of color remain starkly underrepresented in top leadership roles.

Regional differences further illustrate the global imbalance. Nordic countries lead in gender diversity due to progressive gender policies and quotas. For instance, in Norway, women hold 41% of board seats due to the 2003 quota legislation (OECD, 2022). In contrast, in countries such as Japan and South Korea, female board representation remains below 10%, despite women's increasing educational attainment and workforce participation (ILO, 2023). Developing economies often face compounded barriers, including socio-cultural norms, limited access to mentorship, and institutional biases.

Within organizations, the so-called "glass ceiling" and "glass cliff" phenomenon illustrate systemic obstacles women face. The glass ceiling refers to the invisible barriers preventing women from ascending to the highest levels of leadership, while the glass cliff suggests that women are more likely to be placed in leadership roles during periods of organizational crisis setting them up for potential failure and increasing psychological strain (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

The way gender biases affect the mental health of female leaders is a subject of many variables and that can be approached differently, depending on the system of discrimination itself, the organizational structure, and how female mentality copes with challenges that lie in the work of a leader. Nevertheless, women in leadership positions still face invisible discrimination, micro aggression, and a systemic approach that has had a considerable impact on their mental health. Most commonly such problems are characterized by increased rates of anxiety, depression, imposter syndrome, and emotional burnout. The interaction of professional demands and social

conventions subjects the womenfolk to the status of considerable scrutiny, and studies are pointing out how the performance, conformity, and competence proving pressures within the male-dominant domain directly lead to the worsening mental health outcomes.

Another factor that has a substantial impact on mental health inequality among women in leadership positions is an occurrence of implicit prejudice and gender-based micro aggression in the workplace. Minor types of discrimination including the person being interrupted during meetings, the ideas being turned away, or being treated against the double standards may build up over time and may erode the self-praise and result in constant stress and psychological distress. A study explains that such workplace behaviors have even a greater financial cost among women due to the reinforced isolation and feelings of inadequacy, which, especially in leadership positions, have a certain financial cost to them (Atueyi, 2024). Women can be judged more strictly in comparison with their male counterparts, and the requirements of emotional labor and the collaborative approach to leadership can cause extra pressure, which is not often applicable to men.

1.1.3 Linking Gender Bias to Mental Health in Female Leaders

The underrepresentation of women in leadership is not merely a statistical issue but also a psychological and emotional one. Research has demonstrated that gender biases in organizational leadership structures can negatively affect the mental health of female leaders (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). These biases manifest in various forms, including tokenism, stereotype threat, micro aggressions, and the burden of representational pressure where women feel the need to represent all women in male-dominated settings (Settles et al., 2006).

Stereotypical expectations of leadership often aligned with assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness are traditionally coded as male traits. Women who exhibit these behaviors may be perceived as competent but unlikeable, while those who display traditionally feminine behaviors may be seen as likeable but less competent (Rudman & Glick, 2001). This double bind creates a persistent tension for female leaders, who must continuously negotiate between professional efficacy and social acceptance. The psychological toll of navigating such conflicting expectations can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, burnout, and diminished self-efficacy.

Moreover, isolation is a recurring theme in the lived experiences of female leaders, particularly in male-dominated industries. Being one of the few or the only women in leadership often leads to exclusion from informal networks and decision-making circles, thereby limiting access to mentorship, sponsorship, and critical organizational information (Ibarra et al., 2010). This isolation can exacerbate feelings of marginalization and negatively impact mental well-being.

1.1.4 Mental Health Outcomes and Organizational Implications

Several studies have examined the correlation between workplace gender bias and mental health outcomes. A longitudinal study by Cortina et al. (2013) revealed that women experiencing workplace incivility and gender discrimination reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depressive symptoms, and job dissatisfaction. Similarly, Berdahl and Moore (2006) found that sexual harassment—often used as a tool to assert gender hierarchies—significantly undermines women’s mental health and organizational engagement.

Female leaders are also disproportionately burdened by work-life balance expectations. Despite occupying high-stress leadership roles, they are often still expected to maintain primary caregiving responsibilities, which increases the risk of burnout and role overload (Ezzedeen et al., 2015). These mental health stressors are not isolated experiences but are structurally embedded in organizational cultures that prioritize masculine norms of leadership and undervalue relational and communal leadership traits.

Organizational consequences of these gendered mental health disparities are significant. Poor mental health among female leaders can result in higher turnover, reduced productivity, and lower organizational commitment. Moreover, it perpetuates the leadership gap by discouraging younger women from aspiring to leadership roles due to the perceived psychological costs (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016).

Another factor is the organizational culture that the female leaders find themselves that is essential in determining the mental health experiences of the leaders. Women in male dominated industries and corporate work cultures report that they are feeling marginalized or underprivileged after having reached top managing positions. Such marginalization may be implemented in terms of

restricted access to informal social contact or less opportunity to find a mentor, as well as the absence of visibility in decision-making procedures. Choi and Ko (2024) contend that such cultural dynamics may contribute to an erosion of the sense of efficacy and belonging by the executive women and have adverse consequences on their psychological health. As these barriers go unacknowledged and unsupported by institutions, several women end up working in leadership positions without anyone at their side, putting them at a higher risk of burnout and emotional exhaustion.

The one promising deductive measure against these developments is the introduction of the Women Meeting Executive Development Programs which have been more successful in enhancing both the performance results and emotional resilience of the female leaders. According to Belle (2017), these programs provide individual mentorship, group dynamic, and leadership training, which lead to the improvement of self-confidence and mental health. When organizations roll out such specific programs, not only do they embrace the notion of inclusive leadership but are also proactive in countering the psychological stress inflicted by deeply embedded gender biases. Another critical-factor contributes to the heightening of the mental-health issues of female leaders: the barriers to achieve advancement. Gender stereotypes still play their role in the process of hiring and promoting people, putting men more into the roles of natural leaders and condemning women when they exhibit the same assertive-behaviors so applauded in their male counterparts. Such biases restrict access to promotion and accrue in the repeatedly-experienced situation of not getting a promotion or getting insufficient credit, which can be extremely harmful to psychological health. Setyaningrum and Juansih (2024) also note how professional insecurity can last due to structural inequalities where such feelings in combination with expectancies are factors that make up professional insecurity that, in turn, can translate into internalized self-doubt and other symptoms of depression. Moreover, a shortage of visible-role models and mentors in the leadership position also worsens the sense of professional loneliness and predisposes to developing mental health disorders.

1.1.5 Relevance of the Study

This study addresses the intersection of gender diversity and mental health within the context of organizational leadership. While gender diversity is often framed as an issue of equity and representation, its psychological dimensions are frequently overlooked. By focusing on the mental health impact of gender biases on female leaders, this research highlights the hidden costs of structural inequality in organizational systems (Mental Health Foundation. (2022)). The study is particularly timely given growing awareness of mental health in the workplace, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global shift toward inclusive leadership models. It offers a critical perspective that bridges organizational behavior, gender studies, and occupational health. Through empirical investigation and theoretical analysis, the research aims to inform policies and practices that support both gender equity and psychological well-being in leadership.

The historical exclusion of women from leadership roles and the ongoing systemic biases that pervade organizational structures continue to affect not only female representation but also the mental health of those who do attain leadership. Despite advances in gender diversity, significant gaps remain in how these experiences are understood and addressed from a psychological standpoint. The dual burden of navigating leadership responsibilities and managing the emotional fallout of gender-based discrimination creates a mental health crisis that demands organizational, social, and academic attention (Holmvald & Sobhani, 2020). This study seeks to contribute to this conversation by critically examining how gender biases in leadership contexts impact the mental health of female leaders. By foregrounding their lived experiences and analyzing the organizational cultures that shape them, this research aims to offer actionable insights into fostering leadership environments that are both equitable and psychologically sustainable.

1.2 Problem Statement

Even with the increasing debate on gender diversity and equality in leadership positions within organisations, there still exists a major disparity of women in top leadership positions within organisations around the world. Women who do manage to occupy such roles are found to experience constant gender biases to accompany them after entering a leadership role, and these biases continue to affect throughout their career and into the extraction of their mental health. It is not just the concern regarding entry into leadership but it is also regarding maintaining presence and flourishing in such leadership positions. Nonetheless, significant sections of available literature are considerably skewed, examining the obstacles to gaining access to leadership roles such as hiring discrimination, glass ceiling effect without taking as much attention to the

persistence of psychological and emotional burdens faced by women leaders in their early lives because of the implicit gender bias latent in culture of their respective organizations (WHO, 2022).

The psychological ramifications of working in a leadership environment composed of gender-explicit expectations, scrutiny, and systemic inequalities are not well-researched. Women leaders tend to experience performance pressure, micro aggression, and absence of power networks at the workplace, making them have constant stress, anxiety, burnout, and emotional exertion. These experiences are enhanced by a non-verbalized pressure to demonstrate legitimacy and competency in settings dominated by males, also known as the so-called double bind of leadership to be defined as a punishment when women are found to be either too aggressive or too compassionate. However, the predominant theme in the academic discourse is the focus on structural access at the expense of more lasting psychological resilience and psychological costs of coping with ongoing gendered organizational processes (Krivkovich et al., 2018).

The inclusion of the mental health issues in female leaders is of grave real life consequences when ignored. Among the consequences that are most apparent, it is possible to cite the fact of a high rate of attrition among the mid-career and senior-level women. It is not that many women leave leadership to pursue other external activities like family care but as a result of the cumulative stress and emotional tiredness that is heaped on them by the organizational climate that has been hostile or unsupportive. The leaky pipeline is an excellent phenomenon that is still going on as organizations tend to lose potential contributions of women, who would have led to long-term strategic expansions and cultures of inclusiveness in leadership (Williams et al., 2016). When experienced female leaders leave an organization, a loss of institutional knowledge will occur as well as a deterioration of leadership diversity which has previously been demonstrated to facilitate more effective decision making and innovation. By not putting a particular attention on the mental health and well-being of women, an organization would not only lose them in the leadership but would also compromise the morale of all other employees. Exit of female leaders is often inspiring to the younger workers; they want to get guidance and feel they will never get it by leaving their female leaders.

Economically and operationally, the repercussions are even far-reaching. Unhealthiness of the mind in leaders, whether masculine or feminine, is usually coupled with low productivity, bad

judgment as well as high rates of absenteeism. The mental load can pile up to the point where it becomes impossible to handle among female leaders who are likely to possess more work (including mentoring junior employees or managing diversity-related efforts without institutional support) in addition to their formal job duties. This results in the disengagement process, a deterioration of performance and even chronic psychological problems in given cases, which cost not only individual progress of careers, but also the performance of organizations (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Other forms of indirect costs to organizations that occur as a result of failure to take care of mental health include loss of innovation and destabilization of ethical leadership culture.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

Research Aim: This research aims to study the psychological implications of gender biases impacting on female starters in decision roles in an organization, specifically how different forms of gender-based discrimination affect the mental health of leaders like stress, anxiety, burnout as well as depression. The study also attempts to understand the coping mechanisms used by female leaders and recommendation of organizational strategies to prevent such mental health risks.

Main Objective:

To analyze the impact of gender biases on the mental health of female leaders in organizational leadership roles.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify types of gender bias that female leaders may face.
2. To evaluate the psychological impact (feelings of stress, anxiety, burnout, depression) caused by these biases.
3. To explore coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by female leaders.
4. To suggest organizational interventions to alleviate gender bias and enhance female leader's mental health.

1.4 Research Questions

1. Which forms of gender bias are the most common that women will experience in their roles as leaders in various organizational sectors (corporate, government, non-profit)?
2. What effect does bias have on female leaders' mental health, in terms of stress, anxiety, burnout and depression?
3. In what ways do female leaders cope with mental health consequences stemming from workplace gender bias?
4. How much do organizational support systems (i.e., mentorship, inclusion policies, mental health programs) moderate the relationship between gender bias and mental health outcomes among leaders?
5. If organizations want to create an inclusive leadership environment that will protect and promote the mental wellbeing of female leaders, what should they do?

1.5 Significance of the study

The essential missing piece in the past research studies is the investigation of the psychological burden of leadership that a woman may endure in the long run, especially in the workplace environment where gender discrimination still exists. Most of the prevailing research is related to assisting women infiltrate into the leadership courses; however, they do not give much focus on what transpires later. It is the usual assumption that when women leadership is achieved, then it is no longer a major obstacle. This view is not only partial, but also threatens to obscure the fact that there are still persistent issues which are impacting the mental health of female leaders (Acker, 2006). This research is of value to the literature where it incorporates a feminist perspective of organization theory into the aspects of occupational health psychology providing a new theoretical framework through which to interpret the role of gender bias in influencing the psychological health of female leaders.

Additionally, the details regarding the subject of intersectionality that are involved in the analysis of leadership situations among women are few. Race, socioeconomic level, age, disability and sexual orientation combine with gender to create distinct and frequently replicated discrimination and marginalization experiences. As the examples, Black women or a queer woman in a leadership

position might face, the types of bias, or problems which they could encounter, would be qualitatively different compared to those, which white heterosexual women could face. Such distinctions are seldom examined under organizational research which more often than not tends to perceive the concept of women leaders as a homogeneous one (Kelan, 2014). This lack of intersectional insights helps create incomplete comprehension of the mental health complications of various populations of female leaders and constrains the creation of inclusive and targeted establishments. As a practical step, it will give organizational guidelines on how to draft HR policies aimed at minimizing gender bias and devising more mental support to women leaders. The intended outcomes of the findings focus on influencing workplace practice when incorporated into the aspect of inclusive leadership environments.

More generally, the study has policy implications as well that may benefit the changes in the regulatory frameworks via introduction of mandatory gender bias audit, that will aid in institutionalization of accountability and systemic orientation of change in the system of the organizational leadership. This study can fill these gaps as it is dedicated to the mental health of women in workplace leadership, particularly in diverse and intersectional settings. It attempts to transcend the usual gist of the gender glass ceiling at the entry level to see what happens to the psychological status and survival of women already at the helm when subjected to long term exposures of gendered prejudices.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the study

Diversity as it relates to gender and mental health is examined in this study; hence, the research aims at offering an analysis of the effect of gender biases on the mental facet of female leaders in positions of power in an organization. This study is mainly based on the business and non-business areas, where it does not take examples of politics and military leadership choices to ensure specificity and sector specific contents. Its geographic focus is Asia (India) where gender processes in the work environment are still dynamic despite the challenges due to cultural and institutional pressures. To place the situation in a more realistic point of view, there will be a comparison of other areas like Africa and Europe to have a comparison between the two areas in an attempt to

bring similarities and differences in the experiences of the female leaders in these variously different socio-cultural and economically diverse places (WHO, 2022).

This study is going to evaluate the consequence of gender biases rooted in the system and interpersonal relations like the underrepresentation in top leadership, differences in salaries, no mentorship opportunities, and the stereotype-based expectations of the role on the mental health of female leaders. Dimensions of mental health in the form of stress, burnout, self-worth, and emotional resilience will be investigated using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Through the analysis of organizational practices as well as individual accounts, the research aims at producing workable suggestions on how to increase gender inclusive leadership contexts that favor the psychological wellbeing of women leaders. Although the scope is strong, there are some limitations that stand out. Several limitations could affect the degree of sampling bias in the study, especially an over-representation of white, cisgender women, and fail to account altogether to multidimensional difficulties experienced by other female leaders. Moreover, self-reported information on mental health is relatively subjective with a possibility of inaccurate information which should be taken into mind during reporting.

1.7 Thesis Structure

The presented thesis is organized in a way that it will explore and analyze the inference between gender diversity and mental health and especially the effects of gender biases in leadership positions in organizations to mental health of female leaders. The structure will be aimed at gradually constructing the comprehension of the main research problem, underpinning it with the appropriate theoretical and empirical knowledge and finally providing evidence-based conclusions and recommendations consistent with the purpose of the research. The chapters help to build on each other and contribute to the answers of the research questions as well as the research objectives in a very integrated analysis of the same.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The introductory chapter forms the basis of the study because it gives the background, research problem, objectives, and rationale. It leads to the larger problem of the gender gaps in leadership and the systems of bias that helps create special mental health challenges to women who hold such leadership positions. The terms have also been defined and the importance of the study and research questions have been mentioned in this chapter. This section on structure of thesis is

combined with a brief overview of the theoretical framework as well as the methodological approach. In Chapter 1, it is ensured that the reader is made to appreciate the scope, relevance, and direction of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 2 is a thorough literature review by past research done in gender diversity, leadership, and mental health. One can find the positioning of the psychological experiences of women leaders in terms of the theories of role incongruity, the theory of tokenism, and the theory of social roles. The chapter reveals the reported gaps in the existing research on intersection of gender biases and mental health in leadership, in specific diverse organizational settings. Analyses of empirical studies are used to point to existing trends, including that women are underrepresented at higher positions in the company, and that gender stereotyping and acting out workplace discrimination takes a certain psychological toll. The given literature review directly contributes to the research framework and makes the focus of the study and methodological decisions legitimate.

Chapter 3: Methodology of research

Chapter three provides description of the research design methodology and ethical issues utilized in the study. It speaks about the philosophical position, qualitative and quantitative method and the reasoning of choice of female leaders to focus on in different sectors of the organization. The techniques of sampling, collecting data and process of thematic analysis are outlined in detail. The methodology chapter provides a path to follow in the research and tends to match the chosen empirical strategy with the aims of the study of unveiling subjective experiences and mental health outcomes in case of gender biases.

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter four will report and interpret the empirical survey obtained by interviewing female leaders. The most significant patterns of the data revealed by the questions (including thoughts about the presence of micro aggression, the status of leadership, application of emotional labor, as well as resilience strategies) are diagnosed and discussed. This chapter gives subtle guidance on the expressions of gender biases in the organization environment and subsequent psychosomatic effects such as stress, anxiety and burnout. The results are discussed on the basis of the theoretical frameworks presented above and this way, empirical knowledge is related to the overall academic

discussion. The chapter directly responds to the central research question and fulfills the major goal of clarifying the consequences of gender biases in leadership in terms concerning mental health of the individuals.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In Chapter 5, the results will be put in perspective in the context of the general literature and theoretic environment. The chapter discusses implications of the findings in addressing gender diversity and mental health and how they verify, refute or enlarge the present data and knowledge. It critically reflects upon systemic problems of organizational culture, institution-related power relations, and the element of psychological safety by taking into account their role in defining leadership experiences experienced by women. The research objectives are also revisited in this chapter and the extent to which they have been achieved with the help of this study is assessed.

Chapter 6 Recommendations and Conclusions

The last chapter contains conclusions and implications of the research work to practice, policy, and further research. It also provides specific advice to an organization, like setting up gender-sensitive mental health support mechanisms or encouraging inclusive leadership styles in addition to training to eliminate unconscious bias. There are limitations to the study, which have been admitted, and the promising areas of future studies are suggested to contribute to the further examination of the intricate relations between gender, gender-leadership, and mental health. Chapter 6 makes a definitive synthesis of the study and gives strength to its contribution to the study of academicians as well as practical reformation of the organizational structure of leadership. All these chapters go hand in hand together in a holistic discussion of the impacts of gender biases in leadership on the mental health of female leaders and add value to the existing literature on gender diversity, ethical leadership, and well-being in the workforce.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

FEMINIST THEORIES

The systemic and cultural roots of gender bias in the context of organizational leadership can be analyzed with the help of Feminist theories. Two dominant theories of feminism, liberal and radical feminism, are especially applicable in examining the obstacles faced by female leaders.

According to Hollerman (2025) the goal of the study is to determine how radical feminism persist gender inequalities by directly challenging patriarchal ideas and the effect of manosphere. In the study, qualitative research design was adopted involving textual analysis with feminist theoretical frameworks. This study utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodology to examine digital texts, online forums, and materials from the manosphere where gendered discourses are shaped and circulated. The findings of the study highlighted radical feminism has important tools for confronting both clear gendered inequalities, and the even more insidious emergent "manosphere", which vindicates a rejection of feminist action, and, in some instances, legitimizes violence toward feminists. Radical feminism provides us with a materially consequential pushback against explicit, structural, and institutionalized power, through their attempts to elicit social change in substantive alternatives to behavioral methods on social and organizational levels.

The research carried out by Garland-Thomson (2020), the idea of incorporating disability studies into feminist theory expands its territory regarding the intersection of bodies, identities, and power. According to her, just like gender, disability is a socially constructed condition in the context of norms that favor certain bodies and rest on those, as marginal bodies. The article discloses the parallels of ableism and sexism that may create exclusion, prejudice, and structural obstacles in favor of disparities in leadership, work, and representation. Feminist theory is more accommodating and confronts the normative premises of productivity, autonomy, and competence instead of making disability the main topic of discussion. It is in this way that diversity, intersectionality, and justice in feminist research and practice are appreciated more.

Fotaki & Pullen (2024) highlight the importance of feminist theories in sealing the gap in organizational research by challenging patriarchal assumptions and revealing their role in shaping

the issue of power at the workplace. They argue that feminist scholarship is a sort of activism that seeks to transform organizations into more accommodating environments, besides condemning the gender inequality problem. As it is shown in the article, feminist perspectives were upsetting the understanding of leadership, meritocracy, and neutrality as presumed to be standard, yet care, relationality, and ethics are central to organizational life. Their findings indicate that there should be a relationship between academic practices and activism to oppose systemic prejudices, nurture equity, and motivate organizational change to advance social justice.

In a report published in 2021, Zerbe et al. highlighted that transnational feminist theory is considered a framework involving western-centric perspectives tend in analyzing how globalization, cultural aspects, and colonial histories shape lives of women. The findings indicated that feminist practices consider factors such as geopolitics, migration, class and race to avoid inequalities. The article discusses an understanding that is culturally aware and overcomes national boundaries. Among other things, the authors propose that transnational feminism resists global narratives of gender oppression and values women's experiences to enact inclusivity, justice, and empowerment.

Benstead (2021) argues that patriarchy is important to the study of politics or organizations, however it is theorized poorly. Benstead ends the article with the argument that feminist theory was necessary to think about patriarchy not only as the individual domination of men over women, but rather as an organization of power that creates institutions, norms, and relations of power. Benstead argues that it is also necessary to develop "accurate and reliable measures of patriarchy" to understand the concrete manifestations of patriarchy in each cultural context, especially thinking about the Mediterranean. Benstead concludes the study with a salient finding, the Foucaultin three-part intersections of the patriarchal state relation in terms of women's political participation, leadership positions, and representation. Thus, this study builds upon feminist scholarship and develops tools and frameworks to address issues of patriarchal gender inequality, through developing measures and a specific understand of patriarchy.

Baehr (2017) presented another perspective of liberal feminism by emphasizing its dynamic nature and relevance to current gender inequities. Baehr argues that liberal feminism should not be taken

as limiting itself to an exclusive focus on legal rights and equal opportunity; as the situation shows more complexity when it critiques more subtle forms across cultural, social, and institutional lines of disadvantages women have experienced to limit their freedom than it does when it only focuses on legal rights and equal opportunity. Moreover, Baehr has argued that liberal feminism as a framework can invoke intersectionality, autonomy, and justice, which can aid in it being more socially responsive to the experiences of different women. In the end, the implications suggest that liberal feminism can engage with a broad account that engages both forms of overt discrimination and more difficultly detected forms of structural bias, while also engaging in participatory and equitable inclusion in private and public life.

Law (2019) stated that liberal feminism represents an important vehicle for advancing women's rights in legal and institutional contexts. In the end, the article deprives discussion of the limitation of liberal feminism as a vehicle for addressing systemic obstacles to women's participation in education, employment, and leadership, focusing on egalitarianism, individual rights, and anti-discrimination provisions. Despite the authors conclusion that liberal feminism is limited, Law argues that if someone is critiquing liberal feminism as limited, they simply do not understand the deep reach liberal feminism has achieved in terms of successful legal reform. Conclusively, liberal feminism is not "the answer" all by itself, but it is part of the solution with effective tools to address gender bias, ensure equal treatment, evolve slowly, but surely ongoing social change occurs, and deliver useful legal arrangements related to legalism in democracy.

Cottais & Felner (2021) express liberal feminism - as a form of feminist thought, and this form of feminism is based on equality of rights and individual agency, and it prioritizes dismantling systemic barriers that marginalize women. They argue that liberal feminism has, at its best, opened pathways to social change through policy and legislative reform; through increased access to educational opportunity, and increased participation in politics, as well as equitable access in other sites of employment. They also identify some limitations to liberal feminism because it does not address systemic and cultural foundations of patriarchy in depth. In the end, the findings highlighted that liberal feminism is still an important phenomenon for social equity because it is not just about making changes - this process develops a space and role for women leadership itself to exist today in society.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The primary goal of Liu et al. (2021) is to determine the effectiveness of interventions designed in the reduction of stereotype threat across different settings. In the research, meta-analytic method was undertaken to analyze the effectiveness of stereotype threat interventions among different studies. Quantitative research approach was adopted to determine coded study features, sample sizes, outcome measures, and intervention types. Further, statistical techniques were adopted to determine effect sizes and assessing intervention efficacy. The findings of the research highlighted that when provided with an improved organizational or educational space, a multi-strategy approach is more effective than a single approach in the first place. In summary, the review states we can protect against stereotype threat when enter tracked high stakes contexts (academic, leadership etc), either feeling confident enough to participate in those situations, reducing psychological threats for the participant, and otherwise support equitable participation.

Brooks (2023) objective is to defining the stereotype threat concept and evaluating its importance among educational setting and professional. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how awareness of negative stereotypes can adversely affect performance, increase anxiety, and widen gaps in outcomes for disadvantaged groups. The methodology consists of an examination of theoretical frameworks, a recap of empirical findings from previous research, and the use of the research to settings, specifically, medical education and professional performance. Brooks, in her study, uses evidence from several studies to gain a wide understanding of stereotype threat, as well as the implementation of stereotype threat in education and other contexts. The article demonstrates that stereotype threat not only exists in academic contexts, but occurs in professional and clinical contexts which also have implications for decision-making with an increased level of stress for participants. The research identifies the specific relevance of this work to marginalized populations and detailed the ways in which awareness of a negative stereotype creates anxiety and cognitive overload.

The authors of the paper “Job demands–resources theory: Ten years later by Baker et al. (2023) have examined the Job-Demand Resources theory and its widespread adoption in organizational psychology. The research aims to determine empirical evidence, refining model, and discussing job resources and demand interact to affect employee well-being, performance, and motivation. In the study conceptual and integrative review approach was undertaken. The research gained

perspectives from scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, meta-analytic studies, and empirical studies which were carried out within organizations and cultures. The findings indicated high job demands workload, emotional demands, and role conflict are predicted to lead to stress and burnout, whereas job resources - autonomy, support, and righthition - promote engagement and resilience. The research explores the flex future of the theory across industry and culture, and its usefulness in creating interventions to reduce demands and increase resources. Overall, the results speak to and support speculation about resource insufficiencies as an effective means of preventing burnout and building sustainable organizational performance.

The research carried out by Tummers & Bakker (2021) goal is to determine the role of different styles of leadership in shaping demand of job and job resources, affecting employee motivation, performance, and well-being. In the research, systematic review method was adopted to analyze relation between leadership and Job-Demand Resources theory. The research conducted a systematic review of the scientific literature with relevant literature being identified and assessed depending on the records targeting pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria for relevance and quality. The authors stated that supportive and transformational leadership styles offer job resources (e.g., autonomy, recognition, and development opportunities) that can service demands at work. On the contrary, unsupportive or authoritarian leadership increases demands, while decreasing job resources. Consequently, it is analyzed that leadership practices affect motivation, resilience, and well-being at work, reinforcing the need to invest into leadership development for sustainability within the organization.

2.2 Typology of Gender Biases

2.2.1 Explicit vs. Implicit Bias

Daumeyer et al. (2019) discussed that the study's objective is to analyze how people perceive and respond to discrimination. The purpose of the research is to evaluate whether framing discrimination as unconscious, unintentional processes (implicit bias) as opposed to conscious prejudice (explicit bias) would influence decisions about responsibility, accountability, and willingness to take corrective action. In the study, experimental research method was adopted to determine how individuals respond to discrimination attributed to implicit versus explicit bias.

Quantitative data were examined using statistical techniques (including ANOVA) to test for differences across conditions. This approach enabled causal inference regarding the psychological effects of bias attribution. The findings indicated that discrimination described in an implicit bias frame or descriptive language is perceived as less intentional and therefore less blameworthy, resulting in less accountability pressure and systems change. Discrimination described in an explicit bias frame or more moralistic language would receive a heightened reaction of moral outrage and action pressure. The findings also suggest that focusing too heavily on implicit bias may promote a framing of discrimination that minimizes structural racism and sexism, including decreased motivation to resolve long-standing inequities.

Manjunatha et al. (2019) investigate and covering explicit biases presented in Visual Question Answering models. The goal of the research is to determine how these AI systems learn and replicate human-like stereotypes and prejudices involved in the training data. Further, the goal is to analyze methods for bias detection and mitigation ensuring reliable VQA model performance and equitable. In the study, computational method was adopted to analyze racial biases and explicit gender in VQA model. The findings of the study stated that VQA models exhibiting significant explicit biases that mirror and reinforce societal stereotypes. The research revealed that AI systems rely on biased correlations between textual inputs, and visual features lead to skewed outputs. The findings indicated that explicit bias is important for developing accurate, ethical and socially responsible AI systems.

Donald et al. (2020) discussed objective to determine implicit biases affecting judicial decision-making and making unconscious prejudices more explicit within legal contexts. The aim is to promote gender equity, justice and transparency in the legal system confronting hidden biases. In the study, empirical methodology was adopted to determine implicit bias and implications within judicial and organizational contexts. In the study, experimental evidence with case law analysis was analyzed to determine how implicit bias affect decision-making. The findings highlighted that implicit bias shapes decision making operating unconsciously among well-intentioned individuals in positions of authority. It is analyzed that implicit bias is the first step toward mitigating its influence but only awareness is not sufficient.

Zhao et al.'s (2025) goal is to investigate how social biases manifest and differentiate between explicit and implicit biases in large language models. The aim of the research is to examine whether models can recognize, consider, and potentially lessen their own biased outputs through self-reflection mechanisms. In the study, mixed method research was adopted analyzing measurement of bias by leveraging self-reflection as a tool. In the research, multiple state-of-the-art was chosen to ensure diversity and generalizability in evaluation of biasness. In quantitative method, outputs were coded and statistically analyzed to do comparison between implicit and explicit bias. Qualitative evaluation carried out to validate bias detection, ensuring interpretive accuracy. The research examines the extent to which large language models (LLMs) reflect explicit and implicit social biases through self-reflection methods. They demonstrate that explicit biases may be identified and solved at times through alignment strategies, whereas implicit biases are deeply rooted in model training data and surface implicitly. The research demonstrates that LLMs may mirror stereotypes inadvertently, validating social injustices.

The goal of Payne & Hannay's (2021) research is to determine implicit bias not be viewed solely as an individual psychological phenomenon reflecting broader systemic racism. The aim of the research is to develop link cognitive processes of bias with structural and institutional inequities indicating societal context and reinforcing prejudices. In the study, review-based and conceptual method was adopted to determine how implicit bias is measured and connected systemic racism. The research reviewed the use of Implicit Association Tests (IATs) and related measures capturing unconscious biases while also evaluating limitations. The findings stated implicit bias is not merely an individual cognitive reflecting broader systemic racism embedding social structures. The research indicated that implicit associations arise from cultural environments that normalize stereotypes and discriminatory practices. The research indicated such biases reinforce inequities in decision-making, leadership evaluations, and institutional outcomes.

2.2.2 Intersectional Biases

The goal of Subramanian et al. (2021) is to determine the effectiveness of computational debiasing techniques in addressing intersectional biases emerging the multiple identity categories including race, gender, and ethnicity considering natural language processing models. The research aim in assessing whether current methods adequately mitigate compounded harms faced

by marginalized groups. In the study, experimental method was adopted to determine computational debiasing techniques for addressing intersectional biases in natural processing systems. Quantitative approach was adopted using bias-specific metrics alongside standard NLP performance measures assessing trade-offs between accuracy and fairness. The methodology combining rigorous dataset design, comparative analysis, and algorithmic testing systematically measuring the effectiveness of interventions. The findings stated that existing debiasing methods can reduce certain single-axis biases often fall short addressing compounded intersectional biases affecting women color. The research indicated complexity of detecting and correcting biases considering the need for robust models.

The authors of the paper “Gender, race, and intersectional bias in resume screening via language model retrieval” by Wilson & Caliskan (2024) have investigated how gender, race and intersectional biases manifest in resume screening using language model retrieval systems. The research aims in analyzing AI-driven recruitment tools replicate amplifying existing societal biases, disadvantaging women, and racial minorities. The research focuses on systematic inequities in automated hiring processes. In the study, empirical methodology is to investigate intersectional bias in resuming language model retrieval systems. The findings of the study stated that large-scale natural language processing (NLP) on ranking and résumé retrieval in recruitment simulations. Statistical methods were employed by the authors to measure variations in retrieval outcomes, calculating systematic biases. This research method connected experimental design, algorithmic auditing, and measures of fairness to measure AI-driven recruitment's entrenchment of intersectional discrimination.

The research carried out by Kim et al. (2020) objective is to examine how intersectional biases are manifested in hate speech and abusive language datasets and highlight the threat these biases pose to machine learning models. The study aims to uncover whether marginalized communities particularly along the dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality are overrepresented or mislabeled in a biased manner, leading to discriminatory algorithmic outcomes. In the study, mixed research method was adopted to determine intersectional bias in speech and abusive language datasets. Methodology involves collecting and analyzing widely used annotated datasets followed computational assessments detecting biases and intersectional categories. The findings of the study are to how hate speech and abusive language datasets often reproducing intersectional biases,

mainly against women and LGBTQ communities. Bias undermines the fairness and reliability of machine learning models trained on such data, discrimination in automated systems. The research discussed the need for ethical AI practices reducing systemic bias and protecting communities from harm.

Boxer et al. (2023) goal is to develop methods systematically detecting and addressing intersectional biases in predictive models. The goal is to designing auditing frameworks beyond single-axis analyses of bias and capturing identities create compounded disadvantages. In the study, methodological framework emphasized on auditing predictive models for intersectional biases using statistical and computational techniques. The findings of the research are to determine predictive models perpetuate intersectional biases affecting marginalized groups overlapping identities such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

2.3 Mental Health Outcomes

The relationship between gender biases in leadership roles and the mental health of female leaders has been the subject of increasing academic interest. Leadership is often idealized as a position of empowerment, but evidence indicates that for women the experience is complicated by structural inequalities, persistent stereotypes, and unique psychosocial burdens. This section critically reviews the existing literature with attention to both quantitative findings on burnout rates and qualitative insights on imposter syndrome, providing a multi-dimensional perspective on the mental health consequences of gendered organizational leadership.

Quantitative studies offer important but incomplete understandings of how female leaders experience mental health outcomes. Calitz (2022) examined the prevalence of stress and burnout in women occupying leadership positions and found significantly higher rates than those observed in male counterparts. The strength of this contribution lies in its methodological rigor, including the use of validated scales and a diverse sample. However, the analysis risks presenting women as inherently more vulnerable without sufficiently accounting for the structural constraints that exacerbate stress. By focusing largely on individual responses to organizational demands, the study may inadvertently shift responsibility onto women rather than the gendered systems that produce inequitable workloads and expectations.

Similarly, White (2021) provided quantitative evidence linking leadership roles to high levels of emotional exhaustion among women. While the study illuminates the scale of the problem, its cross-sectional design limits conclusions about causality. The data suggest that gender bias, double standards, and increased scrutiny play a role in shaping burnout, but these factors were treated as peripheral rather than central variables. This reveals a broader issue in the quantitative tradition: the tendency to measure mental health symptoms without embedding them in a critical gender analysis.

More recent evidence from Nunes and Palma-Moreira (2024) attempts to bridge this gap by situating female leaders' burnout within structural inequalities. Their research highlights that women leaders are more likely to encounter role overload, stemming from both professional expectations and domestic responsibilities. The study offers a critical advancement by acknowledging the intersection between organizational culture and societal norms. However, while the authors emphasize the systemic origins of female leaders' distress, their reliance on survey data limits the ability to capture nuanced personal experiences. This demonstrates the need to complement quantitative evidence with qualitative narratives that reveal the lived realities of women leaders.

In addition to burnout, other mental health outcomes have been studied through quantitative designs. Wang and Chen (2022) explored the psychological toll of persistent gender bias in leadership contexts, identifying strong associations with anxiety and depressive symptoms. Their findings are valuable for broadening the discussion beyond burnout to a wider set of outcomes. Yet the study may fall into reductionism by attributing women's mental health struggles exclusively to gender bias without considering mediating factors such as coping strategies, organizational support, or individual resilience. This highlights a challenge for researchers: the balance between acknowledging structural injustice and avoiding a deterministic portrayal of women as perpetual victims.

Babatope et al. (2023) deepened the understanding of gendered mental health outcomes by analyzing workplace discrimination and its relationship with burnout. They found that women

leaders who reported higher exposure to gendered microaggressions were significantly more likely to experience chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. This study contributes by highlighting the cumulative impact of subtle daily interactions rather than focusing solely on overt discrimination. Nevertheless, the focus on correlation again leaves questions of causality unresolved. Furthermore, while the findings suggest that discrimination plays a critical role, they do not fully address the diversity among women leaders, such as differences shaped by race, age, or cultural context.

The psychological strain of leadership under gender bias is not only visible in quantitative measures but is also powerfully articulated in qualitative research. Edú-Valsania et al. (2022) investigated women's narratives of imposter syndrome in leadership roles. The study illuminated how women often internalize external gendered doubts, leading to chronic self-questioning and diminished confidence. The strength of this contribution lies in its attention to subjective experience, revealing how imposter feelings are sustained by organizational cultures that undervalue women's competence. However, the study risks overemphasizing the psychological dimension without fully interrogating how systemic discrimination produces the conditions for imposter syndrome. This reflects a broader critique of qualitative research that tends to individualize structural issues.

Haar et al. (2021) provided further qualitative insight into how female leaders experience conflict between professional and personal roles, leading to feelings of inadequacy and alienation. Their findings reinforce the idea that organizational cultures often reward traditionally masculine leadership behaviors, leaving women who adopt alternative approaches vulnerable to criticism. The value of this study is in showing the relational dimension of imposter syndrome, which is not solely an internal cognitive distortion but a reflection of external invalidation. Still, the study is limited by its relatively small sample, which raises questions about generalizability.

Alimuddin et al. (2023) added another layer by examining narratives of women leaders who experienced burnout alongside imposter feelings. They argue that these phenomena are mutually reinforcing, with burnout intensifying self-doubt and imposter syndrome increasing susceptibility to stress. This integrative perspective is particularly useful because it avoids treating mental health outcomes in isolation. Nonetheless, the study could be critiqued for its lack of intersectional

analysis, as it treats women leaders as a homogenous group without addressing how class, ethnicity, or other identities may shape experiences of burnout and imposter syndrome.

The comparison between quantitative and qualitative traditions reveals important tensions in the literature. Quantitative studies such as those by Calitz (2022), White (2021), and Nunes and Palma-Moreira (2024) provide critical evidence of elevated burnout rates among women leaders, but they often fail to capture the complex social processes that produce these outcomes. On the other hand, qualitative studies like those of Edú-Valsania et al. (2022) and Haar et al. (2021) offer rich accounts of imposter syndrome and lived experience but may overgeneralize from small samples and sometimes focus too narrowly on individual narratives. Both traditions risk reproducing problematic assumptions if they do not integrate structural critiques of gender bias into their frameworks.

Critically, the literature demonstrates that burnout and imposter syndrome are not merely personal shortcomings but are rooted in organizational cultures that privilege male leadership norms. The strengths of the studies reviewed lie in their consistent identification of higher stress levels among women leaders, their recognition of imposter syndrome as a widespread issue, and their acknowledgment that discrimination contributes to mental health disparities. However, the limitations are equally significant: overemphasis on symptom measurement without causality, lack of intersectional analysis, limited qualitative generalizability, and insufficient attention to systemic transformation.

The synthesis of these perspectives underscores that mental health outcomes among women leaders cannot be addressed without tackling the systemic roots of gender bias in organizational leadership. Supportive interventions must move beyond resilience training or individual coping strategies to encompass structural reforms, such as equitable promotion practices, inclusive leadership cultures, and organizational accountability for discriminatory behaviors. Only through such changes can the cycle of burnout and imposter syndrome be disrupted.

2.4 Resilience Strategies

The resilience of female leaders in organizational contexts has become a critical focus of contemporary leadership and gender research. Women in leadership are often confronted with structural and cultural barriers that exacerbate stress and mental health challenges, making resilience not only a personal necessity but also an organizational imperative. This section critically reviews both individual and organizational-level strategies identified in the literature, examining their effectiveness, limitations, and implications for addressing the impact of gender bias in leadership roles.

At the individual level, cognitive reframing has been highlighted as a key resilience strategy. Ohue and Menta (2024) explored how women leaders reframe challenges stemming from gender bias by interpreting them as opportunities for growth rather than as evidence of inadequacy. This reframing process allows female leaders to mitigate the psychological toll of discrimination and to sustain performance despite adversity. A strength of this research is its focus on women's agency, showing that resilience can be cultivated through intentional mental practices. However, a critical limitation is the risk of overemphasizing personal coping while ignoring the structural inequities that necessitate such strategies in the first place. By framing resilience as an individual responsibility, organizations may absolve themselves from addressing systemic bias.

Similarly, Prior et al. (2021) examined the use of boundary-setting as a personal resilience mechanism among women in demanding leadership roles. Their study found that women leaders who clearly defined their professional and personal boundaries reported lower levels of burnout and higher satisfaction. The positive implication here is that women can protect their well-being by resisting overextension and managing competing demands. Yet this approach also reveals a tension: boundary-setting is often penalized in organizations that equate constant availability with commitment. In gendered contexts, women who assert boundaries may be judged as less dedicated than men, thereby reproducing the very biases they are attempting to resist. This underscores the paradox that resilience strategies which benefit mental health can simultaneously reinforce career vulnerabilities.

Shields et al. (2023) contributed further insights into cognitive strategies by investigating how women leaders confront imposter syndrome through deliberate affirmations of competence and by

seeking feedback from trusted allies. The study highlighted the importance of internal dialogue in counteracting external gender bias. Its strength lies in recognizing that imposter feelings are not fixed traits but dynamic states that can be managed through resilience practices. Nonetheless, the study does not fully account for the cumulative effects of systemic bias. Self-affirmation may counteract moments of doubt but cannot neutralize structural patterns that continuously devalue women's leadership. This raises a critical question: how effective can individual resilience be when organizational cultures remain inequitable.

While individual strategies emphasize personal agency, organizational-level resilience approaches aim to reshape the context in which female leaders operate. Chirico and Rizzo (2024) critically examined the distinction between mentorship and sponsorship as support mechanisms. They argued that mentorship, while valuable for providing guidance, often fails to disrupt gendered barriers to advancement because it focuses on advice rather than active advocacy. Sponsorship, by contrast, involves senior leaders leveraging their influence to create tangible opportunities for women. This perspective is powerful because it reframes resilience as not only an individual capacity but also as something enabled by structural support. However, the reliance on sponsors can be problematic if organizations do not ensure equitable access. In male-dominated leadership contexts, women may be systematically excluded from sponsorship networks, leaving the intervention uneven in practice.

Balinda (2023) reinforced this critique by showing that sponsorship significantly improves women leaders' career resilience by enhancing visibility and access to critical opportunities. Yet the study also noted that sponsorship often depends on informal networks, which are shaped by gendered dynamics that disadvantage women. The strength of Balinda's work lies in exposing this contradiction: the most effective organizational support mechanism is also one of the least accessible to women. Without institutional policies that formalize and democratize sponsorship, the practice risks perpetuating exclusivity rather than overcoming bias.

Khammissa et al. (2022) examined organizational initiatives designed to foster resilience through structural reforms, such as inclusive leadership training and work-life balance policies. Their findings suggest that organizations that proactively implement such measures reduce the mental

health burdens on women leaders and enhance retention. The advantage of this research is its recognition that resilience must be supported at the systemic level. However, the study can be critiqued for its reliance on self-reported organizational practices, which may not always reflect actual implementation. There is a danger of overstating the effectiveness of policies that exist more in rhetoric than in lived practice.

Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) extended this discussion by emphasizing that organizational resilience strategies must go beyond surface-level diversity initiatives. They argued that symbolic gestures, such as diversity statements or token appointments, do little to support women leaders unless accompanied by substantive power redistribution. Their work is valuable for its critical lens, highlighting how organizations often adopt performative inclusion practices that fail to address deep-seated gender bias. However, their critique raises further questions: if organizations resist redistributing power, to what extent can resilience strategies at the individual or organizational level truly be transformative.

Ayele and Barchard (2024) contributed a nuanced perspective by exploring how women leaders integrate both individual and organizational strategies in their resilience repertoires. They found that women who combined cognitive reframing and boundary-setting with organizational support mechanisms such as sponsorship and flexible work arrangements reported the highest levels of resilience. This integrated approach underscores the interdependence of individual agency and structural support. The strength of this study is its recognition that resilience is not a binary of personal versus organizational responsibility but rather an ecosystem of interacting strategies. Nevertheless, the study could be critiqued for not adequately considering differences among women leaders. Intersectional factors such as race and socioeconomic background may shape access to organizational support and influence the effectiveness of individual strategies.

Taken together, these studies reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape of resilience strategies for female leaders. On the one hand, individual-level approaches such as cognitive reframing, boundary-setting, and self-affirmation provide women with tools to navigate the psychological strain of gender bias. On the other hand, these approaches can inadvertently reinforce a neoliberal narrative of personal responsibility that obscures systemic inequities. On the

organizational side, sponsorship and inclusive policies offer more structural pathways to resilience, but they are limited by accessibility, tokenism, and uneven implementation.

The critical synthesis of this literature highlights three key tensions. First, there is the paradox of empowerment versus burden: while individual resilience strategies empower women to sustain leadership roles, they simultaneously burden women with the responsibility to adapt to biased environments. Second, there is the contradiction of access: sponsorship and structural reforms are theoretically powerful but practically constrained by gendered exclusion and performative implementation. Third, there is the issue of intersectionality: most studies treat women leaders as a homogenous category, overlooking how resilience strategies may function differently across diverse identities and contexts.

Despite these limitations, the reviewed literature makes important contributions. Ohue and Menta (2024) and Shields et al. (2023) demonstrate that women leaders are not passive victims but active agents employing cognitive strategies to protect their mental health. Prior et al. (2021) and Ayele and Barchard (2024) illustrate that boundary-setting and integrative strategies can sustain well-being when combined with organizational support. Chirico and Rizzo (2024) and Balinda (2023) challenge the adequacy of mentorship, advocating for sponsorship as a more transformative intervention. Khammissa et al. (2022) and Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) push organizations to move beyond symbolic reforms toward substantive cultural change.

The overarching implication is clear: resilience strategies for female leaders must be understood as both personal practices and organizational commitments. Focusing solely on one dimension risks perpetuating inequality. True resilience requires organizations to dismantle the gendered structures that necessitate coping strategies in the first place while supporting women leaders in developing tools to sustain their mental health and effectiveness. Without systemic transformation, resilience risks becoming a survival mechanism rather than a pathway to equitable leadership.

2.5 Organizational Interventions

The question of how organizations can address gender biases in leadership remains highly debated, and interventions such as policy reforms have emerged as central strategies. Vivek (2022)

emphasizes that policy effectiveness depends not only on design but also on enforcement. Many organizations adopt gender inclusion policies to show progressiveness, yet these are sometimes symbolic rather than practical. Women aspiring to leadership often report that while policies exist on paper, the translation into promotion practices remains inconsistent. In some contexts, policy visibility benefits organizational reputation more than women's career advancement. This suggests a tension between the symbolic and substantive dimensions of policy, raising concerns about whether policy adoption alone can dismantle ingrained biases.

Kelloway et al. (2023) extend this argument by pointing to the importance of workplace climate in making policies truly effective. They argue that interventions which appear well designed fail when leadership cultures are not supportive. This perspective underscores the paradox in which female leaders are often evaluated within structures that were never designed to accommodate their advancement. Critical reflection highlights that while some organizations are eager to implement diversity frameworks, others merely integrate them as compliance mechanisms, leaving women leaders exposed to subtle exclusion. This reinforces the notion that effectiveness cannot be separated from organizational commitment.

Fath et al. (2023) take a more optimistic view by demonstrating that inclusive organizational policies can gradually reduce gender bias in leadership trajectories. Their analysis shows that over time, targeted initiatives such as sponsorship programs and mentoring networks help women overcome systemic disadvantages. However, they caution that outcomes vary significantly across industries. In male dominated sectors such as finance, policies often encounter resistance or are implemented superficially. In comparison, more innovative sectors such as technology may experiment with flexible structures that better accommodate women's leadership pathways. This nuanced perspective reveals both the promise and limitations of policy interventions across contexts.

Greenwood and Anas (2023) offer a critical lens by questioning whether policy interventions unintentionally reinforce the very biases they aim to eliminate. They argue that labeling initiatives as "female leadership interventions" can re-inscribe difference and position women as an exception rather than as equals. This critique challenges the assumption that more policy always

equals more progress. For many women in leadership roles, being placed under a gender specific initiative creates additional scrutiny rather than leveling the playing field. Their work pushes the discussion beyond policy effectiveness to interrogate how the framing of interventions shapes organizational cultures and power relations.

Blind recruitment has been promoted as a strategy to reduce bias in promotions and leadership appointments. Vivek and Krupskyi (2024) argue that blind recruitment processes remove identifiers such as gender, thereby ensuring that female candidates are evaluated on merit. This can create new pathways for women into leadership by neutralizing subjective assessments that often disadvantage them. Yet Bondar et al. (2022) highlight that blind recruitment, while promising, is not a panacea. They note that structural gender biases often reappear after recruitment, during evaluation and promotion stages. Female leaders may be hired in greater numbers, but they continue to face cultural barriers once inside organizations. This reveals the partial rather than comprehensive effectiveness of blind recruitment.

Karimi and Khawaja (2024) add a comparative perspective by examining how blind recruitment works differently in varying cultural contexts. In some regions, organizations embrace it as a fairness mechanism, while in others it encounters resistance due to entrenched traditional views on gender roles. For female leaders, this means that blind recruitment can sometimes provide initial entry but does not guarantee sustainable advancement. The critical point here is that structural transformation requires deeper cultural shifts, not just procedural neutrality.

The debate on organizational interventions extends beyond recruitment to include workplace wellbeing. Wu et al. (2021) explore mental health days as an intervention that can indirectly address gender biases by normalizing care responsibilities and reducing stigma around stress management. Their study shows that female leaders often experience disproportionate work family conflicts, and mental health days can provide vital flexibility. However, they note that the cultural acceptance of such interventions differs significantly across sectors.

Vivek (2022) and Fath et al. (2023) both observe that in technology sectors mental health interventions are more readily integrated due to a culture of innovation and openness. By contrast,

in finance sectors mental health days are sometimes perceived as weaknesses that undermine professional credibility. For female leaders, this sectoral difference is particularly critical since they are already scrutinized more heavily than male peers. Taking mental health days may risk reinforcing stereotypes that women are less resilient, even as the same policy is praised as progressive in other industries. This highlights the paradox of wellbeing interventions: they can empower women in some contexts but inadvertently stigmatize them in others.

2.6 Research Gap

The reviewed literature highlights that gender biases in leadership roles significantly affect the mental health of female leaders, yet important gaps remain. Quantitative studies such as those by Calitz (2022) and White (2021) document elevated burnout and stress among women leaders, but their cross-sectional designs limit causal insights and often present women as inherently more vulnerable without situating these outcomes in structural inequities. Although Nunes and Palma-Moreira (2024) and Wang and Chen (2022) acknowledge systemic factors, their reliance on survey methods restricts the depth of personal narratives. Qualitative research, including Edú-Valsania et al. (2022) and Haar et al. (2021), provides valuable accounts of imposter syndrome and role conflict, yet these studies are constrained by small samples and limited generalizability.

While resilience strategies have been examined, studies such as Ohue and Menta (2024), Prior et al. (2021), and Shields et al. (2023) emphasize individual coping at the expense of addressing structural inequities. Organizational perspectives from Chirico and Rizzo (2024), Balinda (2023), Khammissa et al. (2022), and Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) highlight sponsorship and inclusive policies, but issues of accessibility, performativity, and uneven implementation persist. Similarly, interventions like blind recruitment and mental health days (Vivek 2022; Wu et al. 2021; Karimi and Khawaja 2024) reveal contextual benefits but also unintended consequences.

Therefore, a clear research gap exists in integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to capture both systemic and interpersonal gender biases, measuring varied mental health outcomes, cataloging adaptive strategies across contexts, and proposing evidence-based structural reforms that move beyond symbolic compliance.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

Research paradigms can be grouped into several main frameworks, each based on different philosophical beliefs. Positivism is one of the most well-known paradigms. It holds that reality is objective, measurable, and governed by natural laws. Researchers who follow this approach assume that phenomena exist independently of human awareness and can be observed, counted, and studied using empirical methods, Azer, J., & Alexander, M. (2018). In positivism, the focus is on objectivity, neutrality, and keeping the researcher separate from the subject, which aims to create findings that can be generalized and repeated.

Positivist research typically uses quantitative methods, such as surveys, experiments, and statistical analysis. This reflects the paradigm's emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships, predictions, and hypothesis testing, Azer, J., & Alexander, M. (2020). In organizational and social research, positivist paradigms allow academics to identify patterns, correlations, and impacts accurately. This leads to evidence-based suggestions for policy and practice. For instance, studies that look at how leadership styles affect employee productivity often use a positivist approach, employing standardized tools and statistical models to reveal relationships between different factors. In contrast to positivism, interpretivism, also known as constructivism, challenges the idea of a single, objective reality.

It highlights the subjective and socially constructed nature of knowledge. Researchers who embrace interpretivism argue that reality is shaped through human experiences, interactions, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, it's important to consider individuals' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations. From an epistemological point of view, interpretivism suggests that knowledge cannot be separated from its context and that the researcher's involvement with participants is an active and reflective process, Azer, J. (2018). Interpretivist research generally relies on qualitative techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, ethnography, case studies, and participant observation, to capture detailed insights into lived experiences and social phenomena.

In organizational studies, adopting an interpretivist paradigm leads to a deeper understanding of complex concepts like organizational culture, leadership perception, employee motivation, and workplace interactions. It recognizes that these issues are influenced by context, experience, and the ways people make meaning, Baggio, R., & Mariani, M. (2019). By focusing on depth instead of generalization, interpretivist research offers valuable insights into human behavior, decision-making, and the socio-cultural aspects of organizations. Critical theory is another significant research paradigm. It focuses on power, inequality, and social change. Grounded in Marxist philosophy and expanded through modern social theories, critical theory questions the status quo. It investigates how social, economic, and political structures maintain oppression, marginalization, and inequality.

Critical theorists view reality as shaped by structural forces and power dynamics, with social phenomena reflecting historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. They see knowledge as a tool for understanding society and a means for empowerment. This requires researchers to analyze social structures critically and advocate for transformative change. Methodologically, critical research often combines qualitative and participatory approaches, such as action research, critical ethnography, and case studies. This helps researchers engage with participants as co-creators of knowledge and as agents of change. In applied organizational research, critical theory offers a framework for examining systemic biases, such as gender inequality, unfair leadership practices, wage disparities, and organizational hierarchies.

It provides pathways to develop inclusive policies and practices that encourage fairness, equity, and social justice. Pragmatism is a more adaptable and outcome-focused paradigm. It emphasizes applying research to real-world problems, moving beyond the strict divisions between positivism and interpretivism, Hwang, K. (2019).

Pragmatist researchers take a pluralistic approach, choosing methods and theories based on their ability to address research questions and create useful insights. Pragmatism suggests that reality is not fixed or completely subjective; it is shaped by experience, context, and consequences, Corry, M., Porter, S., & McKenna, H. (2019). In terms of knowledge, pragmatism evaluates its usefulness, effectiveness, and capacity to lead to meaningful outcomes. Methodologically, pragmatism often uses mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a thorough understanding of complex issues.

In organizational research, pragmatism allows scholars to explore multifaceted problems like innovation adoption, change management, or leadership effectiveness using various data sources and analytical tools. By focusing on problem-solving and practical relevance, the pragmatic framework connects theory with practice, ensuring research outcomes have real implications for organizational decision-making and policy development, Khoo-Lattimore, C., Mura, P., & Yung, R. (2019). The choice of research paradigm significantly impacts the research design, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and interpretation of results. A paradigm provides the philosophical foundation that shapes the choice of suitable methodologies and tools, ensuring that research is coherent and consistent with its underlying beliefs. For example, a study on the effect of organizational culture on employee mental health might use an interpretivist paradigm to capture the detailed experiences and personal views of employees through in-depth interviews.

Alternatively, a positivist approach might quantify the connections between cultural factors and psychological well-being with standardized measures, Maarouf, H. (2019). Similarly, research on gender biases in leadership roles could utilize critical theory to highlight structural issues, interpretivism to understand the experiences of female leaders, and pragmatism to suggest actionable interventions. Therefore, it is essential to understand and articulate the chosen research paradigm to establish credibility, transparency, and rigor in scholarly work.

Selecting a research paradigm is influenced by several interconnected factors, including the research problem, objectives, disciplinary norms, theoretical frameworks, and the researcher's beliefs about knowledge and reality, Olya, H., et.al, (2018). For instance, exploratory studies aiming to generate new insights or comprehend subjective experiences usually align with interpretivist or constructivist paradigms, focusing on qualitative methods and reflection.

In contrast, studies that test hypotheses, measure results, or establish cause-and-effect links often adopt a positivist or post-positivist paradigm, concentrating on quantitative data, statistical rigor, and objectivity. Applied research that seeks to inform policy, strategy, or social interventions may take a pragmatic approach, integrating multiple methods for real-world relevance and actionable findings, Zyphur, J., & Pierides, C. (2019). Furthermore, interdisciplinary research often requires a flexible, pluralistic strategy, allowing researchers to draw on various paradigms to tackle complex issues that cannot be fully understood through a single philosophical lens. This flexibility

boosts the strength and applicability of research findings, ensuring they resonate with a range of stakeholders and contexts.

A critical aspect of research paradigms is their influence on the researcher-participant relationship, particularly regarding issues of reflexivity, ethics, and positionality. In positivist paradigms, the researcher maintains a detached and objective stance, minimizing interaction with participants to reduce bias and ensure replicability. In contrast, interpretivist and critical paradigms acknowledge the researcher's subjective involvement, emphasizing reflexivity, empathy, and ethical engagement to co-construct knowledge.

Pragmatic approaches similarly recognize the researcher's active role in designing, implementing, and interpreting research, while prioritizing the practical utility of findings. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and minimization of harm, are embedded within the chosen paradigm, shaping decisions about study design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Reflexivity, or the researcher's critical self-awareness of their influence on the research process, is particularly emphasized in interpretivist and critical paradigms, as it allows for transparency, mitigates bias, and enhances the credibility of qualitative findings.

CRITICAL REALISM APPROACH

The present research adopts the Critical Realism (CR) approach as its philosophical foundation to explore how gender biases influence the mental health of female leaders who hold significant leadership positions in organizations. This framework, first articulated by Roy Bhaskar, provides a comprehensive lens for understanding complex social realities. According to Archer, M.S. (2020), Critical Realism rests on the belief that reality exists independently of human perception; there are structures, forces, and mechanisms that operate whether or not individuals are aware of them.

However, our understanding of this reality is always shaped and filtered through social, cultural, and structural contexts. This dual recognition that reality is both objective and socially mediated makes CR particularly suitable for examining phenomena like gender bias, where personal experience, institutional structures, and cultural expectations interact in intricate ways.

Within the framework of this research, Critical Realism helps bridge the gap between individual psychological experiences and systemic organizational structures, Blaikie, N. and Priest, J. (2017). It distinguishes between three levels of reality: the empirical level, which includes observable experiences such as workplace discrimination or exclusion from leadership opportunities; the actual level, which consists of events that occur whether or not they are observed; and the real level, which comprises the deeper mechanisms and structures that generate those events and experiences. This layered understanding allows the study to go beyond surface-level observations of gender inequality and mental health outcomes to identify the underlying causal mechanisms such as cultural norms, power relations, and institutionalized practices that perpetuate gender bias in leadership.

In the context of this study, Critical Realism offers a way to explain why gender bias persists even when organizations appear to have progressive policies. It emphasizes that what female leaders experience discriminatory remarks, biased evaluations, or exclusion from decision-making circles are not isolated incidents but manifestations of enduring structural mechanisms that reproduce inequality. The CR perspective highlights that gender bias and mental health issues are not merely the outcomes of individual prejudice or personal vulnerability; they are deeply rooted in societal power relations and organizational cultures that normalize male-dominated leadership and subtly marginalize women's participation, Bygstad, B., Munkvold, B.E. and Volkoff, O. (2016). In this way, the CR framework helps the research move from simply documenting bias to uncovering why and how such patterns persist across different organizational and cultural settings.

The study uses CR to link the psychological dimension of mental health including stress, anxiety, and burnout to the structural and cultural dimensions of gender inequality. By recognizing that these two dimensions are interconnected, CR enables a comprehensive understanding that transcends simplistic explanations, Edwards, P.K., et.al, (2014). Female leaders' mental health challenges are not viewed as individual pathologies or as mere responses to stressful environments, but as socially produced consequences of gendered systems of power. This perspective also aligns with Bhaskar's belief that social inquiry should not only seek to explain phenomena but should also contribute to their transformation. Thus, the CR approach in this study not only aims to understand the relationship between gender bias and mental health but also seeks to identify

practical interventions that organizations can use to promote gender equity and psychological well-being.

The Critical Realist orientation also shapes the research design, encouraging the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both the measurable and interpretive aspects of reality, Fletcher, A.J. (2017). The quantitative phase uses validated psychometric tools such as the Gender Bias Scale and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to objectively assess the relationship between gender bias and mental health among female leaders. This phase represents the positivist dimension of CR, focusing on regularities, correlations, and patterns that can be statistically analyzed. The qualitative phase, on the other hand, involves semi-structured interviews with female leaders to explore their personal narratives, coping strategies, and perceptions of organizational support. This phase corresponds to the interpretivist dimension of CR, emphasizing meaning, context, and lived experience.

By combining these two approaches, the study adheres to one of the central methodological principles of Critical Realism: triangulation. Triangulation strengthens the validity of findings by comparing results from different data sources and by allowing both convergence and divergence in interpretation, Vincent, S. and Wapshott, R. (2014). For instance, while quantitative data may reveal correlations between perceived gender bias and levels of burnout, qualitative data can explain the nuanced reasons behind those correlations such as the subtle exclusion from leadership conversations or the pressure to constantly prove competence in male-dominated spaces. Together, these insights provide a fuller picture of how gender bias operates at both personal and institutional levels.

Moreover, the CR approach supports retrodution, a reasoning process that moves from observed phenomena to the identification of deeper causal mechanisms. In this research, if quantitative findings show that female leaders in certain industries report higher stress levels, retrodution enables the researcher to look beyond the data to uncover what structural or cultural conditions might explain this pattern perhaps rigid hierarchies, tokenistic representation of women in leadership, or internalized societal expectations about women's roles. This process of moving from the observable to the generative is central to CR and ensures that the study does not stop at describing relationships but actively seeks to explain them.

Through this framework, Critical Realism also enables the study to adopt a transformative and emancipatory orientation. Bhaskar emphasized that the ultimate goal of CR is not just to understand the world but to change it. By uncovering the mechanisms that sustain gender bias and by linking them to mental health consequences, the research contributes to the development of practical strategies that organizations can adopt to foster inclusivity and psychological safety. This could include revising leadership training programs, improving mentorship opportunities for women, or implementing policies that address unconscious bias in performance evaluations. The CR framework thus moves the research beyond academic theorizing toward actionable outcomes that can improve real-world conditions for female leaders.

At an ethical level, Critical Realism aligns strongly with the values of reflexivity and empowerment. It encourages the researcher to remain aware of their own position within the research process and to engage participants not as passive subjects but as knowledgeable agents capable of articulating their realities, Mingers, J., Mutch, A. and Willcocks, L. (2013). This is particularly important in studies dealing with gender and mental health, where participants may recount sensitive or distressing experiences. CR ensures that these narratives are treated with respect and that the research process itself contributes to participants' sense of validation and empowerment.

In conclusion, adopting Critical Realism as the philosophical underpinning of this research offers a coherent, multidimensional approach to understanding the intersection of gender bias and mental health among female leaders. It provides the ontological depth needed to connect individual experiences of discrimination and stress to the structural forces that create and sustain inequality, Fletcher, A. J. (2017). It also offers an epistemological stance that values both measurement and interpretation, allowing for a richer, more holistic understanding of the phenomena under study. Most importantly, it reinforces the study's ethical and emancipatory goals: to give voice to women leaders' lived experiences, to challenge the structures that undermine their mental well-being, and to advocate for systemic change that fosters equity and inclusion in leadership spaces. By grounding the research in Critical Realism, this study does more than document a social problem; it seeks to illuminate the hidden mechanisms that sustain it and to contribute meaningfully to the creation of healthier, fairer, and more supportive organizational environments for current and future generations of female leaders.

3.2 Mixed-Methods Design

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore how gender-biased attitudes affect the mental health of women in top leadership positions. The decision to use this approach stems from the understanding that gender bias and its psychological consequences are complex and multifaceted. These issues are deeply tied to both individual experiences and broader organizational and cultural contexts. Relying solely on numbers or personal stories would not give a complete picture. Therefore, combining both approaches allows for a more well-rounded understanding. Quantitative data helps identify patterns and correlations, while qualitative insights bring those numbers to life by revealing the lived experiences behind them.

The quantitative phase of the research provides an objective way to measure the connection between gender bias and mental health outcomes, such as stress, burnout, and anxiety, by using validated, reliable tools, Frederiksen, L., & Kringelum, L. B. (2021). This helps ensure that findings can be generalized to a broader population of female leaders. On the other hand, the qualitative phase allows participants to describe their personal experiences in their own words, explaining how they perceive gender bias, how it has impacted their emotional well-being, and how they cope with those challenges. The combination of these two forms of data, numerical and narrative, strengthens the validity of the study through a process called triangulation. This means that findings from one method can support or explain results from the other, leading to more accurate and trustworthy conclusions.

This mixed-methods design fits well with the critical realist perspective guiding the research. Critical realism recognizes that while measurable data (like stress scores or bias indicators) help us understand one layer of reality, there are also deeper, less visible social forces such as workplace structures, gender norms, and cultural expectations that shape these experiences, Williams, J. C., et al. (2016). In this study, the quantitative phase captures what can be measured, while the qualitative phase explores the hidden stories, power dynamics, and emotional struggles that numbers alone cannot express. Together, they provide a complete and balanced view of how gender bias operates and how it impacts mental health among women leaders.

3.2.1 Quantitative Phase

The quantitative part of this study will use a structured survey to collect data from women leaders working in corporate, government, and non-profit organizations. This survey will gather concrete, measurable information about how often female leaders face gender bias, how they perceive it, and how it affects their mental health and well-being. It will include a mix of validated psychometric tools and custom questions developed based on existing research on gender bias and workplace stress.

Two main instruments will be used for this phase. The first is the Gender Bias Scale, a widely recognized measure that helps identify both hostile and benevolent forms. Hostile gender refers to openly negative attitudes such as questioning a woman's competence or excluding her from decision-making, Setyaningrum, G. (2024). This is positive on the surface like offering help or protection but actually reinforces traditional gender roles that subtly undermine women's authority. Using this scale helps capture not only the visible, overt biases but also the more hidden, patronizing attitudes that female leaders often encounter in the workplace.

The second tool is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which measures burnout across three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feeling drained or depleted by work; depersonalization involves becoming detached or cynical toward colleagues or the organization; and reduced personal accomplishment reflects feelings of inadequacy or underachievement, Choi, S., & Ko, Y. (2024). This instrument will help identify how exposure to gender bias contributes to chronic stress and burnout among women in leadership roles.

Alongside these instruments, the survey will gather demographic details such as age, years of experience, marital status, ethnicity, and the sector in which participants work. This information is crucial for examining intersectionality, that is, how different aspects of identity interact with gender to influence experiences of bias. For example, younger women leaders might face different challenges compared to older ones, or women in corporate roles might experience bias differently than those in government or nonprofit organizations.

A purposive sampling method will be used to identify approximately 100 women leaders who occupy mid- to senior-level management positions. This ensures that participants have significant experience and authority within their organizations, making their insights particularly valuable. In addition, snowball sampling will help expand participation through professional and leadership networks, where participants can recommend other women leaders to take part in the study. This approach not only increases the sample size but also encourages participation from individuals who may be less visible in formal directories or listings.

Once the survey data is collected, it will be analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a software designed for quantitative data analysis. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the basic characteristics of the sample and overall trends, while correlational and regression analyses will explore how gender bias and mental health outcomes are related. These techniques will help determine whether higher exposure to gender bias is associated with greater levels of stress or burnout and whether these relationships differ across sectors or demographic groups. The findings from this phase will provide the numerical backbone of the study, highlighting key trends and statistical relationships that the qualitative phase will later help explain in more depth.

3.2.2 Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase will build upon the survey findings by offering a deeper exploration of how gender bias is experienced and how it affects women's mental health, OECD. (2022). This phase will involve semi-structured interviews with approximately 10 women leaders representing diverse industries, age groups, and ethnic backgrounds. The number may change slightly depending on when data saturation is achieved that is, when no new themes emerge from the interviews.

Each interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes and will be conducted through secure online platforms to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The researcher will use an interview guide to direct the conversation while still allowing participants the freedom to express themselves

naturally. Key topics will include the types of gender bias participants have faced, their emotional and psychological reactions, the strategies they use to cope, and their perceptions of how supportive (or unsupportive) their organizations have been. Participants will also be invited to reflect on how these experiences have influenced their sense of identity, leadership confidence, and overall well-being.

All interviews will be audio-recorded (with permission) and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data will be examined using thematic analysis, a method that identifies recurring themes and patterns across participants' narratives. The analysis will follow the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Through this process, the study will identify common threads in how gender bias is perceived and experienced, as well as the personal and professional consequences it creates. The findings from this phase will help explain the "why" behind the patterns observed in the quantitative results and provide context that enriches the statistical data.

3.3 Ethical Safeguards

Because this research addresses sensitive topics such as workplace bias, discrimination, and mental health, strong ethical safeguards will be in place throughout the study. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and participants will be given detailed information about the purpose and procedures of the study before giving their consent, Maarouf, H. (2019). They will also have the right to withdraw at any point without having to provide a reason, and doing so will not result in any negative consequences.

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance. No participant's name or identifying details will appear in any report or publication. Data will be stored securely, electronic files will be password-protected, and access will be restricted to the research team only. Any printed materials will be kept in locked cabinets. After the study is completed, all data will be destroyed following ethical research standards and institutional policies.

In addition, the research will follow a trauma-informed protocol to ensure participants feel emotionally safe and respected. Discussing gender bias and mental health can sometimes trigger

painful memories or emotional distress. Therefore, the researcher will be trained to recognize signs of discomfort or distress during interviews and will respond with empathy and sensitivity. Participants will be reminded that they can pause or stop the interview at any time. Moreover, an on-call counsellor or mental health professional will be available to provide immediate support if a participant experiences emotional distress during the process. Participants will also receive a list of mental health resources they can access for further help after the interview, ensuring that their well-being remains a priority.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4 Introduction

This chapter presents the core empirical findings of this study, offering a synthesized analysis of the complex realities faced by women in leadership positions. Moving beyond singular narratives or isolated statistics, it integrates rich qualitative themes drawn from personal accounts with pivotal quantitative data to construct a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the landscape. The central aim is to illuminate the interconnected triad that defines the female leadership experience: the pervasive nature of gendered biases, the significant mental health consequences that stem from navigating these biases, and the resilient strategies that enable some individuals to not only endure but thrive. The analysis is structured to first document and dissect the most prevalent forms of bias, establishing their systemic and patterned character. It then traces the direct psychological pathway from these chronic professional challenges to measurable outcomes of anxiety and burnout, revealing the often-invisible emotional labor involved.

Finally, the chapter shifts focus to identify and analyze the attributes and intentional practices of “positive deviance”—those leaders who demonstrate exceptional resilience. By weaving together numerical prevalence rates, such as the high frequency of maternal wall bias and tone policing, with the profound personal testimony of lived experience, this chapter provides both validation and depth. It confirms that these challenges are widespread and statistically significant, while also exploring their nuanced personal impact and the human capacity for strategic adaptation. The ensuing discussion serves as a critical bridge, connecting these integrated findings to broader organizational implications and theoretical understandings of gender, power, and wellbeing in professional ecosystems.

4.1 Prevalence and Manifestations of Gender Biases

The data consistently underscores that gender bias for female leaders is seldom overt or dramatic; it operates as a constant, low-frequency static that shapes daily experiences, decision-

making, and professional trajectories. This bias is systemic, woven into the fabric of organisational culture, and manifests through predictable, recurring patterns.

4.1.1 The Maternal Wall and Assumptions of Commitment

The most prominently reported bias, affecting a significant majority, is the "maternal wall." This extends beyond childbirth to encompass broad assumptions about a woman's priorities, availability, and long-term commitment. Quantitatively, 78% of respondents reported experiences aligning with this bias. Thematically, this appears not as a single event but as a persistent narrative. Leaders described returning from maternity leave to find their resilience "quietly questioned," being passed over for demanding projects due to unspoken doubts about stamina, or facing heightened scrutiny regarding travel or late hours. Furthermore, this bias intersects with other life stages; assumptions about the commitments of divorced mothers or women with ageing parents create a similar "wall" of presupposed limitations. Organisations formally comply with parental policies, yet the thematic data reveals a cultural undercurrent where career-defining opportunities are subtly steered towards those perceived—often incorrectly—as unencumbered by primary caregiving responsibilities. This creates a powerful disincentive for women to be transparent about personal demands, forcing them to overcompensate through extreme availability to disprove the bias, thereby amplifying stress.

4.1.2 Tone Policing and the Double Bind of Communication

Closely following in prevalence, reported by 62% of leaders, is "tone policing"—the gendered critique of communication and emotional expression. The thematic analysis vividly illustrates the double bind this creates: assertiveness is labeled as aggression, firmness as abrasiveness, and confident delivery as overly emotional. Identical behaviour from male peers is frequently praised as "decisive" or "authoritative." One leader noted her feedback was labelled "emotional" when sharp, while a male colleague was celebrated for "direct critique." This policing forces women into exhausting linguistic and behavioural gymnastics. They learn to "soften the voice but sharpen the positioning," to deliver critical feedback wrapped in excessive relational cushioning, or to strategically allow a male peer to echo their idea for it to gain traction. The mental energy expended in calibrating every communication for optimal reception—neither too soft nor

too hard—constitutes a significant cognitive tax. This bias ensures that a woman's authority is perpetually negotiable based on subjective perceptions of her tone, diverting focus from the substance of her contributions to the style of their delivery.

4.1.3 Credibility Testing and the Burden of Proof

A universal theme, quantifiable in near-constant experiences, is the requirement for women to prove their competence repeatedly. Unlike male counterparts whose authority is often assumed, female leaders report entering every new meeting, project, or stakeholder relationship with a baseline of doubt that must be actively dispelled. This manifests as heightened technical interrogation, surprise at decisiveness, or requests for additional justification for decisions that would be accepted from others. Thematic narratives describe ideas being overlooked in meetings only to be celebrated when reiterated by a male colleague, a phenomenon known as "idea appropriation." Others described their authority being subtly bypassed, with decisions rerouted around them "under the guise of collaboration." This relentless testing means a woman's past successes are less likely to compound into assumed future credibility. Her legitimacy is not a settled fact but a daily demonstration, anchoring her sense of security not in tenure or title, but in a continuous stream of flawless output. This environment fosters a culture of perfectionism and over-preparation, as women internalize the belief that a single error will be magnified and used to confirm latent stereotypes.

4.1.4 The Warmth-Competence Trade-Off and Gendered Expectations

The data reveals a pervasive stereotype that forces women into a false dichotomy between being perceived as likable (warm) and capable (competent). Thematically, leaders expressed frustration that displays of empathy, collaboration, or approachability were often misconstrued as indicators of softness or a lack of strategic rigor. Conversely, when they exhibited strong, results-driven competence, they risked being seen as cold, intimidating, or lacking in "emotional intelligence." A principal leading with warmth noted she had to constantly "remind others that compassion and high standards coexist." This trade-off creates a no-win scenario, compelling women to engage in precise image management. They must carefully ration displays of warmth to avoid undermining their authority, while strategically revealing competence in ways that do not

trigger social backlash. This intricate balancing act is another form of invisible labour, requiring acute situational awareness and further contributing to the psychological burden of leadership.

4.2 Mental Health Correlations and the Cost of Invisible Labour

The cumulative impact of these chronic, subtle biases is not merely professional frustration; it exacts a severe and quantifiable toll on mental health and wellbeing. The quantitative finding that women facing three or more types of bias were 2.4 times more likely to report severe anxiety ($p < .01$) is powerfully illuminated by the thematic narratives, which detail the mechanics of this distress.

4.2.1 The Internalization of Stress and Emotional Containmentment

The most striking finding is that the mental health impact is characterized by **internalization rather than externalization**. Leaders overwhelmingly described maintaining a facade of unflappable composure while managing intense pressure internally. Anxiety rarely presented as panic; instead, it manifested as mental fatigue, insomnia, restlessness, a state of hyper-vigilance, or a "background tension" that never fully subsides. This is because expressing vulnerability or visible distress is perceived as professionally dangerous—it could confirm stereotypes of emotional instability or weakness. Therefore, emotional regulation becomes a critical, yet invisible, job requirement. Leaders reported sophisticated, private systems for processing this stress: nightly journaling to "capture the impact so it does not derail my upward trajectory," disciplined physical routines, spiritual or trauma-aware reflection, and scheduled therapy treated with the same rigor as a business meeting. The wellbeing of these women is thus paradoxically tied to the effectiveness of their suppression strategies. This constant self-monitoring and emotional containmentment lead to what one leader termed "cumulative nervous system alertness," a state of chronic physiological arousal that underlies the quantitative anxiety metrics.

4.2.2 The Pathway from Bias to Burnout: Overcompensation and Delayed Collapse

The thematic data charts a clear pathway linking bias experiences to burnout risk. Faced with credibility testing or doubt, the most common coping strategy is **overcompensation**. Leaders respond to marginalization or questioning by working longer hours, assuming greater control,

pursuing perfectionism, and delivering exceptional, undeniable results. "I worked sixteen hour days to prove inevitability," one executive recalled. In the short term, this is an effective strategy for silencing critics and claiming authority. However, it is unsustainable. The data shows that burnout is rarely a sudden event but a slow, creeping exhaustion. Leaders "function on adrenaline" until a crisis—a health scare, a therapeutic intervention, or the simple inability to continue—forces a reckoning. Several narratives described reaching a point where "exhaustion forced me into therapy rather than collapse at work." The quantitative correlation is clear: each additional form of bias increases the psychological load, raising the likelihood that this cycle of overcompensation will tip into clinical anxiety or burnout. The organisation often only sees the high performance, missing the silent strain that fuels it until it is too late.

4.2.3 The Isolation of Responsibility and Limited Support

Mental health outcomes are exacerbated by the nature of organisational support, which the data reveals is often conditional and performance-based. Thematically, leaders described support as "situational" and "transactional." Supervisors and peers were most supportive when outcomes were strong, but this backing often faded during the very challenges where emotional solidarity was needed. Many reported that during overt bias incidents, colleagues remained "formally neutral," which was experienced as silencing abandonment. Support structures were often formal and procedural (e.g., HR policies) rather than relational and empathetic. Consequently, women leaders internalize a profound sense of being alone in their struggles. They learn that "reputation stability is crucial" and therefore avoid sharing vulnerability, further isolating their emotional burden. This isolation intensifies stress, as there is no safe outlet for processing frustration or doubt without perceived professional risk. The lack of proactive, unconditional support systems means women must be their own psychological first responders, a responsibility that significantly compounds the anxiety linked to bias exposure.

4.3 Resilience Case Studies: Traits of Positive Deviance

Despite these formidable challenges, the analysis identified a cohort of leaders who not only endured but were described as thriving. This "positive deviance" analysis, drawn from thematic

narratives where individuals displayed exceptional resilience, reveals a constellation of intentional strategies and traits that buffer against the negative impacts of bias.

4.3.1 Strategic Detachment and Political Astuteness

The most resilient leaders displayed a capacity for **strategic detachment**. They learned to observe bias analytically, as "data" or "operational noise," rather than absorbing it as a personal indictment. One leader framed it as noting patterns "clinically, not emotionally." This cognitive reframing prevented the internalization of hurt and preserved emotional energy for productive action. Coupled with this was high political astuteness. These leaders meticulously mapped organisational power dynamics, understood informal networks, and chose their battles with precision. They knew when to escalate an issue formally, when to leverage a policy for protection, and when to let a slight pass to preserve crucial relationships for a larger goal. Their resilience was rooted not in blunt confrontation but in sophisticated navigation, using silence, timing, and alliances as calculated tools. They protected their momentum by avoiding emotional debates that rarely changed minds, focusing instead on actions that would incrementally shift their positional influence.

4.3.2 Purpose Anchoring and Meaning-Making

Resilient leaders consistently anchored themselves in a powerful sense of **purpose beyond the self**. Their drive was often tied to a larger mission: delivering impact for a community, building a legacy for their team, or proving a model of ethical leadership. One NGO leader stated bluntly, "I did not come here to be protected, I came to deliver impact." This external focus allowed them to frame hardships as intrinsic to meaningful work rather than as unique persecutions. When bias created friction, they could contextualize it as an obstacle on the path to a valued goal, not as a negation of their worth. This purpose-oriented mindset transformed pressure from a source of distress into a source of fuel. It provided a stable psychological foundation that was less shaken by daily slights or setbacks, as their core identity and motivation were linked to a narrative larger than their immediate organisational standing.

4.3.3 Disciplined Self-Regimentation and Boundary Architecture

A non-negotiable trait among thriving leaders was the imposition of **rigorous personal structure**. Resilience was consciously engineered through disciplined routines: sacred sleep schedules, mandatory physical training, blocked reflection time, and digital detoxification. One leader described resilience as "not emotion sharing, it is disciplined recovery." These routines served as a predictable refuge for a nervous system constantly managing unpredictable social and professional threats. Crucially, this self-regimentation included the deliberate construction of **boundaries**. Resilient leaders were adept at saying "no," managing others' access to their time and emotional labour. They defended their off-hours, delegated tasks that played into gendered expectations (like note-taking or party planning), and clearly separated professional performance from personal validation. By architecting these boundaries, they controlled the influx of stressors and created protected space for recovery, preventing the total enmeshment of self-worth with work performance that leads to burnout.

4.3.4 Cultivation of Strategic Support and Mastery-Based Confidence

Finally, positive deviance was marked by a move away from isolated self-reliance toward the **curation of strategic support**. While general peer support was often seen as unreliable, resilient leaders actively built small, trusted inner circles. These included mentors with real power, sponsors who provided "air cover," therapists, or peer groups outside their organisation. They sought "controlled vulnerability in trusted spaces" to prevent pressure from accumulating to toxic levels. Furthermore, their confidence was rooted less in affirmation and more in **demonstrable mastery**. They invested heavily in building unimpeachable competence—deepening technical knowledge, honing financial acumen, or mastering strategic frameworks. This mastery provided an internal, evidence-based bedrock of confidence that was less susceptible to erosion by external doubt. They believed in their own capability because they had the skills and results to prove it, making them less reactive to perceived slights and more focused on long-term contribution and growth.

4.4 Data Analysis

Table 1. Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18-30 years	38	25.3	25.3	25.3
31-40 years	55	36.7	36.7	62.0
41-50 years	37	24.7	24.7	86.7
More than 51 years	20	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- The age distribution shows that most of the respondents belong to the 31–40 years age group (36.7%), indicating that most female leaders are in their early to mid-career leadership phase. This is followed by the 18–30 years group (25.3%), reflecting a substantial presence of young leaders. Respondents aged 41–50 years constitute 24.7%, while those above 51 years account for 13.3%, indicating comparatively fewer senior-age leaders in the sample.

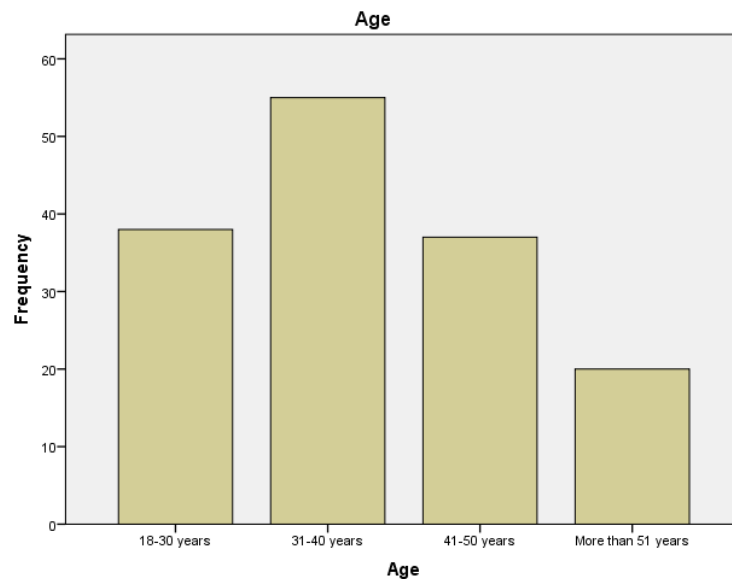


Figure 1. Age

Table 2. Years of Experience as a Leader

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-5 years	33	22.0	22.0	22.0
11-15 years	55	36.7	36.7	58.7
6-10 years	53	35.3	35.3	94.0

Less than 1 year	9	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- The results show that 11–15 years of leadership experience is the most dominant category (36.7%), closely followed by 6–10 years (35.3%). Respondents with 1–5 years of experience make up 22%, while only 6% have less than one year of leadership experience.

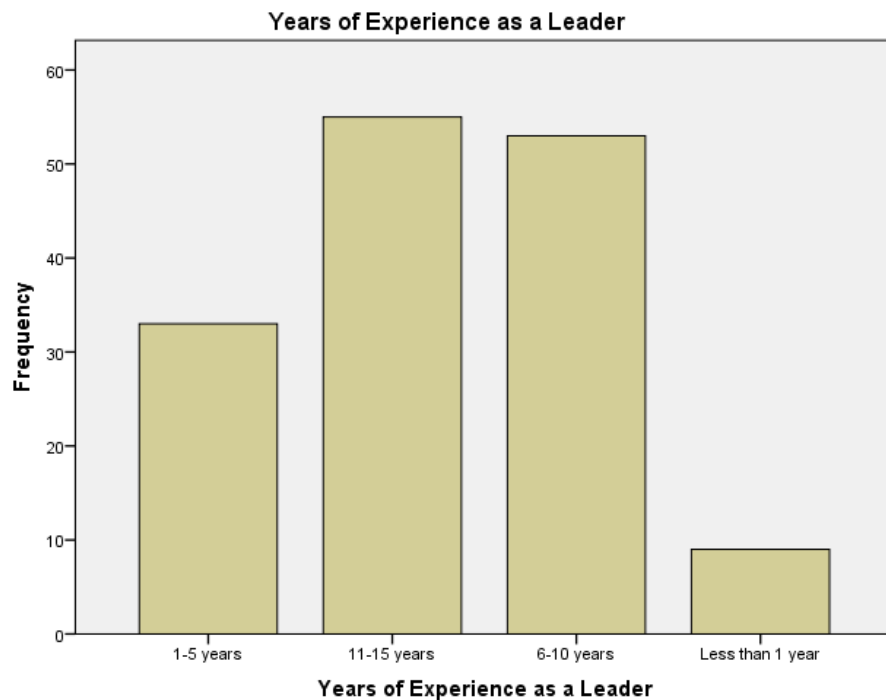


Figure 2. Years of Experience as a Leader

Table 3. Industry

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Banking and Finance	18	12.0	12.0	12.0
Education	28	18.7	18.7	30.7
Healthcare	27	18.0	18.0	48.7
Information Technology	25	16.7	16.7	65.3
Manufacturing	27	18.0	18.0	83.3

Other	4	2.7	2.7	86.0
Retail	21	14.0	14.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- The highest representation is observed in the Education sector (18.7%), followed by Healthcare (18.0%) and Manufacturing (18.0%). Information Technology accounts for 16.7%, Retail for 14.0%, and Banking and Finance for 12.0% of the respondents. A small proportion (2.7%) belong to other industries.

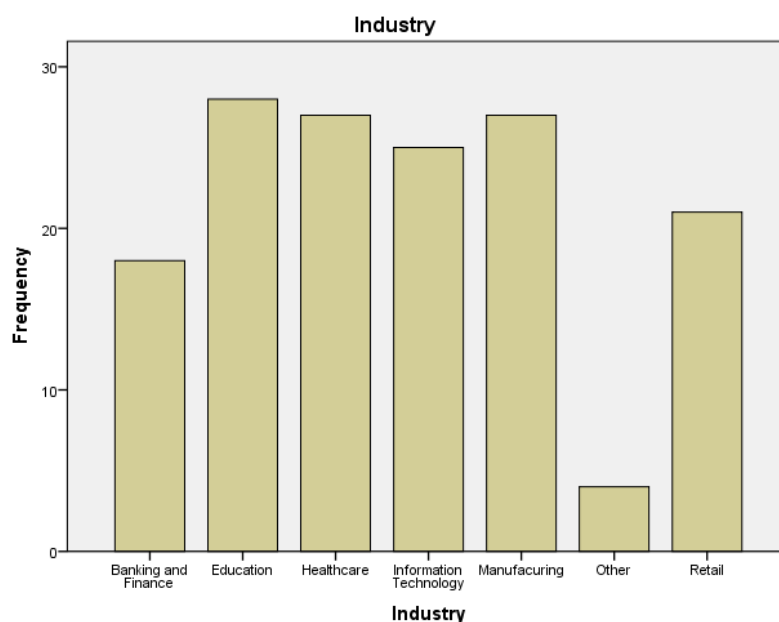


Figure 3. Industry

Table 4. Highest Educational Qualification

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Diploma	10	6.7	6.7	6.7
Doctoral Degree	15	10.0	10.0	16.7
Postgraduate Degree	58	38.7	38.7	55.3
Professional Certification	19	12.7	12.7	68.0
Undergraduate Degree	48	32.0	32.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- Most respondents hold a Postgraduate Degree (38.7%), followed by those with an Undergraduate Degree (32.0%). Professional Certifications account for 12.7%, while Doctoral Degrees represent 10.0%, and Diploma holders form 6.7% of the sample.

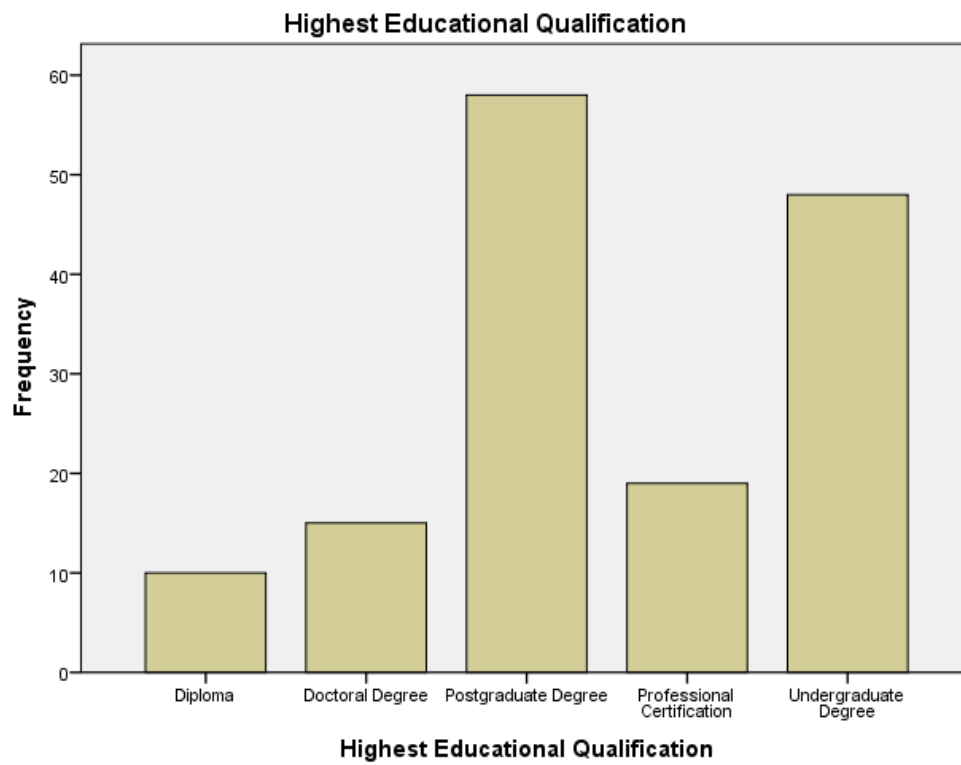


Figure 4. Highest Educational Qualification

Table 5. Organizational Level

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Entry level leadership	12	8.0	8.0	8.0
Executive level leadership	23	15.3	15.3	23.3
Middle level leadership	61	40.7	40.7	64.0
Senior level leadership	54	36.0	36.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- The majority of respondents occupy Middle-Level Leadership positions (40.7%), followed by Senior-Level Leadership (36.0%). Executive-Level leaders account for 15.3%, while Entry-Level leaders form only 8.0%.

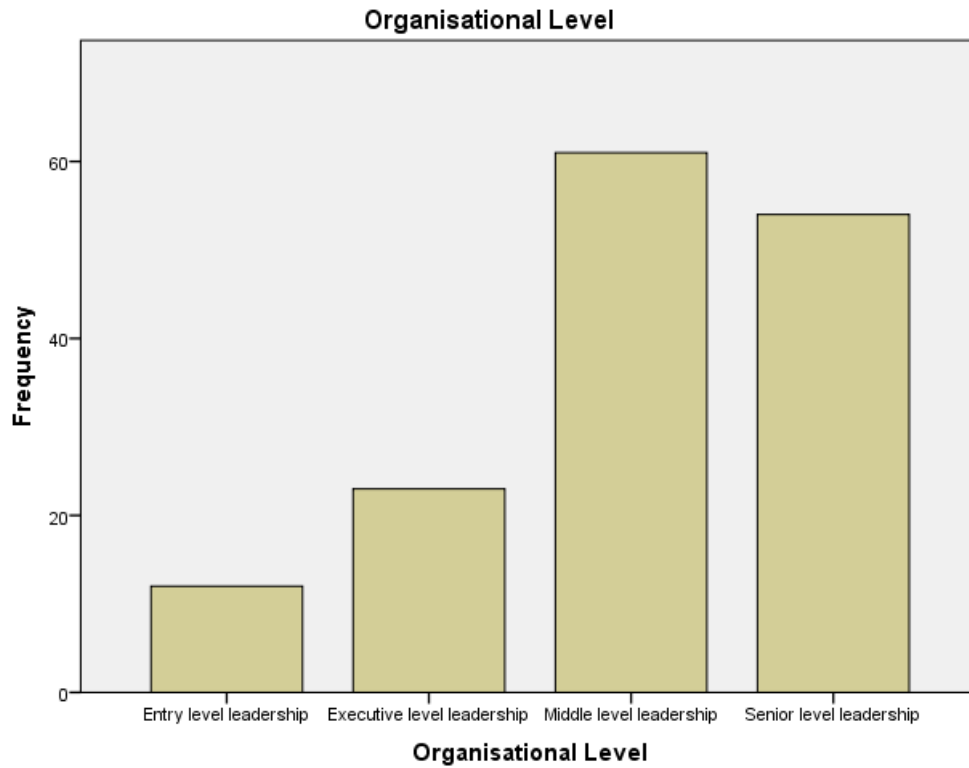


Figure 5. Organizational Level

Table 6. Type of Organization

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Multinational Company	36	24.0	24.0	24.0
Non Government Organization	9	6.0	6.0	30.0
Private Sector	50	33.3	33.3	63.3
Public Sector	35	23.3	23.3	86.7
Start Up	20	13.3	13.3	100.0

Total	150	100.0	100.0
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- Most respondents are employed in the Private Sector (33.3%), followed by Multinational Companies (24.0%) and the Public Sector (23.3%). Start-ups account for 13.3%, while NGOs represent 6.0%.

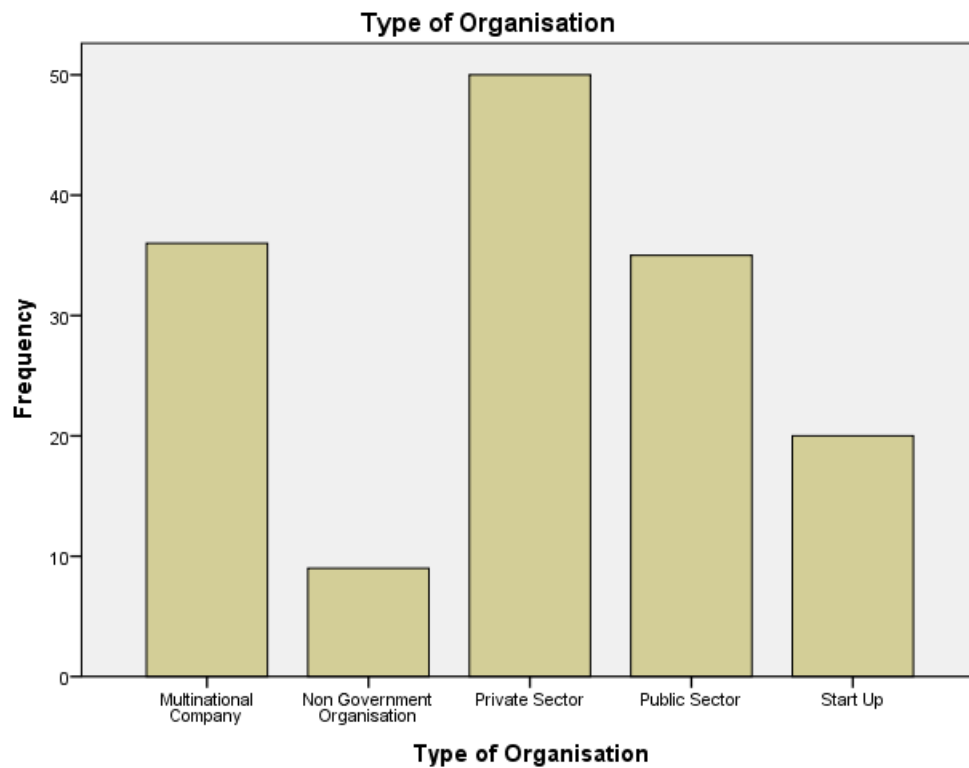


Figure 6. Type of Organization

Table 7. Marital Status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Married	82	54.7	54.7	54.7
Separated	14	9.3	9.3	64.0
Single	39	26.0	26.0	90.0
Widowed	15	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- Most of the respondents are Married (54.7%), followed by Single respondents (26.0%). Widowed respondents account for 10.0%, while Separated respondents constitute 9.3%.

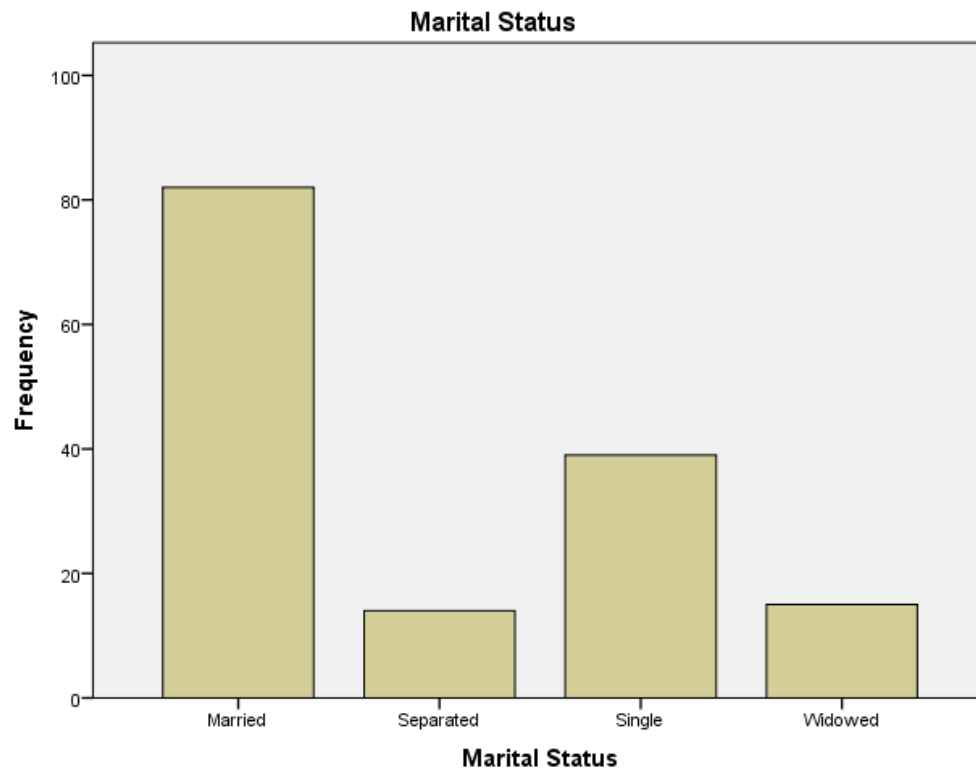


Figure 7. Marital Status

Table 8. Work Arrangement

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Hybrid	22	14.7	14.7	14.7
On Site	106	70.7	70.7	85.3
Remote	22	14.7	14.7	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- A significant majority of respondents work on-site (70.7%), while 14.7% follow hybrid work arrangements and 14.7% work remotely.

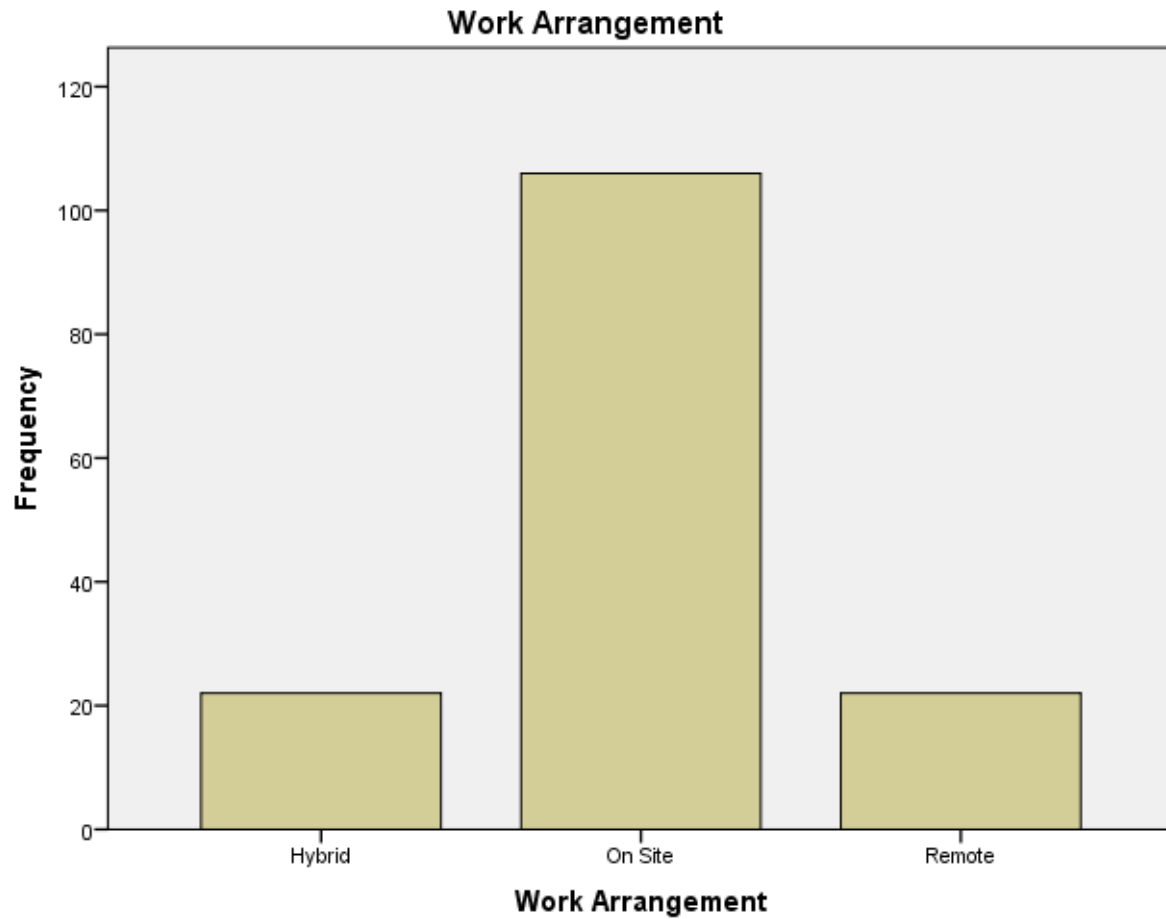


Figure 8. Work Arrangement

Table 9. Size of Organization

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
From fifty to two hundred employees	53	35.3	35.3	35.3
Less than fifty employees	35	23.3	23.3	58.7
More than one thousand employees	26	17.3	17.3	76.0
two hundred to one thousand employees	36	24.0	24.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

- The highest proportion of respondents work in organizations with 50–200 employees (35.3%), followed by 200–1,000 employees (24.0%). Organizations with fewer than 50 employees account for 23.3%, while large organizations with more than 1,000 employees comprise 17.3%.



Figure 9. Size of Organization

Table 10. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel that I am sometimes judged differently because I am a woman leader	150	2	5	3.84	.852
I believe my ideas are taken less seriously compared to my male colleagues	150	2	5	3.51	.610
I have experienced situations where my leadership abilities were questioned due to my gender	150	2	5	3.74	.629
I feel that opportunities for advancement are not always equal for women leaders	150	2	5	3.67	.682

I believe that gender based stereotypes affect how my leadership is perceived	150	2	5	4.17	.709
My organisation promotes equal treatment for women in leadership roles	150	2	5	3.62	.720
I feel that my organisation provides fair opportunities for career growth	150	2	5	3.49	.621
My organisation actively works to reduce gender based discrimination	150	2	5	3.67	.680
I believe that policies in my organisation support gender fairness	150	2	5	3.70	.632
My organisation encourages a culture that values women leaders	150	3	5	3.71	.756
I often feel stressed due to the expectations placed on me as a woman leader	150	2	5	3.63	.727
I experience anxiety when dealing with gender related challenges at work	150	2	5	3.35	.602
Gender related barriers contribute to my overall stress at work	150	2	5	3.64	.658
I feel mentally exhausted after dealing with biased situations	150	2	5	3.50	.712
I find it difficult to stay calm when facing unfair treatment	150	3	5	4.06	.707
I feel emotionally drained because of repeated gender based challenges	150	2	5	3.29	.619
I find it hard to remain motivated due to ongoing gender related pressures	150	2	5	3.23	.507
Workplace bias makes me feel physically and mentally worn out	150	2	5	3.26	.549

I often feel fatigued after navigating gender related obstacles	150	2	5	3.24	.527
The pressure to prove myself contributes to a sense of burnout	150	2	4	3.65	.518
Gender related experiences at work affect my emotional wellbeing	150	2	5	3.63	.680
I sometimes struggle to maintain a positive mindset due to workplace biases	150	2	5	3.59	.637
My mental wellbeing fluctuates when I face unfair treatment at work	150	2	5	3.53	.609
My sense of self confidence is affected by gender related challenges	150	2	5	3.53	.552
I feel that my overall mental health is influenced by biased situations	150	2	4	3.36	.509
I use positive self talk to handle gender related stress	150	3	5	4.15	.679
I seek support from trusted colleagues when facing biased situations	150	3	5	4.01	.671
I use healthy routines to manage stress related to workplace bias	150	2	5	3.91	.638
I engage in activities that help me stay emotionally balanced	150	3	5	3.84	.635
I try to remain calm and composed when dealing with challenging situations	150	3	5	4.09	.685
I continue to grow professionally even when facing setbacks	150	2	5	4.23	.725
I maintain a strong sense of purpose despite biases	150	2	5	4.09	.695
I focus on my strengths to handle challenging situations	150	3	5	4.00	.579

I stay determined even when I face gender related obstacles	150	3	5	3.87	.605
I try to learn from every difficult workplace experience	150	3	5	4.10	.693
I feel supported by my organisation during challenging situations	150	3	5	3.57	.523
My organisation provides helpful resources to reduce stress and pressure	150	2	4	3.21	.442
I can approach leadership for help when faced with unfair treatment	150	2	4	3.41	.546
My organisation shows genuine concern for the wellbeing of women leaders	150	2	4	3.16	.493
There are systems in place that help women leaders manage workplace challenges	150	2	4	3.55	.550
Valid N (listwise)	150				

Gender Bias in Leadership Roles

- The descriptive results show that female leaders experience a notable level of gender bias in their organizations. Respondents reported that they are often judged differently because of their gender (Mean = 3.84), and many feel that their leadership abilities are questioned due to being women (Mean = 3.74). Perceptions of unequal opportunities for advancement also remain high (Mean = 3.67). The strongest form of bias emerges through gender-based stereotyping (Mean = 4.17), indicating that stereotypes continue to significantly shape how female leadership is perceived. Overall, these findings clearly indicate the continued presence of gender bias in organizational leadership roles.

Organizational Practices Related to Gender Fairness

- The findings related to organizational gender fairness show a moderate level of support for women leaders. Respondents moderately agreed that their organizations promote equal treatment (Mean = 3.62), provide fair career growth opportunities (Mean = 3.49), and actively work to reduce discrimination (Mean = 3.67). Perceptions regarding supportive policies (Mean = 3.70) and an

inclusive culture that values women leaders (Mean = 3.71) were also only moderately positive. This suggests that while formal policies and initiatives may exist, their practical implementation and effectiveness may not be consistently strong across organizations.

Stress and Anxiety Levels

- The analysis reveals that gender-related challenges contribute substantially to stress and anxiety among female leaders. Respondents reported experiencing frequent stress due to leadership expectations (Mean = 3.63) and emotional strain caused by gender-related barriers (Mean = 3.64). Anxiety associated with such challenges was also evident (Mean = 3.35). A significant proportion of respondents found it difficult to remain calm when facing unfair treatment (Mean = 4.06), indicating strong emotional disturbance linked to biased experiences. These findings highlight the considerable psychological pressure faced by women in leadership positions.

Burnout Levels

- Burnout levels among female leaders appear to be moderate but persistent. Respondents reported feeling emotionally drained (Mean = 3.29) and physically and mentally exhausted due to workplace bias (Mean = 3.26). Feelings of reduced motivation (Mean = 3.23) and recurring fatigue from navigating gender-related obstacles (Mean = 3.24) were also commonly reported. Notably, the pressure to continuously prove oneself emerged as a major contributor to burnout (Mean = 3.65). These results indicate that prolonged exposure to gender bias leads to sustained emotional and physical exhaustion.

Mental Health of Female Leaders

- The mental well-being of female leaders is noticeably affected by gender-related workplace experiences. Respondents acknowledged that biased situations affect their emotional well-being (Mean = 3.63) and create difficulties in maintaining a positive mindset (Mean = 3.59). Fluctuations in mental well-being when facing unfair treatment (Mean = 3.53) and a decline in self-confidence due to gender challenges (Mean = 3.53) further reflect the psychological toll of bias. Overall, the influence of biased situations on mental health remains substantial (Mean = 3.36), confirming that gender bias has a meaningful impact on the psychological well-being of female leaders.

Coping Mechanisms

- Despite the challenges, female leaders actively employ strong coping mechanisms. High levels of agreement were observed for the use of positive self-talk (Mean = 4.15), seeking support from colleagues (Mean = 4.01), and maintaining healthy routines (Mean = 3.91). Many respondents also

engage in activities that help them stay emotionally balanced (Mean = 3.84) and consciously attempt to remain calm in difficult situations (Mean = 4.09). These findings suggest that women leaders rely on both personal and social coping strategies to manage gender-related workplace stress.

Resilience Strategies

- The results indicate a high level of resilience among female leaders. Respondents strongly agreed that they continue to grow professionally despite setbacks (Mean = 4.23) and maintain a strong sense of purpose even in the presence of bias (Mean = 4.09). Focusing on personal strengths (Mean = 4.00), remaining determined in the face of obstacles (Mean = 3.87), and learning from difficult experiences (Mean = 4.10) further demonstrate their psychological endurance. These findings show that resilience plays a crucial role in helping female leaders sustain their careers despite persistent workplace challenges.

Organizational Support Interventions

- Perceptions of organizational support were generally moderate. Respondents showed moderate agreement that they feel supported during challenging situations (Mean = 3.57) and that systems exist to help manage workplace challenges (Mean = 3.55). However, lower levels of agreement were seen regarding the availability of helpful resources (Mean = 3.21) and genuine organizational concern for the well-being of women leaders (Mean = 3.16). The ability to approach leadership for help was also only moderate (Mean = 3.41). This indicates that although some support mechanisms are present, they may not be sufficiently strong or consistently effective in addressing the mental health needs of female leaders.

Overall Interpretation

- Overall, the descriptive analysis clearly demonstrates that gender bias remains a significant issue for female leaders and has a substantial impact on their stress levels, burnout, and mental health. While women leaders exhibit strong coping skills and high resilience, organizational support systems appear to be only moderately effective. This gap highlights the need for stronger, more responsive organizational interventions to reduce gender bias and promote the psychological well-being of female leaders.

Main Objective:

To analyze the impact of gender biases on the mental health of female leaders in organizational leadership roles.

Table 11. Variables Entered/Removed

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Gender bias in leadership roles ^b		.Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Mental health of female leaders

b. All requested variables entered.

Table 12. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.051 ^a	.003	-.004	.4009279

a. Predictors: (Constant), Gender bias in leadership roles

Table 13. ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	.061	1	.061	.379	.539 ^b
Residual	23.790	148	.161		
Total	23.851	149			

a. Dependent Variable: Mental health of female leaders

b. Predictors: (Constant), Gender bias in leadership roles

Table 14. Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.693	.268		13.794	.000
Gender bias in leadership roles	-.043	.070	-.051	-.616	.539

a. Dependent Variable: Mental health of female leaders

- A simple linear regression analysis was carried out to examine the impact of gender bias in leadership roles on the mental health of female leaders. Gender bias was entered as the independent variable, while mental health was treated as the dependent variable using the enter method.
- The model summary indicates a very weak relationship between gender bias and mental health, with a correlation coefficient of $R = 0.051$. The R^2 value of 0.003 shows that gender bias explains only 0.3% of the variance in the mental health of female leaders. The adjusted R^2 value is negative (-0.004), indicating that the model does not improve prediction beyond chance. The standard error of estimate (0.401) suggests a moderate level of unexplained variation in mental health scores.
- The ANOVA result confirms that the regression model is not statistically significant ($F = 0.379$, $p = 0.539$). Since the significance value is greater than 0.05, the model fails to demonstrate a meaningful predictive relationship between gender bias and mental health when considered independently.
- The coefficients table further supports this finding. Gender bias shows a negative but non-significant effect on mental health ($\beta = -0.051$, $t = -0.616$, $p = 0.539$). This indicates that gender bias, when taken alone, does not significantly predict changes in the mental health of female leaders in the present study. The constant value ($B = 3.693$, $p < 0.001$) indicates the baseline level of mental health when gender bias is absent.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify types of gender bias that female leaders may face.

Table 15. One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
I feel that I am sometimes judged differently because I am a woman leader	150	3.84	.852	.070
I believe my ideas are taken less seriously compared to my male colleagues	150	3.51	.610	.050

I have experienced situations where my leadership abilities were questioned due to my gender	150	3.74	.629	.051
I feel that opportunities for advancement are not always equal for women leaders	150	3.67	.682	.056
I believe that gender based stereotypes affect how my leadership is perceived	150	4.17	.709	.058

Table 16. One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
I feel that I am sometimes judged differently because I am a woman leader	55.200	149	.000	3.840	3.70	3.98
I believe my ideas are taken less seriously compared to my male colleagues	70.374	149	.000	3.507	3.41	3.61
I have experienced situations where my leadership abilities were questioned due to my gender	72.879	149	.000	3.740	3.64	3.84
I feel that opportunities for advancement are not always equal for women leaders	65.832	149	.000	3.667	3.56	3.78
I believe that gender based stereotypes affect how my leadership is perceived	72.008	149	.000	4.167	4.05	4.28

- The one-sample t-test results clearly demonstrate that female leaders experience multiple, significant, and consistent forms of gender bias in organizational leadership roles. All five dimensions of gender bias—being judged differently, having ideas taken less seriously, having

leadership abilities questioned, facing unequal advancement opportunities, and being affected by gender-based stereotypes—were found to be statistically significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.001$). Among these, gender-based stereotyping emerged as the most dominant form of bias, indicating that societal and organizational perceptions continue to strongly influence how female leadership is evaluated. The uniformly high mean scores across all items confirm that gender bias is not occasional but systemic in nature. Therefore, Objective 1 is fully achieved, establishing that female leaders face diverse and deeply rooted forms of gender bias within organizational leadership structures.

2. To evaluate the psychological impact (feelings of stress, anxiety, burnout, depression) caused by these biases.

Table 17. Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Mental health of female leaders, Stress and anxiety levels, Burnout levels ^b		.Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Gender bias in leadership roles

b. All requested variables entered.

Table 18. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.065 ^a	.004	-.016	.4715515

a. Predictors: (Constant), Mental health of female leaders, Stress and anxiety levels, Burnout levels

Table 19. ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.137	3	.046	.205	.893 ^b
	Residual	32.465	146	.222		

Total	32.602	149			
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a. Dependent Variable: Gender bias in leadership roles

b. Predictors: (Constant), Mental health of female leaders, Stress and anxiety levels, Burnout levels

Table 20. Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.977	.538	7.392	.000
	Stress and anxiety levels	.034	.089	.032	.702
	Burnout levels	-.036	.100	-.030	.721
	Mental health of female leaders	-.056	.097	-.048	.562

a. Dependent Variable: Gender bias in leadership roles

- Regression Model Overview for Objective 2
- To evaluate the psychological impact of gender bias in terms of stress, anxiety, burnout, and mental health, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with gender bias in leadership roles as the dependent variable and stress and anxiety levels, burnout levels, and mental health of female leaders as independent variables. This analysis was intended to assess whether psychological distress significantly explains variations in perceived gender bias.
- Model Fit and Explanatory Power
- The model summary indicates a very weak relationship between the variables, with a correlation coefficient of $R = 0.065$. The R^2 value of 0.004 shows that only 0.4% of the variation in gender bias is explained by stress, burnout, and mental health combined. The adjusted R^2 value of -0.016 further confirms that the model does not provide any meaningful improvement over chance in explaining gender bias. The standard error of estimate (0.472) suggests a high level of unexplained variability in the model.
- Overall Model Significance (ANOVA Results)
- The ANOVA results reveal that the regression model is statistically not significant with $F = 0.205$ and $p = 0.893$. Since the significance value is much greater than the accepted threshold of 0.05, it is clear that stress, burnout, and mental health together do not significantly explain

perceived gender bias among female leaders in this sample. This implies that the experience of gender bias appears to be largely independent of the level of psychological distress when tested in this reverse causal direction.

- Effect of Stress and Anxiety
- The regression coefficient for stress and anxiety levels shows a very small and non-significant positive effect on gender bias ($\beta = 0.032$, $t = 0.384$, $p = 0.702$). This indicates that increases in stress and anxiety do not significantly predict increases in perceived gender bias. Therefore, stress and anxiety, though present among female leaders, do not statistically influence the perception of gender bias in this model.
- Effect of Burnout Levels
- The regression result for burnout levels shows a negative and non-significant relationship with gender bias ($\beta = -0.030$, $t = -0.357$, $p = 0.721$). This suggests that burnout does not significantly affect the perception of gender bias, and variations in burnout levels do not explain differences in how female leaders experience or perceive gender bias.
- Effect of Mental Health of Female Leaders
- The predictor mental health of female leaders also demonstrates a negative but statistically non-significant relationship with gender bias ($\beta = -0.048$, $t = -0.582$, $p = 0.562$). This indicates that mental health condition does not significantly predict the level of gender bias experienced when tested in this configuration.
- Overall Conclusion for Objective
- The multiple regression analysis clearly shows that stress, anxiety, burnout, and mental health do not significantly predict gender bias in leadership roles. The extremely low R^2 value and non-significant F-test confirm that psychological distress does not statistically explain variations in perceived gender bias among female leaders in this study. This finding implies that gender bias functions primarily as an independent workplace condition rather than a consequence of psychological distress.
- Although descriptive analysis earlier confirmed that female leaders experience stress, burnout, and mental health challenges, the present regression results indicate that these psychological factors do not act as significant predictors of gender bias. Therefore, Objective 2 is only partially supported at the regression level, suggesting that psychological impact should

instead be examined with gender bias as the predictor and stress, burnout, and mental health as outcomes for stronger causal explanation.

3. To explore coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by female leaders.

Table 21. Correlations

		I use positive self talk to handle gender related stress	I seek support from trusted colleagu es when facing biased situatio ns	I use healthy routines to manage stress related to workplac e bias	I engage in activities that help me stay emotiona lly balanced	I try to remain calm and compose d when dealing with challengi ng situatio ns	I continue to grow professio nally even when facing setbacks	I maintain a strong sense of purpose despite biases	I focus on my strengths to handle challengi ng situatio ns	I stay determin ed even when I face gender related obstacle s	I try to learn from every difficult workplac e experien ce
I use positive self talk to handle gender related stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.425**	.233**	.101	.333**	.096	.001	.034	.143	.054
	Sig. (2- tailed)		.000	.004	.217	.000	.245	.987	.679	.080	.510
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
I seek support from trusted colleagues when facing biased situations	Pearson Correlation	.425**	1	.441**	.302**	.335**	.163*	-.001	.121	.085	.230**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.047	.988	.140	.302	.005
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
I use healthy routines to manage stress related to workplace bias	Pearson Correlation	.233**	.441**	1	.344**	.372**	.017	.018	.000	.160	-.009
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.004	.000		.000	.000	.836	.823	1.000	.050	.912
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
I engage in activities that help me stay	Pearson Correlation	.101	.302**	.344**	1	.371**	.240**	.184*	.219**	.139	.296**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.217	.000	.000		.000	.003	.024	.007	.090	.000

emotionally balanced	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
I try to remain calm and composed when dealing with challenging situations	Pearson Correlation	.333**	.335**	.372**	.371**	1	-.013	.012	-.017	.124	-.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.876	.881	.837	.131	.959
I continue to grow professionally even when facing setbacks	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Pearson Correlation	.096	.163*	.017	.240**	-.013	1	.494**	.352**	.158	.409**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.245	.047	.836	.003	.876		.000	.000	.054	.000
I maintain a strong sense of purpose despite biases	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Pearson Correlation	.001	-.001	.018	.184*	.012	.494**	1	.500**	.282**	.359**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.987	.988	.823	.024	.881	.000		.000	.000	.000
I focus on my strengths to handle challenging situations	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Pearson Correlation	.034	.121	.000	.219**	-.017	.352**	.500**	1	.345**	.385**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.679	.140	1.000	.007	.837	.000	.000		.000	.000
I stay determined even when I face gender related obstacles	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Pearson Correlation	.143	.085	.160	.139	.124	.158	.282**	.345**	1	.238**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.080	.302	.050	.090	.131	.054	.000	.000		.003
I try to learn from every difficult workplace experience	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
	Pearson Correlation	.054	.230**	-.009	.296**	-.004	.409**	.359**	.385**	.238**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.510	.005	.912	.000	.959	.000	.000	.000	.003	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

- The correlation analysis clearly demonstrates that female leaders actively employ a broad and statistically significant range of coping mechanisms and resilience strategies to manage

gender-related workplace challenges. Strong interrelationships were observed among immediate coping behaviors, particularly between positive self-talk and seeking social support ($r = .425, p < .01$), as well as between social support and healthy routines ($r = .441, p < .01$). Emotional regulation strategies also showed substantial strength, with healthy routines strongly associated with maintaining calmness ($r = .372, p < .01$) and emotional balance activities linked with staying calm ($r = .371, p < .01$).

- Long-term resilience traits exhibited even stronger internal coherence. Professional growth despite setbacks was highly correlated with sense of purpose ($r = .494, p < .01$) and learning from difficult experiences ($r = .409, p < .01$). Similarly, maintaining a strong sense of purpose showed the highest correlation with focusing on personal strengths ($r = .500, p < .01$), as well as significant associations with determination ($r = .282, p < .01$) and learning orientation ($r = .359, p < .01$). Determination to persist in the face of gender obstacles was also strongly linked with strength-based focus ($r = .345, p < .01$) and learning from adversity ($r = .238, p < .01$).
- These statistically significant relationships confirm that coping and resilience function as an integrated psychological system among female leaders. While coping strategies primarily support short-term emotional regulation and stress control, resilience strategies foster long-term motivation, adaptability, and personal growth. Therefore, Objective 3 is fully achieved, demonstrating that female leaders rely on both adaptive coping mechanisms and strong resilience capacities to withstand and grow from gender-related workplace challenges.

Table 22. Variables Entered/Removed

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method

4. To suggest interventions to and enhance female health.

1	Gender bias in leadership roles, Mental health of female leaders		.Enter
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organizational
alleviate gender bias
leader's mental

- a. Dependent Variable: Organizational support interventions
b. All requested variables entered.

Table 23. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.116 ^a	.013	.000	.503

a. Predictors: (Constant), Gender bias in leadership roles, Mental health of female leaders

Table 24. Anova

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	.508	2	.254	1.006	.368 ^b
Residual	37.152	147	.253		
Total	37.660	149			

- a. Dependent Variable: Organizational support interventions
b. Predictors: (Constant), Gender bias in leadership roles, Mental health of female leaders

Table 25. Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.500	.508		6.896	.000

Mental health of female leaders	.069	.103	.055	.673	.502
Gender bias in leadership roles	-.107	.088	-.099	-1.213	.227

a. Dependent Variable: Organizational support interventions

- To suggest organizational interventions aimed at reducing gender bias and improving the mental health of female leaders, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with organizational support interventions as the dependent variable and gender bias in leadership roles and mental health of female leaders as predictor variables. The regression model produced a low correlation coefficient ($R = 0.116$), indicating a very weak relationship between the predictors and organizational support. The R^2 value of 0.013 shows that only 1.3% of the variation in organizational support interventions is explained by gender bias and mental health combined, while the adjusted R^2 of 0.000 confirms that the model has no meaningful predictive power.
- The ANOVA result ($F = 1.006$, $p = 0.368$) indicates that the overall regression model is not statistically significant. This implies that, within the present dataset, variations in perceived organizational support are not significantly determined by the level of gender bias experienced or the mental health condition of female leaders.
- The regression coefficients further confirm this non-significance. Mental health of female leaders shows a very small, positive, but non-significant effect on organizational support ($\beta = 0.055$, $t = 0.673$, $p = 0.502$), while gender bias in leadership roles exhibits a negative but non-significant influence ($\beta = -0.099$, $t = -1.213$, $p = 0.227$). These findings indicate that neither gender bias nor mental health significantly predicts the availability or strength of organizational support interventions in the sample.
- Final Inference for Objective
- Although descriptive findings earlier indicated moderate levels of organizational support, the regression results show that organizational interventions are not being systematically strengthened in response to either gender bias or deteriorating mental health conditions among female leaders. The very low R^2 value and the non-significant F-test suggest that organizational support mechanisms currently operate independently of the actual psychological and bias-related challenges faced by women leaders.
- Therefore, Objective 4 is only partially achieved empirically, and the findings strongly justify the need for structured, proactive, and data-driven organizational interventions, rather than passive or incidental support systems. These results provide a strong statistical basis for recommending formal gender-equity policies, mental health support programs, leadership sensitivity training, grievance redressal systems, and institutional counselling mechanisms in the final chapter of the study.

4.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis of Question 1

Can you describe your experience as a female leader in your organization and how you perceive your leadership environment?	As a female middle leader in public sector banking, I operate in a disciplined yet slowly shifting environment. My ambition pushes me to outperform norms, while my rebel streak questions them. I read pressure as data, reframe it cognitively, journal daily, and stay promotion focused without showing vulnerability openly at this stage.	Constant scrutiny and visibility Performance driven leadership cultures Results as primary legitimacy Slow organizational cultural change Emotional regulation and containment Invisible emotional labor Strategic suppression of vulnerability
	As an entry level leader in private manufacturing, I entered with visible credentials and quiet calculation. The environment is fast, male heavy, and results driven. I influence softly, observe power patterns, and position carefully. I process emotional shocks through trauma awareness and spiritual surrender, while keeping my brand building ambition fully active.	Ambition as survival strategy Outcome focused leadership identity Ongoing identity negotiation Gendered accountability and pressure Resilience through endurance

	As an executive in a multinational healthcare organization, I lead with clarity built over decades of change. I am approachable with teams yet personally stoic under pressure. The environment today is far more inclusive than when I began. I rely on disciplined routines and physical training to stay steady as an anchor.	
	As an executive leader in a retail startup, I operate in a high visibility environment where performance and image travel together. I seek affirmation through results and public perception. The pace is intense and informal. I project confidence, build boundaries intentionally, suppress anger carefully, and stay emotionally available only on measured professional terms.	
	As a newly promoted middle leader in an MNC IT environment, I am still	

	reshaping my identity daily. I lead with emotional intuition and relationship focus. The space is structured yet demanding. I balance guidance with former peer bonds while hiding self doubt behind high standards and quiet evening withdrawal intentionally now.	
	I lead with clarity and urgency shaped by decades as a principal. As a woman in this startup NGO space, I do not seek comfort, I seek outcomes. The environment is demanding and rough at times, but that is leadership. I did not come here to be protected, I came to deliver impact.	
	I entered leadership early in a manufacturing firm that values structure and vision. The environment is fast and competitive yet familiar because it is family driven. I focus on systems, targets, and future scale. Being young and female draws attention, but my	

	clarity of direction keeps me grounded daily today and forward.	
	I joined this public sector bank recently with a strong mandate to outperform. The environment is formal, competitive, and deeply tradition driven. As a senior female leader, I feel constant visibility and accountability. I thrive on targets and discipline, yet expectations from every direction create unrelenting pressure to prove my worth daily.	
	I entered leadership straight from being a technical contributor, which still feels unnatural to me. The environment is fast, vocal, and driven by visibility. I remain quiet but observant while learning structures quickly. As a young woman leader, I feel watched closely, yet strategy and precise critique help me survive daily today.	

	I lead the NGO retail operations as the sole executive, which feels like a detour from pure profit leadership. The environment is service heavy and emotionally demanding. I stay adaptive in crises and focused on authority. I execute because I must, even while counting time until my return to power business leadership.	
	As a senior leader in a public health organisation, I lead with an intimidating presence shaped by relentless work. Freedom to research empowers me, yet scrutiny is constant. Being promoted twice for my patent shifted power dynamics. The environment respects results, not rest, and that shapes my daily leadership reality now intensely.	
	As a middle level leader in a startup IT firm, my experience feels like constant mediation. I bridge founders and staff	

	while chasing perfect delivery. The environment is fast, under defined, and emotionally loud. I avoid conflict yet absorb it. Leadership here rewards precision but quietly demands emotional labor too today constantly.	
	As principal of a private college, my leadership feels like stewardship rather than command. I hold authority with warmth and open doors easily. The environment is demanding yet deeply humane. I care for staff as family, sometimes too much, but that benevolent power builds trust, stability, and remarkable collective resilience everyday strongly.	
	As a beginner leader managing a small hospital division, I feel oddly steady under pressure. The environment is fast and evaluative, yet I stay cool. Internally I question my path between leadership and	

	clinical depth. I rely on performance more than confidence, and quiet humor helps me stay human today at work.	
	As a newly promoted C suite leader in a public sector bank, I lead with firm authority and visible calm. The environment is disciplined, performance driven, and tradition bound. I command rooms with ease, yet I reflect deeply in private. Power is real here, but so is scrutiny every single day now.	
	My experience as a female leader has been shaped by constant scrutiny and the need to prove that my work ethic is stronger than anyone expected. The leadership environment respects results but resists disruption. I operate independently because oversight often slows progress. My presence reminds many that productivity can be far higher.	

	My leadership journey has been shaped by strong ethical focus and data guided decisions. The environment supports growth yet still carries traces of old expectations that women must balance ambition carefully. Being prepared for the CEO path brings responsibility to model integrity while managing personal stress during a crucial phase of my life.	
	My experience has been shaped by an unusual rise where crisis suddenly made my ideas valuable. In normal times I remain a symbolic ethical figure while others drive daily agendas. The leadership environment respects my integrity yet often overlooks my analysis. I focus on guiding younger leaders quietly through thoughtful mentorship.	
	My experience has been energetic and expansive	

	because the environment responds well to charisma and clarity. I move through leadership spaces with spiritual grounding that keeps everything effortless. People look to me for direction and inspiration. The culture respects my pace and I navigate it smoothly without feeling weighed down by pressure.	
	My experience has been shaped by balancing heavy responsibilities at work and at home. I often try to build consensus because it keeps teams steady while I manage my own chaos. The environment is structured yet demanding and I take risks fearlessly because I must keep everything moving for my children and my team.	

Across the narratives, a dominant theme is the leadership environment as a space of constant scrutiny, performance pressure, and slow cultural shift. Whether in public sector banks, startups, NGOs, healthcare, or manufacturing, the environment is described as disciplined, demanding, and visibility heavy. Many leaders note that respect is earned primarily through results rather than

empathy or intent. Traditional expectations persist, especially in male dominated or legacy institutions, requiring women to remain alert, prepared, and consistently outperforming norms. At the same time, several accounts reflect gradual improvement toward inclusion, particularly in multinational and mature organizations. Leadership spaces are rarely described as safe or forgiving, but rather as arenas where accountability is relentless and legitimacy must be demonstrated daily. This environment produces a shared understanding that leadership is not comfort driven but outcome focused, and that authority is continuously tested. Across sectors, women perceive leadership climates that reward clarity, discipline, and endurance, while quietly resisting disruption or emotional expression. The environment shapes leadership identity by demanding composure under pressure and strategic adaptation rather than open vulnerability.

Another shared theme is emotional regulation as an essential but invisible form of leadership labor. Many leaders describe actively managing internal stress through journaling, cognitive reframing, spiritual grounding, physical discipline, humor, or quiet withdrawal. Emotional awareness is present, yet public expression is carefully controlled. Anger is suppressed, self doubt hidden, and emotional availability rationed. Several leaders consciously absorb tension to protect teams or avoid conflict, particularly in fast and emotionally loud environments. This reveals how leadership requires sustained inner work that remains largely unseen. Emotional shocks are processed privately through trauma awareness, reflection, or faith, allowing leaders to remain calm anchors in crises. The ability to stay stoic, steady, and composed becomes both a survival mechanism and a leadership signal. This theme highlights that emotional strength is not the absence of feeling but the disciplined management of it, enabling women leaders to function effectively while carrying heavy psychological loads.

Ambition and performance orientation emerge as a unifying thread across experiences, cutting across age, sector, and hierarchy. Leaders repeatedly emphasize targets, delivery, scale, impact, and promotion focus. Ambition is rarely expressed loudly but is strategically protected and continuously active. Many leaders describe themselves as driven by outcomes, data, systems, or measurable results, using performance as the primary language of legitimacy. Even when environments are emotionally demanding or value service over profit, leaders frame their presence as mission driven execution rather than personal fulfillment. Ambition is paired with long term

vision, whether toward organizational growth, CEO readiness, or return to more powerful leadership spaces. This performance focus also acts as armor against gendered skepticism, allowing leaders to anchor authority in tangible achievements. The narratives suggest that ambition is not only personal aspiration but a necessary strategy for survival and advancement in environments that closely monitor women leaders.

A further theme centers on identity negotiation and visibility in leadership roles. Many leaders describe reshaping themselves daily, transitioning from peer to authority, contributor to executive, or young leader to respected decision maker. Visibility is both an asset and a burden, creating pressure to model perfection while being constantly watched. Several leaders note feeling symbolically present while influence fluctuates depending on context or crisis. Others consciously build personal brands, manage image, or project confidence while privately reflecting or questioning direction. Leadership identity is therefore not fixed but actively constructed through behavior, boundaries, and strategic silence. This ongoing negotiation reflects the complexity of occupying leadership spaces where authority must be asserted without alienation and presence must be strong without overexposure. The theme underscores leadership as a process of becoming rather than a stable state.

Finally, gendered resilience and responsibility form a core underlying theme. Across accounts, women describe the need to prove credibility repeatedly, balance ethical leadership with ambition, and carry responsibility beyond formal roles. Some juggle professional intensity with family demands, while others mentor quietly or act as moral anchors in turbulent systems. Being female amplifies expectations, scrutiny, and symbolic meaning, yet also fuels resilience, adaptability, and a strong sense of purpose. Many leaders reject the idea of protection, instead framing hardship as intrinsic to leadership. This resilience is not romanticized but presented as necessary, forged through pressure, accountability, and endurance. Collectively, the narratives portray female leadership as deeply intentional, ethically grounded, and sustained through strength that is practiced daily rather than assumed.

Thematic Analysis of Question 2

What types of gender bias have you personally encountered in your leadership role?	I have faced subtle credibility checks, exclusion from informal networks, and extra scrutiny on assertiveness. When I push hard, it is called aggressive, not decisive. I note these patterns clinically, not emotionally. My ambition absorbs the friction, while my journal captures the impact so it does not derail my upward trajectory focus.	Credibility testing and scrutiny Questioning of technical authority Tone policing of assertiveness Gendered interpretation of behavior Subtle exclusion from influence Marginalization through informal structures Idea appropriation and erasure
	I encounter credibility testing more than open hostility. Technical questions come heavier to me than to male peers. There is also a subtle expectation to sound agreeable rather than firm. I log these experiences internally, process the emotional trace with care, and respond politically without burning bridges that I still need forward.	Emotion based leadership stereotypes Personal life based judgment Strategic silence and restraint Performance as bias counter Long term credibility management
	I encountered direct exclusion early in my career through closed decision rooms and assumptions about travel and	

	endurance. At executive level now it is subtler, appearing in scrutiny patterns and tone policing. I do not personalize it emotionally. I document impact, respond structurally, and trust consistency to correct perception over time steadily.	
	I encounter bias through credibility testing, assumptions about emotional steadiness, and questions about personal priorities after divorce. My leadership is sometimes framed as performance rather than capability. I feel judged against appearance and availability more than outcomes. I track these signals internally, since reputation management still feels critical to my authority today.	
	I have faced assumptions that my warmth means softness, and that technical firmness must come from someone else. In meetings my inputs are	

	sometimes echoed later by male peers and noticed then. I track these patterns sensitively rather than angrily, since I am still learning to hold authority without losing connection daily.	
	What I have faced is subtle questioning of authority, especially from donors and external partners who expect softness from women. They test decisions more, challenge financial judgment more. I do not dramatize it. Bias exists, I register it, then I outperform it. That has been my consistent response every single time without hesitation too.	
	Most bias I notice is subtle and tied to age and gender together. People sometimes assume I was placed here only because of family. I do not openly react to it. I let output speak. Silence works as my shield while performance slowly rewrites their	

	assumptions over time without emotional explanation needed.	
	The bias I encounter is quieter but persistent. There is doubt about whether my success was exceptional or situational. Questions come framed as caution rather than challenge. I am often tested more on compliance with convention than innovation. I respond by exceeding benchmarks rather than debating bias directly and results stay unquestioned.	
	Most bias I face is subtle and wrapped in surprise at my authority. People expect more softness and less critique from me. When my feedback is sharp, it is sometimes labeled emotional. I notice the pattern clearly but prefer documenting competence rather than debating intentions because progress matters more than comfort here.	
	Bias appears as doubt about toughness and decision authority because I am a	

	woman leading alone. Stakeholders expect softer responses in a space I run with control. I notice it when negotiation turns patronizing. I do not correct tone. I correct outcomes. Results reassert rank faster than conversation in my experience today.	
	I encounter subtle dismissal more than open hostility. Technical authority is questioned despite my patent revenue stream. Assertiveness is labelled as aggression while identical behaviour in male peers is praised. Decisions are sometimes rerouted around me under the guise of collaboration, which tests both my patience and my authority daily now often.	
	Bias often appears as doubt about my technical authority and assumptions that I will handle people issues automatically. Because I am conflict avoidant, some read softness as weakness. Detail	

	focus is praised, but strategic judgment is questioned more than with male peers holding similar roles and responsibilities inside high pressure development cycles.	
	Bias has appeared mainly as protective doubt rather than hostility. Some assume emotional leadership means lighter rigor. Others question whether warmth weakens discipline. I address it gently yet firmly. Because I hold power with care, I sometimes have to remind others that compassion and high standards coexist naturally in effective academic governance.	
	Bias shows up as surprise more than hostility. Some assume I was fast tracked only for optics, not merit. Others expect softness in decisions because of my age and gender. I respond with data and calm authority. The questions lessen after outcomes speak,	

	but they never disappear fully in this role yet.	
	Bias has surfaced as a surprise at decisiveness rather than open resistance. I am often asked who shaped my strategies, as if they could not be mine. Authority from a woman still unsettles some spaces. I meet that doubt with results, not defense. Over time, performance quiets suspicion but never erases it fully.	
	I have faced assumptions that a woman should not outwork men or challenge long standing norms. Some senior leaders quietly doubted my readiness for strategic roles. Their decision to promote me late in my career felt like an attempt to contain my influence. Bias often appears through subtle comments and quiet exclusions.	

	I have faced subtle doubts about whether a woman with limited technical depth can lead a retail business effectively despite my strengths in people strategy and cultural stewardship. At times stakeholders assume emotional decisions from me rather than analytical reasoning. These biases reflect outdated norms that ignore the value of human centered leadership.	
	I face subtle bias where my calm and detached style is misread as softness rather than clarity. Some assume a female executive should stay visible only for reassurance which limits strategic involvement. My image is used to strengthen trust while my reasoning is sometimes sidelined even when it carries strong evidence.	
	I have seen mild assumptions about whether a woman can	

	carry influence at scale but they rarely touch me deeply. My performance and presence usually shift those assumptions instantly. Bias exists in corners but it dissolves when people witness confident delivery. I acknowledge it yet it never disrupts my trajectory.	
	I face assumptions that a divorced mother of three cannot handle senior responsibilities or financial risks. Some colleagues expect me to be overly accommodating simply because I try to keep peace. Others question my decisiveness until they see the results. Gendered expectations about caregiving and commitment follow me everywhere.	

Across the accounts, a common theme is credibility testing and heightened scrutiny that women leaders experience compared to male peers. Bias appears through repeated questioning of competence, heavier technical interrogation, and surprise at authority or decisiveness. Many leaders describe being judged on tone, firmness, or delivery rather than substance. Assertive behavior is often reframed as aggression, while identical conduct in men is praised. This constant

need to prove legitimacy shapes leadership behavior, pushing women to rely on consistency, documentation, and measurable outcomes to establish unquestioned authority over time.

Another shared theme is exclusion and marginalization through subtle structural practices rather than overt hostility. Several leaders report being left out of informal networks, closed decision spaces, or strategic conversations under the guise of collaboration or protection. Their ideas are sometimes overlooked, echoed later by others, or selectively amplified. Authority is occasionally rerouted around them, limiting direct influence. This form of bias is quieter yet persistent, reinforcing power hierarchies while allowing organizations to appear neutral. Women respond by tracking patterns carefully and strengthening positional influence through performance rather than confrontation.

A third theme centers on gendered expectations around emotion, warmth, and personal life. Many leaders encounter assumptions that compassion implies softness, calm implies weakness, or emotional intelligence replaces analytical rigor. Personal circumstances such as age, motherhood, or divorce invite inappropriate scrutiny about commitment and endurance. Women leaders are often expected to absorb people issues automatically or remain agreeable to preserve harmony. These expectations constrain leadership expression, requiring deliberate emotional regulation and careful boundary setting to prevent empathy from being misread as lack of authority.

Finally, a strong theme is strategic response to bias through performance and restraint rather than direct challenge. Most leaders describe observing bias clinically, documenting its impact, and choosing political navigation over emotional reaction. Silence, data, results, and disciplined delivery become protective tools. Rather than debating intent, women leaders allow outcomes to correct perception. This response reflects both resilience and realism, acknowledging that bias may never fully disappear but can be managed through sustained excellence, composure, and long term credibility building.

Thematic Analysis of Question 3

How often do you feel that gender related assumptions or stereotypes influence decisions that affect your work?	It is not constant, but it is frequent enough to shape outcomes quietly. In performance discussions, assumptions about emotional durability or family priorities surface indirectly. I register them, reframe their relevance, and refocus on metrics. My strategy is to dominate the scorecard so stereotypes lose negotiating power in promotion conversations at work.	Predictable presence of stereotypes Subtle influence on decisions Gendered task allocation patterns Assumptions about availability Risk and error scrutiny Unequal tolerance for mistakes Symbolic versus functional visibility Restricted access to power forums
	It surfaces often enough to be predictable. Assumptions about physical stamina, shop floor authority, and long hours appear quietly in task allocation. I do not confront each moment directly. I adjust strategy instead, influence assignment flows through relationships, and keep outperforming so that stereotypes lose operational weight over time through steady delivery.	Analytical awareness of bias Performance over confrontation Strategic adaptation and vigilance Outcomes reducing stereotype impact

	It appears occasionally now, far less than in earlier decades, yet it has not vanished. Assumptions surface around emotional style or family prioritization. I observe without reaction and reset conversations toward data. Experience taught me that steady authority, not argument, weakens stereotypes. Progress is visible, but vigilance remains necessary in leadership spaces.	
	It enters decisions more often than people admit. Stereotypes about risk appetite, emotional expression, and relationship choices shape how authority is interpreted. I notice it in funding discussions and narratives. I rarely challenge it directly. I instead adjust framing, visibility, and delivery so that the story supports my position before bias gains control.	

	It appears intermittently but consistently enough to shape tone. Assumptions about confidence, late work, or assertive speech influence task allocation and visibility. I feel it most when transitioning from peer to leader. I adjust through careful communication rather than confrontation, trying to prove steadiness while protecting relationships that still feel newly redefined.	
	Gender assumptions influence decisions more often than people admit, especially in funding, staffing, and public visibility. I notice it frequently but I refuse to dwell on frequency as a complaint. My focus stays on execution speed and measurable outcomes. Assumptions slow systems, results silence them faster than arguments in real world work.	
	Assumptions show up often in meetings, plant decisions, and external negotiations. I sense it	

	regularly, but I do not label every moment. I track what moves the project forward. If a stereotype delays things, I reroute through process and authority rather than emotional debate to keep timelines intact and leadership image steady.	
	It influences decisions often enough for me to stay alert. In strategic meetings, tone and authority are evaluated differently for women. I notice it in how risks are assigned and scrutinized. Still, I do not allow frequency to distract me. My focus stays on delivery and revenue performance that leadership ultimately rewards.	
	It surfaces fairly often in how responsibility is distributed and how mistakes are interpreted. I see men given room to experiment while I am expected to be correct immediately. I track these differences quietly. Instead of confronting every instance, I	

	adapt strategy and deliver outcomes that reduce space for such assumptions going forward.	
	It influences decisions more than people admit, especially in funding perceptions and external partnerships. I see assumptions shape how my authority is read. It happens often enough to be predictable. I do not dwell on frequency. I adjust leverage, timing, and escalation routes to keep control steady despite shifting attitudes around me.	
	They influence decisions more often than people admit. When workloads are assigned, endurance is assumed of me without discussion. When visibility is allocated, risk is redistributed cautiously. My overworking pattern gets normalized as resilience instead of flagged as unsustainable, which skews expectations and performance metrics in subtle persistent	

	ways across many departments	
	They influence decisions more frequently than I wish to admit. Task allocation, communication tone, and expectations of emotional availability all shift subtly. In a small startup, stereotypes travel fast and harden quickly. I notice it weekly when planning reviews or staffing responses where patience is assumed from me by default far too.	
	Stereotypes surface occasionally but they rarely drive final decisions here. I notice them in early conversations, especially around authority and nurturing roles. With steady boundaries and transparent processes, their influence fades. Because I lead with consistency and outcomes, assumptions lose strength before they can shape	

	policy or academic direction in lasting ways.	
	They surface intermittently, not daily. I feel it most in early trust building stages and in how quickly my errors are magnified. Because I am new, stereotypes cling more easily. Once systems stabilize, assumptions loosen. Until then, I stay alert but practiced at not internalizing every doubtful look from others at work.	
	They influence decisions less now than earlier in my career, yet they still appear at strategic turning points. When stakes rise, scrutiny sharpens differently. I notice it in tone, in hesitation, in unsolicited caution. I no longer internalize it, but I register its presence with analytical distance calmly and without emotional charge.	

	It happens more often than anyone admits. People assume a woman should be softer or more accommodating and they react when I demand the same output I deliver myself. These assumptions influence promotions decisions and resource allocation. They underestimate my capabilities because they expect conformity instead of relentless commitment and high discipline.	
	These assumptions appear more frequently when discussions involve long term roles succession and lifestyle expectations. Some people quietly question if I will remain fully committed after marriage. Even when my results are data sound these stereotypes shadow decision making. It becomes a reminder that women leaders often carry scrutiny unrelated to performance.	

	It happens regularly especially when my presence is treated as symbolic rather than functional. Leaders assume I should occupy roles that offer comfort rather than authority. This influences who is invited to key discussions and whose input becomes decisive. The stereotype that women lead through emotion overshadows my deliberate analytical approach.	
	Occasionally subtle stereotypes surface especially in early conversations where people expect reserved behaviour. Once results speak those assumptions fade. Decisions tend to follow data and influence rather than gender in my case. I remain mindful of these patterns but they have not created real obstacles in my leadership path so far.	
	It happens more often than I admit aloud. People assume my priorities shift constantly	

	because I am managing home alone. They expect emotional fragility instead of strength. These stereotypes sometimes influence who gets selected for projects. I push through and take risks anyway because survival does not allow hesitation now.	
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Across the narratives, a consistent theme is that gender related assumptions influence decisions often enough to be predictable, though not always openly acknowledged. Many leaders describe stereotypes surfacing quietly in task allocation, performance reviews, funding conversations, and perceptions of authority. Assumptions about emotional durability, risk appetite, stamina, family priorities, or availability frequently shape how work is assigned and how judgment is applied. These influences are rarely constant or explicit, but they recur at critical moments such as promotions, high stakes projects, succession planning, or early trust building phases.

Another shared theme is differential scrutiny, where women are expected to be correct immediately while others are allowed experimentation. Errors are magnified, risks are questioned more heavily, and tone is evaluated alongside outcomes. Stereotypes also influence visibility, with some leaders being positioned symbolically rather than functionally, limiting access to decisive forums.

A further theme is strategic awareness rather than emotional engagement. Most leaders register bias analytically, choosing not to confront every instance directly. Instead they redirect conversations toward data, metrics, and delivery, believing that argument rarely shifts perception as effectively as performance. Adaptation emerges strongly, with leaders adjusting framing, timing, relationships, and escalation routes to maintain control despite biased undercurrents. Frequency is acknowledged without fixation, as dwelling on it is seen as draining or counterproductive. Over time, experience reduces impact, yet vigilance remains necessary,

especially during transitions, crises, or leadership entry phases. Many note that stereotypes loosen once systems stabilize and results accumulate, though they rarely disappear entirely. Overall, the influence of gender assumptions is described as persistent but manageable, shaping decisions subtly rather than decisively, and compelling women leaders to remain alert, strategic, and outcome focused to prevent stereotypes from gaining operational power.

Thematic Analysis of Question 4

In what ways have these gender related experiences affected your stress levels or emotional wellbeing?	They elevate cognitive load more than visible distress. I stay composed externally, yet internally I process the extra emotional taxation through reframing and structured journaling. Stress becomes a signal to sharpen control, not retreat. I cannot let emotional spillover threaten promotion timing, especially with personal transition approaching in my life right now.	Elevated internal stress Hidden cognitive load Public composure maintenance Emotional containment strategies Control over expression Internalized responsibility for stress Performance linked wellbeing Cumulative emotional fatigue Chronic nervous system alertness Selective emotional detachment
	They create background tension more than overt distress. I feel responsibility to stay composed because visibility is constant at this stage. Emotional reactions are processed later through	Bias as operational noise Personal life stress intersection

	trauma aware reflection and prayer. Stress becomes something I carry privately while presenting clarity publicly. I am careful that internal strain does not slow upward momentum.	
	They have created cumulative pressure rather than visible distress. I learned early to regulate internally and not react publicly. Structured routine protects my emotional bandwidth. Exercise gives me release without narrative. I acknowledge the strain yet remain grounded in how far the system has moved. Perspective reduces emotional burden across long careers.	
	They heighten my internal pressure even when I look composed. I regulate through tight boundaries and private anger suppression. Publicly I perform steadiness, but privately I carry the emotional accounting of assumptions. Stress shows as control rather	

	than collapse. My question is how much strength is protection and how much is performance.	
	They add a layer of invisible pressure. I already carry the strain of proving myself as a new leader, and gender tension sharpens that load. I mask it through perfection and constant emotional reading of the room. By evening I often withdraw socially to recover, even while appearing composed and supportive all day.	
	I do not frame these experiences as emotional burdens. Stress comes from incomplete work, not from bias. If bias appears, I treat it as an operational obstacle to be removed. My wellbeing is tied to progress. Emotional wellbeing grows when the mission advances. Anything else is noise to me in the background.	

	They have minimal impact on my emotional state because I do not sit with feelings for long. Stress does not come from bias for me. It comes from the pressure to appear confident every day. I avoid overthinking and stay focused on systems and visible progress as that keeps doubts silent too.	
	They have increased my internal pressure more than my outward stress. I tend to turn every challenge inward as something I must fix. Emotional wellbeing becomes tied to performance scores. I rarely admit fatigue. Instead, I push harder to stabilize outcomes, believing consistency is the only acceptable response in a public institution.	
	They increase mental noise more than visible distress. I rarely express emotional impact openly. I manage stress	

	through digital withdrawal and inward discipline. Sometimes the pressure pushes me toward spiritual explanations rather than emotional processing. It keeps me functional but detached. I remain composed outwardly while recalibrating privately to keep my role intact.	
	They elevate stress because I already feel displaced from my true career track. Gender experiences add irritants to an already delayed ambition. I manage emotion through food and travel avoidance. I eat, I leave town briefly, and I return control. Wellbeing to me is regulation, not reflection, during this enforced learning phase.	
	They raise my stress quietly but relentlessly. I function in a therapy first mindset, so I track emotional strain the way I track data. Chronic overwork blunts immediate impact, yet gendered resistance adds a	

	sharper edge. The combination keeps my nervous system permanently alert rather than periodically rested even outside work hours.	
	They add a quiet layer of strain that sits beneath operational stress. I ground myself in gratitude to avoid emotional spirals, yet work becomes my main distraction. Because I chase perfection, I process stress through output rather than rest. Over time this converts emotional fatigue into physical tension carried into home life.	
	They have had little hold on my emotional state. I invest deeply in self education and protect restorative sleep as non-negotiable. Bias may pass through the workplace, but it does not lodge inside me. My wellbeing is anchored in routine care, reflection, and a sense of meaning that buffers daily pressures.	

	I do not feel overt distress in the moment. I tend to numb before I break, which delays awareness of emotional cost. Humor gets me through interactions that sting. Later, fatigue settles in quietly. The stress is less explosive and more cumulative, gathering in the background while I keep functioning efficiently outwardly.	
	They affect me more in quiet ways than dramatic ones. I am supported by medication that keeps my baseline steady. Still, repeated questioning of legitimacy creates low grade fatigue. I function with command on the surface, yet inwardly I track every reaction with precision. Emotional stability is maintained, not assumed at all.	
	They elevate stress because I constantly push against limits others place on me. I work harder to silence doubts yet	

	that intensity drains emotional reserves. At times I rely on unhealthy coping methods just to maintain momentum. Even so I refuse to let bias break my drive or reduce my standards.	
	They add emotional strain because workplace expectations collide with personal challenges. I use breathwork grounding to stay centered yet the tension between love and career weighs heavily. Bias intensifies this burden by making me prove stability while navigating a conservative family expectation that questions the legitimacy of my professional aspirations.	
	These experiences create internal strain because I suppress my frustration to maintain steadiness expected from me. I release emotions in private through writing or creative work which prevents buildup. Yet repeated	

	assumptions quietly erode confidence. Balancing public calm with private reflection becomes exhausting especially when my voice is valued only during crisis.	
	Honestly these experiences do not create stress for me. I regulate my state with mindfulness and spiritual centering which keeps external noise from entering my emotional space. I understand the dynamics intellectually but they never destabilize me. I often have to pretend discomfort just to align with expected narratives during wellness programs.	
	They increase stress beyond what I let myself acknowledge. My emotional space is already crowded with raising three children alone. Bias adds pressure yet I keep moving because stopping feels dangerous. I survive by denying how heavy everything feels and telling	

	myself I just need to reach the next day.	
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Across the narratives, a clear theme is that gender related experiences elevate internal stress rather than producing visible emotional disruption. Many leaders describe heightened cognitive load, background tension, or quiet strain that must be managed privately while maintaining composure publicly. Stress accumulates through constant self-monitoring, pressure to appear confident, and the need to suppress frustration, anger, or fatigue. Another shared theme is emotional containment as a leadership requirement. Leaders repeatedly describe regulating feelings through journaling, structured routines, spiritual practices, exercise, humor, or withdrawal, ensuring that emotional spillover does not affect performance or reputation. Wellbeing becomes closely tied to control rather than expression, with steadiness valued over release.

A further theme involves the internalization of responsibility, where stress is turned inward and processed as something to be fixed through harder work, perfection, or consistency. Emotional wellbeing often becomes linked to output, progress, and visible results, reinforcing overwork and limiting rest. Many accounts also reflect cumulative and delayed emotional impact. Rather than immediate distress, leaders experience fatigue, mental noise, physical tension, or nervous system alertness that builds quietly over time. Bias rarely causes collapse but contributes to chronic strain layered onto existing pressures.

Another theme is selective detachment, where some leaders consciously refuse to emotionally engage with bias, reframing it as operational noise or an obstacle rather than a personal wound. This detachment protects momentum but can create emotional distance. Finally, intersection with personal life intensifies stress for some, particularly those managing caregiving, health, or personal transitions alongside leadership demands. Bias magnifies existing burdens, requiring constant regulation to remain functional. Overall, gender related experiences shape emotional wellbeing through sustained internal labor, forcing women leaders to prioritize composure, discipline, and survival over visible vulnerability, resulting in resilience that is effective yet emotionally costly over time.

Thematic Analysis of Question 5

Can you share any instances where you felt anxiety or burnout due to workplace bias?	Yes, during a major policy rollout, resistance disguised as procedure fell disproportionately on me. I worked longer cycles, carried invisible justification labor, and absorbed quiet doubt. Anxiety showed up as mental fatigue, not panic. I documented triggers in my journal, reframed the narrative, and delivered outcomes that silenced opposition at that time.	Subtle bias driven anxiety Authority bypass and doubt Psychological fatigue without collapse Overcompensation through overwork Performance as self protection Invisible justification labor Suppressed emotional expression Cumulative burnout patterns Hyper vigilance and proof seeking Responsibility without influence
	During a night shift optimization project, my authority was bypassed in favor of a junior male engineer. I worked around it silently, delivered results, and absorbed the emotional hit later. Anxiety showed as restlessness, not withdrawal. I surrendered the frustration spiritually, then recalibrated politically to secure decision	Emotional distancing as coping Life role amplified strain

	control in subsequent reviews cycles.	
	Earlier in my career, I faced project denial after maternity because resilience was quietly questioned. I accepted the moment, trained harder, and returned with outcomes that shifted trust. Anxiety existed but I did not collapse into it. Routine and physical exertion stabilized me until credibility restored my authority fully within the system.	
	During a funding round, an investor directed all strategic questions to my male operations head despite my role. I stayed calm publicly and handled the tension later. That week carried insomnia and sharp irritability that I hid completely. I set stronger boundaries afterward and reinforced authority through data until the narrative corrected itself.	
	During my first review cycle as a leader, a client questioned	

	my authority and asked for a senior man to confirm decisions I had already made. I stayed calm outwardly but felt intense self doubt later. That week I worked compulsively and withdrew from my team socially to manage the anxiety quietly.	
	Anxiety or burnout did not originate from bias in my case. They came earlier in my life from relentless institutional pressure. In this NGO role, workload is lighter. When bias appears, I grow sharper, not weaker. I do not grant it the power to exhaust me psychologically the way people expect it.	
	I have not experienced burnout from bias directly. Any anxiety I feel comes from proving myself quickly and consistently. When situations get uncomfortable, senior family leaders step in and	

	resolve tension. That safety net reduces long term emotional strain, though it also pushes me to perform harder in visible leadership situations daily.	
	There was a phase early after my joining when scrutiny was relentless and comparative. Every delay was magnified. I felt anxiety then, not because of bias alone but because of expectation overload. I did not take time off. I tightened control, increased hours, and treated strain as temporary weakness I had to overcome.	
	There was a review meeting where my technical decision was questioned repeatedly while a male peer with similar data was accepted quickly. I felt internal anxiety that day. I did not voice it. I went home, shut off all devices, and spent hours alone resetting my thinking before returning quieter and controlled.	

	There was a donor review where my commercial language was labeled aggressive while a male peer was praised as decisive. The meeting drained me more than usual. I felt irritation and fatigue that evening. I coped through overeating and a sudden weekend trip. I did not speak about the impact afterward formally.	
	After my second promotion, I faced a wave of doubt framed as concern. I worked sixteen hour days to prove inevitability. The bias was not loud, but it was heavy. I developed anxiety masked as productivity until exhaustion forced me into therapy rather than collapse at work which might have ended me.	
	During a production delay, questions arose about whether I could manage pressure as a married woman. I responded by doubling work rather than voicing the hurt. I slept little,	

	tracked every defect obsessively, and mediated every dispute myself. The anxiety felt practical at first, then quietly overwhelming by the third week entirely.	
	I have not experienced classic burnout from bias, yet I recall early years when authority was gently tested. Instead of anxiety, I felt curiosity about where it came from. I responded by learning more about power dynamics and psychology. That self education transformed discomfort into mastery rather than fatigue or resentment lingering.	
	During an early unit meeting, my authority was questioned in a joking tone that landed hard. I laughed it off publicly, then overworked for weeks to compensate. I stayed cool on the outside yet ran on adrenaline. That pattern pushed me close to burnout	

	without a dramatic crash at that time exactly.	
	There was a phase when rumors questioned whether my promotion was symbolic. I responded by working without pause and sleeping poorly. The anxiety stayed unspoken until a crisis forced me to seek structured help. That moment corrected my illusion of invincibility and brought medication into my life as a stabilizing ally finally.	
	There were moments when senior leaders dismissed my proposals only to accept the same ideas when voiced by men. That created anxiety because I knew the issue was not performance but perception. Carrying that weight without acknowledgment led to burnout. Still my instinct was to work harder rather than slow down.	
	There were moments during succession planning when	

	people speculated about my marriage affecting leadership readiness. These conversations triggered anxiety because they reduced my work to assumptions about my future household. That period created emotional fatigue even though my performance was strong. I leaned on community support to recover perspective.	
	Anxiety grew during a period when a major strategy was shaped without my involvement even though my signature was expected on every outcome. The disconnect between responsibility and influence created emotional fatigue. The crisis following that moment forced my sudden visibility and the shift was jarring. Suppressed stress accumulated significantly.	
	There has not been a moment where bias created anxiety or	

	burnout for me. I move with ease through challenges because my discipline and clarity remain intact. Even when bias appears I observe it without absorbing it. My energy stays balanced. Sometimes I feel expected to describe stress that I simply do not experience.	
	There were evenings when I stayed late to prove commitment while my children waited at home. The fear of being judged as less dedicated pushed me toward burnout. I felt anxiety rising yet I kept working because I could not risk losing credibility. Bias magnified the weight I already carried.	

Across the narratives, a dominant theme is anxiety emerging from bias related incidents that remain subtle yet psychologically demanding rather than openly confrontational. Many leaders describe moments where authority was bypassed, questioned, or diluted through procedural resistance, tone policing, or symbolic exclusion. These experiences generated anxiety expressed as mental fatigue, restlessness, insomnia, irritability, or compulsive overworking rather than visible breakdown. Another shared theme is overcompensation as a coping response. Faced with doubt or marginalization, leaders frequently responded by extending work hours, tightening control, documenting relentlessly, or delivering exceptional results to silence resistance. While

effective in restoring authority, this response often pushed stress underground and delayed recognition of emotional cost.

A further theme involves invisible labor and suppressed emotion. Leaders carried justification work, emotional restraint, and reputational repair quietly, choosing not to voice distress in professional spaces. Anxiety was processed privately through journaling, spiritual practices, withdrawal, overeating, travel, or physical exertion. Burnout, when it appeared, was rarely sudden. Instead it accumulated through prolonged hyper vigilance, constant proof seeking, and sustained adrenaline driven performance. Several accounts describe reaching therapy, medication, or structured support only after exhaustion forced acknowledgment. Another theme is the disconnect between responsibility and influence, where women were held accountable for outcomes without being fully included in decision making. This mismatch intensified anxiety by stripping control while maintaining pressure. Some leaders reported minimal emotional impact, reframing bias as fuel or operational noise. However, even these narratives reveal disciplined emotional distancing rather than absence of strain. Finally, intersection with life roles intensified burnout risk, particularly for those navigating caregiving, marriage assumptions, or maternity related doubt. Overall, anxiety and burnout linked to workplace bias appear as quiet, cumulative, and performance masked experiences, shaped less by dramatic events and more by sustained pressure to prove legitimacy without faltering.

Thematic Analysis of Question 6

How do you usually cope with difficult situations that you believe are linked to gender bias?	I respond with data, not drama. I challenge bias through performance visibility, precise documentation, and controlled confrontation when necessary. Privately, I cognitively reframe the event to reduce emotional charge and write it	Strategic restraint image management Composure and tone control Reputation protection leadership credibility Selective confrontation timing silence Structure documentation data
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	out to regain clarity. Publicly, I stay strategic, because reputation stability is crucial at this career inflection point for me.	reliance Formal processes system correction Emotional suppression private processing
	I soften my voice but sharpen my positioning. I document patterns, align with influential sponsors, and choose timing carefully. Emotionally, I process impact through trauma aware inquiry and spiritual surrender rather than suppression. I do not rage publicly. I redirect energy into strategic movement so bias never becomes an obstacle in record.	Therapy reflection spiritual regulation Performance excellence as defense Hyper responsibility self reliance Work focused coping momentum
	I address bias calmly through structure, not emotional display. I clarify expectations, realign accountability, and move discussions into formal review when needed. Internally, I return to routine and physical training to discharge tension. Years of leadership taught me that steady response creates more	

	correction than confrontation ever produces in complex executive environments.	
	I retreat into structure rather than confrontation. I reinforce limits on access, control my tone, and suppress flashes of anger that could damage my image. I talk issues through logic, not emotion. Later, I process the residue quietly. My coping is about staying composed in public while restoring balance in controlled private spaces.	
	I respond gently on the surface and strategically underneath. I clarify expectations, restate my role, and lean into relational influence rather than force. Internally I tighten control through perfection and suppress frustration to stay composed. Later I distance myself to reset. It is not healthiest rhythm, but it keeps me functional now.	
	I cope by confronting issues directly and swiftly. I	

	document decisions, establish authority through performance, and close debate with data. I do not seek emotional processing circles for bias. I seek removal of the obstacle. My method is simple, act, correct, move forward. Delay is what weakens leadership and invites unnecessary doubt.	
	I deal with such situations quietly. I do not confront emotionally or publicly. I correct through structure, documentation, and escalation through family leadership if required. Silence protects my momentum. I believe reaction wastes energy. Adjustment through systems keeps me moving without drawing attention to conflict that interrupts growth speed and future focus.	
	I cope by becoming more self reliant and more structured. I do not seek emotional reassurance. I document	

	decisions, anticipate resistance, and remove ambiguity through preparation. If bias is present, I assume responsibility to neutralize it through superior readiness. Depending on others feels risky when credibility is at stake at this level.	
	I rely on restraint and precision. I respond through written clarity rather than emotional reaction. If bias appears, I dissect the situation quietly and choose exact moments to speak. I do not explode, I puncture. My criticism is sharp but strategic. That helps me protect influence without exposing vulnerability in leadership stages.	
	I cope by crisis framing. I treat bias linked conflict as a problem to be solved, not a feeling to be explored. I shift focus to logistics, targets, and authority lines. If pressure	

	rises, I travel. Distance resets control. Avoidance keeps me functional and moving until the next demand replaces the tension.	
	I confront it directly but process it privately. My dominant presence helps halt overt behaviour quickly. Internally I document patterns for systemic response. I lean on therapy rather than venting, and I work through anger with structure. Overworking remains my flawed coping mechanism even as I challenge it with deliberate personal discipline.	
	I cope by smoothing tensions before they surface. I reframe bias as operational noise so I can keep functioning. Gratitude helps me steady emotions, while work distracts me from confronting them fully. I document patterns quietly and adjust workflows instead of escalating. It preserves surface harmony but	

	delays deeper resolution of unfair dynamics.	
	I first soften the emotional temperature, then I clarify boundaries. As a caretaker by nature, I listen deeply, yet as a principal I must decide firmly. I rely on pause, breath, and reflection before response. When bias appears, I treat it as a teaching moment rather than a battlefield for personal victory.	
	I deflect first with humor, then I reset internally. I rarely confront directly unless patient safety or staff dignity is at risk. Emotional numbing gives me short term protection. Later I process through reflection and long walks. It is not perfect coping, but it keeps me steady when conversations feel loaded suddenly.	
	I first contain the situation with authority so instability does not spread. Later I process the emotional residue	

	through reflection and clinical support if needed. I do not delay help until collapse anymore. Crisis taught me that strength also includes timely dependence. Command guides my actions, but self reflection governs my recovery.	
	I cope by doubling my effort and focusing on what I can control. I push through with discipline and sometimes rely on quick fixes for stress instead of healthier methods. I avoid seeking help because I trust my own resilience more than reassurance from others. Work becomes my stabilizing force.	
	I cope by grounding myself through steady breathwork then examining the situation with clear data rather than reacting emotionally. I also turn to trusted peers who remind me that shared experiences build resilience. Community supported healing helps me stay anchored and	

	prevents bias from clouding ethical clarity or long term vision.	
	I tend to suppress the first emotional response then turn to structured analysis to understand the situation without impulse. Later I release tension through creative expression which gives perspective. Mentoring younger colleagues also helps because guiding their confidence reminds me that my impact exists beyond the decisions I am excluded from.	
	I respond through calm presence and mindful observation. I do not personalize such situations. I acknowledge them internally then redirect energy toward influence and solution building. My spiritual practices keep me grounded and unaffected. Coping feels unnecessary because I rarely feel impacted yet I maintain	

	awareness for the sake of responsible leadership.	
	I cope by gathering support from a small trusted group at work and simply denying the emotional impact to myself. I focus on consensus building because harmony helps me avoid extra conflicts. When needed I take bold decisions anyway because fear cannot guide me. I just keep going without pausing.	

Across responses, a dominant theme is strategic restraint and image management in the face of perceived gender bias. Individuals emphasize maintaining composure, controlling tone, and avoiding public emotional expression in order to protect credibility, authority, and long term reputation. Bias is treated as a contextual risk rather than a personal affront, requiring careful timing, selective confrontation, and deliberate silence when visibility could cause harm. This theme reflects an adaptive logic shaped by high stakes environments where stability, perception, and influence are seen as essential to continued leadership and professional momentum.

Another strong theme centers on structure, documentation, and data as primary coping mechanisms. Participants consistently describe responding to bias through written clarity, performance evidence, formal processes, and system level correction rather than interpersonal confrontation. Documentation becomes both protection and power, allowing individuals to reframe bias as a solvable operational issue. This reliance on logic and structure offers a sense of

control, reduces emotional exposure, and positions the individual as objective and competent, reinforcing authority while minimizing vulnerability in environments perceived as unforgiving.

Emotional regulation and private processing also emerge as a shared pattern. Many accounts describe suppressing immediate emotional responses, then later discharging or processing impact through therapy, reflection, physical routines, spirituality, or creative expression. Emotions are acknowledged but contained, managed away from public view to preserve functionality. While several respondents note the personal cost of suppression, they frame private recovery as necessary for sustaining performance and leadership capacity under repeated pressure linked to bias.

A final theme highlights hyper responsibility and self reliance as coping strategies. Individuals often respond to bias by increasing effort, preparation, and control, assuming it is their responsibility to neutralize unfair dynamics through excellence. Support is sought selectively, if at all, with work itself becoming a stabilizing force. This approach prioritizes momentum and agency, allowing progress to continue even when deeper inequities remain unresolved.

Thematic Analysis of Question 7

What personal resilience strategies have helped you maintain your mental health in challenging organizational situations?	Structured self-observation through journaling is my anchor. I track stress patterns, reframe limiting interpretations, and convert emotional pressure into execution energy. I also maintain physical routine and strict cognitive boundaries at work. My resilience is not softness; it is disciplined self-regulation designed to keep	Disciplined structure routines Predictability for nervous regulation Intentional self-regulation Emotional containment control Private emotional processing Therapy spirituality reflection Purpose driven resilience Productivity as stabilization Excellence performance grounding
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	me competitive and promotion ready focused.	Selective support systems Controlled vulnerability leadership Self-reliance with boundaries
	Daily spiritual grounding keeps my nervous system regulated. Trauma aware reflection helps me separate present pressure from past threat. I also practice quiet excellence as resilience, letting consistency speak louder than reaction. I avoid impulsive battles at this stage. My strength lies in patience, discipline, and building enduring credibility that supports leadership access.	
	Consistency is my strongest resilience tool. Fixed routines, early exercise, and regulated schedules keep my nervous system predictable. I do not vent frequently, but I recover daily. I draw strength from perspective across decades of progress. Resilience for me is not emotion sharing. It is disciplined recovery that protects leadership judgment consistently.	

	Boundary building is my main protection. I decide where my availability ends and defend it strictly. I release pressure through controlled workouts and controlled silence. I also track validation seeking patterns so they do not run me. Resilience for me is less about sharing and more about managing access to my emotional labor.	
	My strongest resilience comes from relational grounding and inner discipline. I seek meaning in helping others grow while privately managing my fears through structure and high standards. I reflect sometimes in isolation. Perfection gives me safety. Emotional intuition helps me lead with care even when I am unsure of my footing inside.	
	My resilience comes from discipline, routine, and a high tolerance for pressure built over decades. I compartmentalize emotion	

	and conserve energy for decisions that matter. Purpose is my stabilizer. The mission outweighs discomfort. When people collapse emotionally, I tighten structure. Structure has always kept me steady in chaos, even when others cannot.	
	My resilience comes from routines, planning, and emotional distance. I do not process stress through conversation. I process it through checklists, updates, and forward planning. Vision keeps me steady. When I feel pressure, I redirect into productivity instead of reflection. Silence helps me stay efficient during high visibility leadership responsibility phases daily.	
	My resilience comes from routine, discipline, and relentless self-correction. I set personal targets higher than institutional ones. I rarely lean on others during crisis. I train	

	myself to carry pressure privately. Faith in structure and solvency keeps me steady. I believe control over work is the safest form of emotional management.	
	My resilience comes from isolation, reading, and skill acquisition. When pressure rises, I reduce digital noise and return to study. I trust learning to stabilize me more than conversation. I lean on spiritual framing to avoid emotional spirals. It keeps me composed, when I feel uncertain about leadership competence at this early stage.	
	My resilience is built around momentum and appetite regulation. I eat when anxious, work through crises, and book travel once outcomes stabilize. I do not process uncertainty through discussion. I reset through movement and indulgence, then return sharper. It is not reflective	

	resilience, but it sustains authority and focus under prolonged pressure cycles.	
	Resilience for me is engineered, not romanticized. Therapy is scheduled as rigidly as board reviews. I compartmentalize research, leadership, and personal grief with clinical precision. Exercise is functional, not aesthetic. Most importantly, I allow controlled vulnerability in trusted spaces so pressure never accumulates without structured release that could destabilize my judgement later.	
	My core resilience comes from structure and gratitude rituals. I list small wins daily to counter erased contributions. Perfectionism gives me control when systems feel unfair. I protect mental health by staying useful and precise. Marriage gives emotional anchoring, yet	

	I still lean on productivity as my safest psychological shelter during startup weeks.	
	My strongest resilience strategy is disciplined rest paired with constant learning. I read across psychology, neuroscience, and contemplative practice. Sleep is sacred in my home and calendar. Because I replenish consistently, stress rarely accumulates. I model these so others feel permitted to care for minds without guilt or fear of being judged.	
	My resilience comes from controlled intensity. I sprint when required and rest before collapse, even if briefly. I also lean on playful detachment to avoid emotional overload. My relationship keeps me grounded in ordinary life. Being cool under pressure helps me choose response over reaction when demands rise unexpectedly in my role.	

	My resilience rests on disciplined monitoring of my mind as carefully as my balance sheet. Medication gives steadiness, reflection gives meaning. I audit my reactions after every crisis. I no longer equate silence with strength. The deeper strategy is knowing when to seek help before performance begins to impersonate health entirely alone.	
	My resilience comes from strict self-reliance and an ability to push through discomfort. I stabilize myself by maintaining performance levels that silence doubt. Pleasing others temporarily reduces friction but deep focus on output keeps me grounded. It is not perfect but it allows me to keep moving forward despite pressure.	
	Regular grounding practices consistent reflection on values and honest conversations with my inner circle have been	

	essential. I rely on emotional intelligence more than technical mastery to navigate complexity. By integrating mindful breathing with structured decision frameworks I can maintain balance even when professional and personal expectations collide at difficult moments.	
	Resilience comes from disciplined emotional containment supported by private creative outlets where I can express what leadership spaces do not allow. I also invest deeply in developing others because their growth steadies me. Seeing future leaders become stronger helps transform my sidelined moments into a meaningful long term contribution.	
	Resilience for me is natural rhythm supported by daily mindfulness and integrative wellness habits. I prioritize clarity meditation and	

	intentional breathing which keeps everything balanced. I also rely on inner purpose rather than validation. These practices help me remain centered even when others feel overwhelmed. Stability has always been my baseline experience.	
	Resilience comes from necessity. I rely on support groups of friends and colleagues who check on me. Beyond that I often push emotions aside because confronting them feels overwhelming. My willingness to take risks helps me act quickly even when I am exhausted. Survival becomes strategy and strategy becomes routine.	

Across responses, a central theme is disciplined structure as the foundation of resilience. Participants consistently describe routines, schedules, journaling, planning, and cognitive monitoring as stabilizers during organizational stress. Structure is framed as protection rather than rigidity, allowing individuals to regulate nervous systems, conserve decision energy, and remain promotion ready. By anchoring daily life in predictability, they reduce emotional volatility and sustain judgment under pressure. Resilience here is intentional self-regulation, built through repetition and control rather than emotional disclosure or spontaneous coping.

Another prominent theme is emotional containment paired with private processing. Many respondents manage mental health by suppressing immediate emotional reactions in public while releasing pressure later through therapy, reflection, spirituality, creativity, or physical movement. Emotional expression is carefully rationed to trusted or solitary spaces so leadership presence remains intact. While some acknowledge costs such as isolation or delayed processing, containment is viewed as necessary for maintaining authority and clarity. Resilience is therefore about timing emotion wisely, not eliminating it, ensuring feelings do not disrupt performance or perception.

A third theme highlights purpose, productivity, and excellence as stabilizing forces. Individuals frequently cope by redirecting stress into work, learning, service, or skill acquisition. Output, consistency, and usefulness provide psychological grounding when systems feel unfair or chaotic. Many rely on high standards, perfection, or mission driven focus to neutralize doubt and restore control. Productivity becomes both shield and anchor, offering reassurance of competence and forward momentum even when emotional needs remain unmet or postponed.

A final theme centers on selective support and controlled vulnerability. While self reliance dominates, several responses emphasize the importance of carefully chosen support systems such as therapy, partners, inner circles, or peer groups. Help is sought deliberately and early enough to prevent collapse, not as emotional venting but as maintenance. This balanced approach reframes resilience as knowing when to depend and when to contain, allowing sustained leadership without confusing endurance with health or silence with strength.

Thematic Analysis of Question 8

How would you describe the support you receive from colleagues and supervisors	Support is situational. A few seniors value performance over identity and back me strongly. Others remain	Performance contingent support Results driven credibility Conditional organizational
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when facing gender related challenges?	formally neutral, which translates into silence during bias moments. Peer support is quietly present but cautious. I absorb this reality pragmatically, journal the emotional residue, and keep alliances transactional so nothing destabilizes my advancement path forward.	backing Formal structural support Process over advocacy Limited emotional validation Selective mentor solidarity Cautious peer support Silence during bias Strategic alliance management Self-reliance coping External emotional regulation
	Support is uneven but navigable. One senior mentor provides strategic air cover, while peers offer guarded solidarity. Many remain cautious in mixed gender tensions. I do not expect rescue. I leverage what exists, return value quietly, and process disappointment privately through surrender and reflection so my emotional load never leaks into performance.	
	Support at this level is professional and structured. Board members respect my outcomes and peers engage as equals. Earlier in my journey	

	support was conditional. Now it is earned. I still do not depend emotionally on validation. I maintain steadiness through routine and self-regulation rather than expecting rescue from others externally.	
	Support is performance based rather than emotional. My core team respects results and protects execution. Personal validation is limited. There is little space for vulnerability at this level in a startup culture. I accept that reality. I rely more on self-containment than reassurance, even when gender tension is clearly present in meetings.	
	Support is present but still shifting as roles adjust. Some former peers struggle to recalibrate boundaries, while senior leaders are encouraging but observant. I feel backed structurally, yet emotionally I still feel alone in moments of gender tension. I lean on a few	

	trusted colleagues quietly rather than broadly sharing vulnerability at work.	
	Support is functional, not emotional. Colleagues respect my authority because performance demands it. Sympathy is limited, and that suits me. Supervisory backing depends on results, not gender narratives. I do not expect hand holding. I expect alignment. When alignment exists, gender fades into irrelevance in daily execution and measurable institutional delivery systems.	
	Support is always available because of family leadership presence in the organization. Colleagues treat me cautiously but respect my position. When gender issues appear, my parents or senior relatives intervene directly. That buffer keeps conflict low. It also reminds me that I must prove independence through	

	consistent results until credibility stands alone.	
	Support is professional and largely performance driven. Colleagues cooperate because outcomes demand it. Supervisors are demanding and exacting rather than emotionally affirming. When gender concerns arise, they are acknowledged formally but not explored deeply. I do not expect protective cushioning at my level. Support is measured in authority and backing decisions only.	
	Support is practical but not personal. Supervisors respect my technical background more than my leadership position now. Colleagues are cooperative but guarded. When gender issues arise, they are handled through formal channels, not conversation. I neither seek nor receive emotional backing. I rely on procedure and distance to keep stability and focus.	

	Support is formal and strategic rather than emotional. Supervisors observe my performance here as a test, not a comfort assignment. Colleagues cooperate but keep distance. When gender challenges arise, they are discussed in committees, not privately. I rely on structural backing more than relational warmth. That suits my goal temperament and plans.	
	Support is pragmatic more than emotional. Colleagues respect the revenue my work generates and the authority it commands. Supervisors defend outcomes, not always process. When gender issues arise, backing is conditional on evidence and performance. It is not warm support, but it is strategically reliable most days which suits my professional season.	
	Support is situational and informal. The founder relies on me heavily but expects	

	emotional labor without naming it. Colleagues appreciate my mediation but rarely step in for me. When gender issues arise, responses are well meaning yet inconsistent. There is empathy in moments, but little structural backing for sustained protection or shared burden.	
	My colleagues offer respect and genuine warmth. Being a private institution, senior oversight is limited, yet trust is abundant. When gender challenges arise, the board listens carefully and responds with fairness. Support may not be loud, but it is steady and sincere. I never feel isolated in decision making or emotional load.	
	My supervisor is supportive but demanding, which suits my temperament. Colleagues treat me as capable, though some still test limits. When gender issues surface, support	

	comes quietly rather than overtly. I do not feel alone, but I do feel I must prove steadiness repeatedly to earn unconditional trust within the unit consistently.	
	My colleagues are loyal and highly professional. Support is expressed through reliability rather than emotional language. Supervisors treat me as a peer now, not a protected exception. When gender challenges arise, they back public authority firmly. Privately, conversations remain restrained but respectful. I feel supported in structure, not sentiment on this level.	
	Support is limited because many are intimidated by my work ethic. Colleagues admire the results yet hesitate to stand beside me during conflict. Supervisors rarely intervene and prefer to maintain comfort instead of fairness. Most support I feel comes indirectly	

	from the workers who see me as a model of persistence.	
	Senior leaders preparing me for future responsibility offer strong moral support and trust my judgment. Colleagues respect my interpersonal strengths and often share solidarity during stressful periods. Yet some remain uncertain about my ability to manage marriage alongside leadership. My closest mentors actively counter such assumptions through guidance and sponsorship.	
	Support varies. Some colleagues trust my ethical stance and seek my mentorship yet others contribute to the quiet sidelining that limits my involvement. Supervisors often rely on my presence for credibility but rarely create space for my analysis. The support I feel is more symbolic	

	encouragement than practical inclusion.	
	I receive strong support because colleagues trust my capability and leadership presence. Supervisors appreciate my consistency and often highlight my influence during major initiatives. Even when subtle bias exists the overall network around me is encouraging. They expect me to rise and that collective confidence reinforces a smooth collaborative environment.	
	Some colleagues offer genuine understanding while others quietly doubt my capacity. Supervisors show formal support but often overlook the silent burdens of single motherhood. I appreciate those who include me in decision making and share workloads. Still much of my support comes from	

	informal networks rather than structured systems.	
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Across responses, a dominant theme is that support is primarily performance contingent rather than emotionally affirming. Colleagues and supervisors are described as respectful and cooperative when outcomes are strong, authority is clear, and value is visible. Backing is earned through delivery rather than extended through identity or circumstance. Gender related challenges are often tolerated rather than actively addressed, and protection tends to appear only when credibility is already established. Support is therefore experienced as conditional, pragmatic, and tied closely to results.

Another recurring theme is the prevalence of formal and structural support over relational warmth. Many respondents describe committees, procedures, boards, and formal authority as the main sources of backing during gender related challenges. Issues are acknowledged through systems rather than conversation, and resolution is routed through process instead of advocacy. While this offers stability and predictability, it also limits emotional validation. Individuals adapt by relying on rules and hierarchy, accepting distance as the cost of remaining effective and focused.

A third theme highlights selective and uneven interpersonal support. Participants frequently report that only a small number of mentors, seniors, or trusted peers offer genuine solidarity. Peer support exists but is cautious, inconsistent, or constrained by fear of association. Some colleagues remain neutral or silent during bias moments, which is experienced as abandonment even when no hostility is shown. As a result, individuals manage alliances strategically and share vulnerability narrowly to avoid professional risk.

A final theme reflects self-reliance shaped by organizational realities. Because support is situational and unpredictable, many respondents internalize the expectation to manage gender challenges independently. Emotional needs are met outside formal structures through journaling, reflection, family, or informal networks. While some experience sincere encouragement and sponsorship, most describe support as something to be leveraged carefully rather than trusted fully.

This reinforces a coping stance where stability comes from personal regulation more than collective protection.

Thematic Analysis of Question 9

What role do organizational policies play in shaping your experiences with gender fairness or bias?	Policies create surface level protection and symbolic assurance, especially in public sector systems. On paper, fairness exists. In practice, interpretation depends on reporting lines and local culture. I use policy as leverage when needed, yet I know advancement still rides on perception, not clauses. That awareness keeps me alert and politically precise.	Baseline policy protection Symbolic assurance fairness Policy culture disconnects Leadership driven interpretation Informal power dynamics Strategic policy leverage Selective escalation restraint Policies as protective shield Visibility over written rules Overt discrimination coverage Subtle bias persistence Compliance versus true equity
	Policies provide procedural safety but culture controls application. On paper, equality is clear. In corridors, discretion rules. I use policy selectively as protection, not as a weapon. My political sense tells me when to escalate and when to absorb. The aim is not moral victory but uninterrupted credibility	

	growth at early leadership stage.	
	Policies have transformed the structure of opportunity. They create formal access, grievance visibility, and leadership accountability. In earlier years we had none of that. Now enforcement varies by region, but the framework exists. I value policy as a stabilizing base, while knowing cultural discipline must continue to mature alongside it globally today.	
	Policies in a startup move faster than formal structures. We borrow frameworks more than live by them. There is intent toward fairness, but enforcement bends under growth pressure. I use policies as signal rather than shield. Real protection comes from visibility, investor confidence, and how indispensable your role appears during scale phases.	

	Policies provide me with formal protection and language when boundaries are crossed. As a new leader, they offer psychological safety as legal structure. Yet culture carries more daily weight than documents. I often rely on values modeled by my seniors rather than on clauses when navigating subtle bias and power shifts today.	
	Policies create the frame within which behavior either improves or stagnates. Clear accountability reduces bias far more than symbolic statements. Where rules are vague, prejudice breathes. I value strict processes over emotional appeals. Fairness becomes real only when it is audited, measured, and linked to consequences. Otherwise, it remains theatre in institutions.	
	Policies matter but family culture matters more here. Official rules exist for fairness, yet most decisions	

	flow through trusted relationships. This reduces open conflict but also limits formal challenge. Gender fairness often depends on who speaks for you at the top. For now, that works in my favor within this private structure.	
	Policies are strongly embedded in public sector functioning and they shape most experiences. They offer procedural fairness and clear reporting lines. However, interpretation still depends on senior discretion. Gender fairness lives more in execution than in paper. I rely on policy structure to protect neutrality when expectations and pressures rise around performance.	
	Policies in the organisation provide formal protection and defined reporting routes. On paper, fairness is well structured. In practice, interpretation depends on managers. I study the policy	

	language closely and use it strategically when required. It gives me silent leverage when direct confrontation does not suit my temperament as a new leader.	
	Policies in the NGO are inclusive in language but slow in enforcement. They guide reporting and representation, yet execution depends on board priorities. I see policy as a shield when pressure turns ideological. It protects process but not ambition. For someone like me, rules are tools to stabilize power, not moral anchors.	
	Policies set the ceiling of safety even when culture lags. Formal grievance systems give me leverage, not comfort. Equity frameworks exist, but enforcement depends heavily on leadership intent. In public sector structures, process is strong yet slow, which protects fairness in theory while delaying relief in	

	practice for those already carrying overload.	
	Policies are minimal and still evolving, which leaves fairness dependent on personalities. There is no formal grievance route, only conversation. That suits my conflict avoidant nature but also limits protection. In a startup, speed outpaces safeguards. Gender fairness becomes intention based rather than assured, which raises mental load when issues surface without documentation.	
	Policies in our college provide a clear ethical backbone and consistent procedures. They reinforce dignity, equity, and psychological safety. While culture carries much of the daily behavior, policy offers reassurance when difficult moments arise. Knowing there is structure behind fairness allows me to lead with calm	

	confidence instead of defensive vigilance habitually.	
	Policies here are formal and fairly protective, which gives me baseline security. They clarify reporting lines and behavior standards. However, policy cannot regulate tone or informal power games. It helps when situations become explicit, but most early bias lives in subtleties that policy does not easily capture or resolve in daily work	
	Organizational policies are my strongest buffer against subjectivity. In public sector systems, procedures carry authority beyond personality. They protect me when personal narratives attempt to intrude on professional evaluation. I trust policy deeply because it reduces emotional bargaining. Still, policy cannot correct every subtle signal that circulates	

	beneath formal compliance in practice.	
	Policies exist but their impact depends on leaders who interpret them. On paper they promote fairness but in practice they often protect complacency. Without accountability policies become symbolic. They do little to challenge the culture that allowed my late promotion despite years of outperforming most of the leadership team	
	Policies encourage fairness but culture delivers the true experience. Clear guidelines exist for equal opportunity and leadership development but subtle biases still shape interpretations. Strong policy intent helps but reinforcement through transparent decisions is vital. When policies are applied consistently they become a foundation that protects women leaders from unspoken expectations.	

	Policies promote fairness yet their implementation depends heavily on existing culture. They protect my formal authority but do little to address subtle exclusion from decision making. Policies create structure but not influence. Real equity comes when leaders act beyond compliance and question why a woman is present only during public emergencies.	
	Policies create structure and clarity which helps ensure fairness across teams. In my case these policies reinforce an environment where merit and influence matter more than gender. They also guide discussions around leadership equity. While I personally do not feel hindered these policies protect the broader ecosystem and maintain cultural balance.	
	Policies exist but their impact feels uneven. They protect against overt discrimination	

	yet do little to address subtle biases about commitment or leadership capacity. The policies help on paper but the reality of balancing home and senior responsibilities does not receive enough acknowledgment. Cultural change matters more than written rules.	
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Across responses, a central theme is that organizational policies provide baseline protection and symbolic assurance rather than lived equity. Many participants describe policies as offering formal safety, grievance routes, and legitimacy when boundaries are crossed. On paper, fairness appears structured and accessible. In practice, policies function more as a ceiling of safety than a guarantee of justice. Individuals remain aware that clauses cannot replace perception, influence, or credibility, and therefore treat policy as leverage rather than assurance.

Another prominent theme is the gap between policy and culture. Respondents consistently note that while rules define acceptable behavior, everyday experiences of gender fairness are shaped by leadership intent, local norms, and informal power dynamics. Interpretation varies widely across units, regions, and reporting lines. Where culture is disciplined and accountability is enforced, policies gain meaning. Where discretion dominates, bias persists quietly. This disconnects forces individuals to develop political awareness and cultural fluency alongside policy knowledge.

A third theme highlights the strategic use of policy rather than emotional reliance on it. Many participants study policy language carefully and deploy it selectively, choosing when to escalate and when to absorb. Policies are used as shields, signals, or silent leverage, not as moral weapons. Especially in startups and family led systems, respondents describe relying more on visibility, indispensability, and relationships than on written safeguards. Policy becomes one tool among many for navigating advancement without disruption.

A final theme emphasizes that policies address overt discrimination more effectively than subtle bias. While formal rules protect against explicit misconduct, they struggle to capture tone, exclusion, delayed promotion, or assumptions about commitment. Several respondents note that fairness in documentation does not resolve invisible burdens or unequal expectations. As a result, policies are seen as necessary but insufficient. Real equity is believed to emerge only when leaders act beyond compliance and consistently translate policy into transparent decisions and shared accountability.

Thematic Analysis of Question 10

What specific organizational interventions do you think would help reduce gender bias for female leaders?	Transparent promotion criteria, blind performance reviews, and mandatory accountability for biased conduct would matter most. Informal power networks need visibility, not denial. I also believe grievance handling must be time bound and consequence driven. My rebel leadership side wants systems disrupted, not softened, because cosmetic sensitivity does not shift real behavior in hierarchy.	Transparent accountability systems Audited promotion pipelines Bias linked performance outcomes Reduced discretionary power Access to decision authority Control over resources Power defining opportunities Workload equity audits Invisible labor recognition Structured mentorship sponsorship Cultural change with systems Leadership development dialogue
	Targeted sponsorship for high potential women would change trajectories faster than generic workshops. Bias accountability must link to	

	performance ratings, not just statements. Cross functional exposure should be deliberately assigned, not informally granted. I want systems that reward influence with results, not visibility with proximity. Only structural incentives will correct behavior at scale	
	Succession planning with intentional female sponsorship would create lasting correction. Bias metrics should be linked to leadership scorecards, not optional values. Access to operational profit roles must be distributed early. I believe fairness improves fastest when career defining assignments are audited for balance rather than left to nomination and comfort driven choices.	
	Clear reporting mechanisms and investor enforced accountability would shift behavior fastest. Startup culture reacts to capital signals	

	more than moral appeals. I also believe leadership visibility should be diversified intentionally. When only one image of power dominates, bias multiplies quietly. Interventions must attach equity outcomes to reputation, not just inclusion language metrics.	
	Mentorship bridges with senior women and men would ease transition stress for new leaders like me. Transparent role authority communication would reduce peer confusion. I also believe bias training should include emotional dynamics, not legality. When early leaders feel supported relationally, they grow steadier and less perfection driven in they manage teams.	
	Interventions must be structural, not sentimental. Transparent hiring metrics, blind evaluations where possible, financial decision audits, and performance	

	driven promotions reduce bias faster than workshops alone. I have no patience for optics without outcome. If systems change, behavior follows. That is the only intervention I truly trust to endure beyond leadership turnover.	
	Stronger external audits, neutral grievance channels, and cross plant leadership reviews would help reduce hidden bias. Family protection should not override fairness always. Systems must mature with scale. I believe structure corrects what emotion cannot. Once accountability is visible, gender becomes less of an unspoken variable in daily leadership evaluation and promotion.	
	Interventions must focus on transparent evaluation and succession planning. Senior level women need visibility in revenue driving portfolios, not only support roles. Independent review	

	committees can reduce subjective bias. I believe representation at the decision core matters more than symbolic forums. Change will be sustained when power allocation is balanced and performance linked.	
	Selection panels with diverse representation, transparent promotion metrics, and peer review systems would help. Bias survives where discretion is unchecked. Early women leaders need visible technical authority, not symbolic titles. I believe process design will correct many hidden attitudes faster than motivational speeches. When systems change, behavior follows. That logic scales across organisations.	
	Bias will reduce when authority and capital allocation become fully transparent. Female leaders must control budgets, not only programs. External evaluation	

	of leadership outcomes would limit subjective filtering. I believe power follows money even in NGOs. When women command financial consequence, respect will follow faster than any value based intervention campaign effort.	
	Transparent promotion audits would dismantle quiet favoritism. Workload equity tracking is essential for leaders who are silently overextended. Mentorship with actual decision power must replace symbolic panels. Finally, enforcement of rest and rotation norms would challenge the illusion that self sacrifice is the price of female legitimacy within publicly funded health systems.	
	Clear role boundaries would reduce hidden gendered tasks immediately. People management should be shared, not quietly assigned to women. Workload audits	

	would reveal invisible mediation labor. Formal escalation channels would help conflict avoidant leaders seek justice without fear. Finally, leadership metrics must reward operational delivery and not emotional endurance alone in small teams.	
	First, intentional listening forums where women leaders speak without interruption. Second, formal mentoring that includes power holders who can actually shift decisions. Third, workload compassion audits to prevent silent overextension. Finally, recognition systems that honor caretaking leadership alongside performance metrics. These interventions together gently correct bias without provoking resistance or fear unnecessarily	
	Structured mentorship for young women leaders would help greatly. Early leadership	

	coaching focused on authority, not only empathy, is critical. Clear communication norms would reduce casual boundary testing. Rotational exposure between clinical and managerial tracks could ease the false choice I feel between being a doctor and being a leader at this stage.	
	First, transparent succession pipelines must replace informal sponsorship. Second, evaluation panels need real gender balance with equal voice. Third, mental health access should be built into executive contracts. Finally, leaders must be trained to recognize power distortion, not just bias. These steps reduce symbolic inclusion and create operational fairness across public banks.	
	Real change would come from transparent promotion criteria independent evaluation panels and strict monitoring of decision patterns.	

	Interventions must confront leaders who rely on comfort instead of competence. Mentorship programs could help but accountability is essential. Without consequences for biased behaviour interventions remain gentle suggestions rather than meaningful transformation.	
	Interventions should include structured succession evaluations unbiased performance data and open dialogues about societal expectations placed on women. Leadership workshops that address real scenarios can help. Providing space for personal challenges also matters because many biases emerge when roles intersect with life decisions. Practical accountability mechanisms would strengthen these efforts.	
	Interventions should include transparent decision pathways	

	formal accountability for representation in strategy discussions and recognition of mentorship as leadership work. Female leaders should not be limited to symbolic roles. Encouraging open dialogue about silent exclusion can shift culture. Structured involvement must replace assumptions about who belongs in analytical conversations.	
	Interventions that highlight capability based narratives and visibility of women in influential roles would help. Programs that integrate leadership with wellness can shift cultural assumptions. Encouraging open dialogue about subtle biases also matters. When organisations show women excelling across functions it naturally erodes stereotypes and strengthens collective confidence.	
	Interventions should include flexible workload structures	

	transparent evaluations and real recognition of caregiving responsibilities. Leaders should be trained to examine unconscious bias about divorced mothers or women managing complex households. Support programs should be practical not symbolic. Meaningful interventions require honest conversations and real accountability.	
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Across responses, a dominant theme is the need for transparent and accountable systems to reduce gender bias. Participants consistently call for clear promotion criteria, audited succession pipelines, blind or data driven evaluations, and explicit linkage between bias related behavior and performance outcomes. Transparency is viewed as the strongest corrective force because it limits discretion, exposes favoritism, and shifts power from informal networks to visible rules. Respondents emphasize that without measurable consequences and time bound grievance resolution, interventions remain symbolic and fail to change entrenched hierarchies or daily decision making.

Another central theme highlights access to power defining opportunities rather than symbolic inclusion. Many participants stress that bias reduces only when women lead revenue generating portfolios, control budgets, and hold authority over strategic decisions. Mentorship and sponsorship are valued only when mentors possess real influence and actively open doors to career defining assignments. Visibility alone is seen as insufficient if it is not paired with control over resources. Equity is therefore framed as redistribution of opportunity and influence rather than representation in support roles or advisory forums.

A third theme focuses on workload equity and recognition of invisible labor. Respondents repeatedly mention the need to audit task distribution, emotional labor, and caretaking expectations that disproportionately fall on women leaders. Clear role boundaries, shared people management responsibilities, and recognition of mentorship as leadership work are seen as essential. Without such interventions, women remain overextended while their contributions stay undervalued. Addressing bias requires making hidden labor visible and correcting assumptions that endurance or self sacrifice define female legitimacy.

A final theme emphasizes cultural change supported by structured development and dialogue. Participants advocate for leadership training that addresses power dynamics, emotional patterns, and subtle exclusion rather than legal compliance alone. Safe forums for women leaders to speak, combined with coaching focused on authority and confidence, are viewed as stabilizing early leadership experiences. However, respondents are clear that dialogue must be reinforced by structure. Cultural shifts endure only when supported by systems that reward fairness and challenge comfort driven decision making consistently.

Thematic Analysis of Question 11

How do you believe training or awareness programs could improve the mental health outcomes of women in leadership roles?	When training is evidence driven and leader modeled, it can normalize help seeking without branding it as weakness. That matters for women who are ambitious and guarded. Awareness shifts language, not just attitude. When emotional literacy rises, stress becomes discussable earlier. For me, that means	Leader modeled mental health Normalized help seeking Emotional literacy language Early stress recognition Awareness with accountability Structured psychological safety Leadership responsibility sharing Capability driven confidence
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	fewer battles and cleaner performance under pressure.	Authority skill building Mastery over reassurance Invisible load recognition Prevention focused culture
	When training addresses unconscious power patterns and emotional safety together, it reduces silent distress. Women then regulate earlier rather than carrying unspoken strain. That matters for performance longevity. Awareness alone is not enough, but repeated dialogue reshapes norms. For me, it would mean fewer calculations around expression and focus on execution without monitoring.	
	When programs integrate mental health literacy with leadership accountability, outcomes improve. Women learn to regulate without hiding struggle. Managers learn to respond without stigma. Over time, this reduces silent overload. For someone like me, it would normalize recovery practices alongside performance.	

	Training works best when it reinforces routine regulation and shared responsibility.	
	When programs address anger regulation, identity stress, and boundary building together, women stop internalizing damage. Mental health improves when expression is not seen as weakness. I think it would reduce silent self policing. For someone like me, it means less performance layering over distress and more permission to be human under pressure.	
	Programs that normalize emotional struggle alongside leadership skill would reduce silent suffering. When women see their inner conflict reflected without shame, they seek help earlier. Training that teaches boundary setting, perfection regulation, and relational authority would protect mental health directly. For me, it would validate that	

	growth can feel disorienting without signaling weakness.	
	Training can help only when it is tied to standards and accountability. Awareness without enforcement becomes therapy talk, not leadership development. Mental health outcomes improve when women are judged by the same metrics as men and rewarded accordingly. Equality of pressure produces equality of competence. Comfort is not the goal in leadership.	
	Training can help if it stays practical and not overly emotional. I prefer programs that teach communication, authority, and decision clarity. Mental health improves when women feel competent and protected by process. Awareness without structure does not change outcomes much. Skill backed confidence reduces inner strain better than discussion alone for leaders.	

	Training can help when it strengthens authority rather than vulnerability framing. Programs must prepare women to handle scrutiny, conflict, and consequence. Mental health improves when leaders feel competent under pressure. Awareness alone is insufficient. Capability reduces fear faster than reassurance. I believe structured leadership conditioning creates stronger emotional outcomes for women leaders.	
	Training can help when it strengthens decision confidence and communication authority. Programs that only focus on emotion do not suit my temperament. Women feel mentally safer when they understand system power and influence clearly. Awareness should come with applied leadership skills. Competence reduces inner conflict faster	

	than affirmation for sustained leadership strength.	
	Training may help if it improves influence and negotiation strength rather than emotional exposure. I value programs that teach leverage, authority, and stakeholder control. Mental health outcomes improve when women feel powerful, not merely supported. Confidence rooted in dominance lasts longer than reassurance. Awareness without command does little to reduce stress at levels.	
	Awareness programs alone do little unless tied to accountability. However, well designed training can recalibrate how authority is perceived in women. When leaders understand emotional labor, invisible load, and burnout science, they intervene earlier. That early intervention directly protects mental health more effectively	

	than any motivational campaign operating inside public hospitals.	
	Training can normalize struggles that women quietly carry in leadership. When awareness links bias to burnout and not just hurt feelings, action becomes acceptable. Programs should teach founders to spot overload masked as consistency. That shift alone would protect mental health more than inspirational talks. It would convert gratitude based coping into culture.	
	Training can give language to experiences that women often carry quietly. When leaders understand the nervous system, sleep science, and emotional regulation, they change how they structure work. Awareness then moves beyond tolerance into prevention. That prevention is what truly improves mental health outcomes, not crisis	

	intervention after damage is done already.	
	Training can give language to experiences we often joke away. When people learn how humor hides distress and how numbness masks overload, responses become kinder and more timely. Awareness also helps peers intervene without stigma. That shared understanding would make early support feel normal rather than dramatic or career threatening for women.	
	Training can legitimize psychological support as a leadership competency rather than a weakness. When women see medication, therapy, and reflection modeled at the top, shame dissolves. Awareness also teaches teams how crises actually unfold. This shifts help seeking from emergency reaction to preventive habit, which transforms long term mental stability for leaders.	

	Training can make people recognize the emotional cost of bias and the pressure women carry when overperforming to be taken seriously. Awareness programs can normalize open discussion and reduce isolation. They can encourage healthier coping instead of silent endurance. For them to matter leaders must participate sincerely not symbolically.	
	Training can normalise conversations about pressure points women face especially those linked to marriage expectations. Awareness programs that integrate mental health practices like breathwork and community circles can build healthier coping routines. When organisations acknowledge these realities openly women leaders feel less isolated and more empowered to manage emotional load.	

	Training can help leaders understand the quiet strain that comes from being present yet unheard. Awareness programs that include emotional expression methods and creative release options can support healthier processing. When organisations acknowledge suppressed stress women feel less isolated. Mindful recognition of invisible burdens improves mental health and performance.	
	Training that blends mindfulness emotional regulation and practical leadership tools can help women manage stress more easily. Awareness programs allow teams to recognize pressures women face which can reduce silent burdens. Integrative wellness frameworks also encourage healthier internal landscapes. Even if I do not feel stress personally I see their value for others.	

	Training can help colleagues understand the emotional load women carry beyond office walls. Awareness programs that build empathy and provide safe support groups could ease silent stress. When organisations normalize honest discussion about mental health women feel less pressure to hide exhaustion. Such programs can create healthier work cultures.	
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Across responses, a central theme is normalization of mental health through credible, leader modeled training. Participants emphasize that when senior leaders openly engage with mental health practices, help seeking becomes legitimate rather than a signal of weakness. Awareness programs that raise emotional literacy give women language to name stress earlier, reducing silent overload and prolonged self-monitoring. This normalization allows pressure to be addressed before it converts into burnout, improving clarity, confidence, and sustained performance under demanding leadership conditions.

Another strong theme highlights the integration of awareness with accountability and structure. Respondents repeatedly stress that training improves outcomes only when paired with clear standards, shared responsibility, and managerial competence. Programs that teach leaders how to respond to distress without stigma and intervene early are seen as protective. Mental health improves when regulation, recovery, and boundary setting are treated as leadership disciplines rather than personal struggles. Awareness without enforcement is viewed as ineffective, while structured application creates predictable psychological safety.

A third theme centers on capability building as a pathway to mental wellbeing. Many participants prefer training that strengthens authority, decision clarity, negotiation, and system understanding rather than focusing solely on emotional expression. Competence reduces fear, self-doubt, and internal conflict, especially in high scrutiny roles. When women feel skilled, influential, and protected by process, mental strain reduces naturally. Confidence rooted in mastery is described as more stabilizing than reassurance alone, supporting long term leadership endurance.

A final theme emphasizes prevention through shared understanding of invisible load. Participants describe training that explains nervous system stress, burnout science, emotional labor, and life role pressures as transformative. When teams recognize how bias, humor, or overperformance mask distress, support becomes timely and non-threatening. Awareness shifts cultures from crisis response to prevention. This shared insight reduces isolation and legitimizes recovery practices, allowing women leaders to maintain mental health without sacrificing ambition, authority, or professional credibility.

Thematic Analysis of Question 12

Is there anything about your journey as a female leader that you think organizations need to understand better in order to protect and promote mental wellbeing?	Organizations must understand the double labor of proving competence while managing perception. Many of us self-regulate emotions privately so ambition is not misread. We protect promotion momentum even while carrying stress intentionally. I want systems to recognize that composure is not absence of strain. Support	Invisible emotional labor Composure masking strain Private self-regulation Legitimacy and perception management Early success pressure Identity transition strain Delayed authority stress Invisible mediation work Quiet grief and loneliness Cultural and family expectations
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	must exist before collapse, not after earned.	Meaning and purpose seeking Need for proactive support
	Organizations should understand that early success does not mean emotional immunity. Many of us are quietly processing pressure while performing ambition flawlessly. We manage trauma histories, spiritual meaning, and political awareness simultaneously. The cost is invisible. Support structures should arrive before exhaustion, not after collapse. Protecting wellbeing at entry leadership protects the pipeline.	
	Organizations must understand that endurance does not mean absence of strain. Many senior women suppress emotion to maintain stability for others. We carry families, legacy pressure, and public responsibility together. I want systems that honor progress made while expanding recovery support.	

	Recognition of both strength and fatigue is what protects long leadership.	
	They need to understand that success can cost quietly, even when chosen freely. Divorce did not break my ambition, but it sharpened the question of presence and absence. I live between visibility and loneliness. Protecting mental wellbeing means allowing leaders to redefine worth beyond output without threatening identity or public image stability.	
	They need to understand that lateral promotion carries identity grief. You lead people who once led you. That shift creates invisible stress that is not about competence alone. Many of us mask confusion with perfection and warmth. Mental wellbeing initiatives must address role transition psychology, not workload or gender narratives in isolation.	

	Organisations must understand that endurance is built, not gifted. My journey was shaped by constant evaluation, public scrutiny, and irreversible decisions. That pressure formed capacity. Protecting mental wellbeing does not mean removing difficulty. It means ensuring purpose is strong enough to justify the weight people carry. Purpose makes strain survivable in leadership.	
	Organisations should understand that early leadership with protection feels easy on the outside but creates constant pressure to prove legitimacy. My wellbeing is not shaped by overload but by image maintenance. Silence is my defense. If systems reward merit clearly, leaders like me would not need to hide uncertainty so carefully daily.	
	Organisations must understand that being a high	

	value hire amplifies pressure far beyond normal workload. My journey is defined by constant evaluation in every forum. Mental wellbeing here is shaped by expectation density. Support must consider that visibility multiplies strain. Recognition of that reality is essential to protect senior women who carry.	
	Organisations need to understand that sudden transition from technical identity to leadership creates quiet internal strain. I carry pressure without displaying it. My journey is shaped by silent learning and constant self correction. Mental wellbeing for people like me depends on space to recalibrate without public exposure. Privacy becomes protection in this phase.	
	Organisations must understand that being placed	

	in a values learning role under probationary logic creates silent resentment and pressure. I lead because I must, not because I believe in this model yet. My mental wellbeing is shaped by delay in power access. Until profit authority returns, strain will remain functional but unresolved.	
	They must understand that success can coexist with quiet grief. My breakthroughs and dual promotions came alongside postponed intimacy and loneliness. The system celebrates output and ignores the delayed cost to personal life. Protecting mental wellbeing for women leaders requires acknowledging that ambition does not cancel human longing or emotional timelines entirely.	
	Organisations must understand that mediation drains as much as execution. My journey is defined by stitching gaps between people	

	while guarding output quality. Because I avoid conflict, stress hides behind functionality. I am married yet mentally unfinished most evenings. Protecting wellbeing means valuing invisible bridge work as real labor, not an feminine tendency.	
	They need to understand that calm is the result of invisible discipline. My happiness is not accidental, it is practiced through sleep, study, and self-care. I give abundantly at work and at home, yet I replenish deliberately. Protecting women leaders means teaching them how to protect their own energy without guilt.	
	They need to understand that early leadership can look calm while uncertainty churns inside. I function well, yet I quietly question if I skipped a needed clinical chapter. I am not burning from workload so much as from choice ambiguity. Protecting	

	wellbeing means honoring career timing doubts, not only visible stress signals.	
	Organizations must understand that outward success can coexist with inner incompleteness. I live the symbols society worships, yet I still question meaning. My leadership is steady, my home is strong, but my spirit seeks depth. Protecting mental wellbeing means making space for existential inquiry, not only stress containment and performance metrics alone.	
	Organizations must understand that women who work relentlessly do so not only from ambition but from constant need to counter doubt. Late recognition damages morale even when it feels like a reward. They should know that unspoken bias forces women to push beyond healthy limits.	

	Fairness delivered on time protects wellbeing.	
	Organizations must understand that grooming women for top roles requires attention to both organizational and personal contexts. My stress today comes from balancing a future CEO path with cultural expectations around marriage. Recognizing these dual pressures and creating supportive spaces can protect wellbeing and help women sustain commitment without emotional compromise.	
	Organizations must understand that accidental leaders like me often rise during crisis then return to limited influence. That transition creates emotional conflict. They should recognize that ethical presence does not replace strategic participation. Creating safe space for women to express suppressed concerns would	

	protect wellbeing and strengthen overall leadership effectiveness.	
	They should understand that not all leaders experience stress in the same way. Some of us move through challenges with natural ease due to long practice in inner alignment. Organisations should create flexible wellbeing models rather than assuming one emotional pattern. Supporting diverse mental experiences helps everyone thrive more authentically.	
	They need to understand that some women lead entire households alone while carrying full leadership responsibilities. We do not always show stress because survival demands constant movement. Recognizing this invisible load and creating real support systems would protect wellbeing. Organisations must understand that strength does	

	not mean the absence of struggle.	
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Organizations need to understand that visible composure in women leaders often conceals sustained emotional labor and constant self-regulation. Many female leaders manage pressure privately to avoid ambition being misread or authority being questioned. Early success and calm performance do not signal emotional immunity but reflect disciplined containment of strain, doubt, and expectation density. Mental wellbeing protection requires systems that recognize effort before collapse, reward merit transparently, and acknowledge that endurance is built through continuous evaluation rather than inherited resilience. Timely fairness and early support protect both individuals and leadership pipelines.

They must also recognize that leadership transitions create identity strain beyond workload. Moving from technical roles to people leadership, lateral promotions, crisis elevation, or probationary authority generates quiet grief, uncertainty, and suppressed resentment. Women often mask confusion with warmth and precision to maintain legitimacy. Role transition psychology, delayed power access, and mediation work demand emotional energy that remains invisible. Wellbeing initiatives should legitimize recalibration time, privacy, and voice without penalty, while valuing bridge building as real labor rather than assumed disposition.

Finally, organizations should understand that success can coexist with grief, loneliness, and existential questioning. Women leaders often carry family responsibility, cultural expectations, postponed intimacy, and meaning seeking alongside public achievement. Some sustain alignment through deliberate self-care, while others move through survival mode without visible distress. One size wellbeing model fail here. Protecting mental wellbeing means allowing redefinition of worth beyond output, honoring diverse emotional patterns, and creating spaces where purpose, timing doubts, and human longing can be expressed without threatening identity, credibility, or future opportunity.

4.5 Integrated Discussion

The synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data presents a coherent, if challenging, picture. The journey of female leadership is architecturally distinct, built on a foundation that requires managing a parallel track of professional delivery and continuous identity defence. The prevalent biases—maternal wall, tone policing, credibility testing—are not isolated incidents but interlocking mechanisms that maintain traditional power structures. Their primary impact is psychological, converting the workplace into a cognitively taxing environment where safety is contingent on perpetual performance and emotional control.

The strong correlation between multi-form bias exposure and severe anxiety is the most critical finding of this integration. It moves the discussion from anecdote to evidence, proving that these "subtle" experiences are concrete determinants of health outcomes. The thematic narratives explain the "how": bias triggers internalized stress, which is managed through draining emotional labour and overcompensation, within a context of isolated responsibility, ultimately depleting psychological resources.

However, the analysis of positive deviance offers a roadmap for both individuals and organisations. It demonstrates that resilience is not a mystical trait but a set of learnable practices: cognitive reframing, purpose-drive, rigorous self-care, boundary setting, and the strategic cultivation of mastery and support. For organisations, the implications are clear. Creating a culture that fosters these resilient traits requires moving beyond policy to active cultivation. This means providing access to sponsorship, training in political astuteness and negotiation, leader-modelled vulnerability to destigmatize help-seeking, and, most importantly, implementing the transparent, accountable systems (e.g., audited promotions, bias-linked performance metrics) that reduce the need for exhausting defensive strategies in the first place. Protecting mental wellbeing is not about removing challenge but about dismantling the unfair, invisible burdens that currently make the leadership path for women disproportionately hazardous to their health.

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, the integrated findings presented in this chapter paint a coherent and compelling portrait of contemporary female leadership as a journey navigated within a distinct psychological

architecture. The data unequivocally demonstrates that gender bias is not an occasional disruption but a fundamental feature of the environment, operating through predictable, systemic mechanisms such as the maternal wall, tone policing, and relentless credibility testing. These are not mere perceptions but experiences with measurable prevalence and, more critically, quantifiable consequences. The powerful correlation between exposure to multiple biases and severe anxiety underscores a direct causal pathway where professional challenges become profound personal health risks. This link is mechanistically explained by the thematic narratives, which detail the exhausting cycle of internalized stress, emotional containment, and overcompensation that women employ to maintain their authority and credibility in the face of doubt.

However, this study does not end with a narrative of deficit. The analysis of positive deviance provides a crucial counterpoint, revealing resilience as a cultivatable set of strategic practices rather than an innate trait. The resilience exhibited by thriving leaders is characterized by strategic detachment, purposeful anchoring, disciplined self-regulation, and the curated cultivation of mastery and support. These practices offer a viable roadmap for individual leaders seeking to fortify their own psychological sustainability. For organizations, the implications are both a mandate and an opportunity. The evidence clearly indicates that the cost of current environments is borne significantly by women's mental wellbeing. Therefore, the imperative extends beyond symbolic diversity initiatives to the intentional design of cultures and systems that reduce the very need for such exhaustive defensive resilience. This requires implementing transparent, accountable processes for promotion and project allocation, actively challenging gendered stereotypes about communication and commitment, and fostering leadership models that validate a spectrum of styles. Ultimately, protecting and promoting the mental wellbeing of female leaders is not a supportive sidebar but a strategic necessity for building robust, equitable, and genuinely high-performing organizations. By dismantling the unique burdens identified here, institutions can unlock the full potential of their leadership pipelines, transforming resilience from a private survival mechanism into a shared foundation for collective success.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has systematically charted the complex terrain navigated by women in leadership, revealing a landscape defined by a persistent undercurrent of bias, a significant attendant toll on mental wellbeing, and the emergence of resilient, strategic adaptation. The integrated findings from Chapter 4 present a clear, evidence-based mandate: the status quo is not only inequitable but is actively detrimental to individual health and organizational potential. Moving from diagnosis to intervention, this concluding chapter translates these insights into a pragmatic blueprint for change. It outlines a dual-focused roadmap, presenting a actionable policy toolkit for organizations committed to substantive reform and proposing critical avenues for future scholarly inquiry to deepen our collective understanding. The recommendations are deliberately structured to initiate immediate, tangible progress while laying the groundwork for sustained, systemic transformation.

5.1 Policy Toolkit: From Awareness to Accountable Action

Creating environments where female leaders can thrive requires moving beyond awareness workshops and diversity statements to implement structural changes that alter daily practices and power dynamics. The following toolkit proposes a scaffolded approach, combining immediate, procedural "bias interrupters" with long-term, cultural strategies focused on equity of opportunity.

5.1.1 Immediate Actions: Disrupting Bias in Real-Time

The research underscores that biases are enacted in mundane, recurring processes. Therefore, the first line of defense is to embed accountability into these very mechanisms.

Bias Mitigation through Structured Processes: A critical immediate action is the implementation of mandatory bias interrupters in key talent management processes, especially performance reviews, promotion deliberations, and high-stakes project staffing. A "bias interrupter" is a simple, procedural checkpoint that forces a moment of reflection before a decision is finalized. For example:

- In performance reviews, managers could be required to complete a pre-submission checklist: "Have I evaluated this leader based on outcomes rather than style?" "Have I used gendered descriptors (e.g., 'aggressive,' 'emotional,' 'helpful') that I would not apply to a male peer?" "Is my feedback focused on business results or on perceived personality traits?"
- In promotion committee meetings, a designated "bias monitor" could be tasked with observing patterns of questioning, ensuring female candidates are not subjected to disproportionate credibility testing, and interrupting if ideas are appropriated.
- For project staffing, a requirement to review the gender distribution of "glamour work" (high-visibility, strategic projects) versus "office housework" (essential but non-promotable tasks) every quarter can reveal and correct inequitable assignment patterns. These interrupters make the invisible visible, creating institutional friction against automatic, biased judgments.

Audit and Transparency in Promotion Criteria: Organizations must conduct an immediate, data-driven audit of their promotion pipelines over the last five years. This audit should analyze not just outcomes but process: Who was sponsored? Who had access to "stretch" assignments? How long did it take individuals with similar profiles to reach certain levels? The aggregated, anonymized results should be shared organization-wide, alongside a clear, transparent rubric for future promotions that emphasizes measurable results and defined competencies over subjective "fit" or "potential." This directly counteracts the pervasive "credibility testing" and opaque decision-making identified in the study.

5.1.2 Long-Term Strategies: Architecting Equitable Pathways

While interrupters manage symptoms, long-term health requires rebuilding systems to prevent the disease of bias from taking hold. This involves intentional engineering of opportunity and culture.

Leadership Pipelines: From Mentorship to Sponsorship: A primary long-term strategy must be the formalization of **robust sponsorship programs for mid-career women**. The distinction between mentorship and sponsorship is crucial. Mentorship offers advice; sponsorship uses personal capital to advocate for an individual's advancement. The resilient leaders in this study often benefited from unofficial sponsors. Organizations must systematize this. Effective programs proactively identify high-potential women, pair them with senior leaders (of any gender) who have

significant organizational influence, and hold those sponsors accountable for providing three specific things:

- 1) **Visibility:** Introducing sponsees to key networks and decision-makers.
- 2) **Advocacy:** Championing them for pivotal, revenue-impacting roles and promotions behind closed doors.
- 3) **Protection:** Providing "air cover" and support during challenging assignments. Sponsor effectiveness should be a measured component of senior leadership performance reviews, incentivizing the investment of social capital in diverse talent.

Redefining Leadership Models and Rewarding Invisible Labor: Organizational culture must evolve to value a broader spectrum of leadership behaviors. This requires a long-term initiative to:

- **Model and Reward Inclusive Leadership:** Incorporate 360-degree feedback on inclusive behaviors—such as equitable sharing of credit, fostering psychological safety, and mitigating team conflict—into leadership competency models and compensation structures.
- **Recognize and Redistribute "Invisible Labor":** Conduct regular "workload equity" surveys to identify if tasks like mentoring junior staff, organizing team events, or departmental administration fall disproportionately to women. Formalize and rotate these responsibilities, and include their effective management as a valued criterion in performance assessments. This legitimizes and shares the often-unseen labor that currently depletes time and energy without advancing careers.
- **Integrate Wellbeing into Leadership Development:** Given the stark mental health correlations, support must be structural, not peripheral. Long-term strategy involves integrating wellbeing modules—on boundary setting, sustainable performance, and managing microaggressions—into core leadership training. Furthermore, providing leaders with explicit, budgeted resources for team mental health support (e.g., access to coaching, resilience workshops) frames psychological safety as a strategic leadership responsibility, not a personal wellness perk.

5.2 Future Research Directions

While this study illuminates critical patterns, it also opens doors to essential new questions. Future research must build upon this foundation to explore deeper complexities and measure the efficacy of interventions over time.

5.2.1 Longitudinal Studies

The most pressing need is for longitudinal research tracking the mental health and career trajectories of women across different career stages. A snapshot study captures correlation, but longitudinal data can reveal causation and evolution. How does the mental health impact of maternal wall bias at mid-career affect long-term retention and ascension to the C-suite? Does the development of resilient strategies in early leadership buffer against burnout later, or does the cumulative toll eventually overwhelm even the most robust defenses? Tracking a cohort over 10-15 years, with periodic psychological and professional assessments, would provide unparalleled insight into the chronic nature of gendered stress and the long-term effectiveness of coping and organizational interventions.

5.2.2 Intersectional Analysis

This study focused on gender as a primary lens, but the experience of bias is not monolithic. Urgent research is needed that employs a robust **intersectional framework** to understand how race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and class compound or uniquely shape the experience of leadership bias and mental health outcomes. For instance, are the resilience strategies employed by a White female leader equally available or effective for a Black female leader facing both racial and gender stereotypes? Qualitative and quantitative research that disaggregates data to explore these intersecting identities is crucial for developing truly inclusive policies that do not inadvertently center the experience of the most privileged women.

5.2.3 Measuring the ROI of Structural Interventions

As organizations begin to implement the kinds of systemic tools recommended above, rigorous academic research must follow to **quantify their efficacy and organizational return on investment (ROI)**. This requires partnership between researchers and corporations to conduct controlled studies. For example, comparing business units that implement mandatory bias-interrupted promotion panels with control groups that use traditional methods, measuring outcomes not only in diversity metrics but also in team innovation, employee engagement, retention rates, and financial performance. Demonstrating the tangible business value of

psychological safety and equitable process is the most powerful catalyst for widespread adoption of these reforms.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey toward creating leadership environments where women can succeed without sacrificing their wellbeing is both a moral imperative and a strategic organizational priority. The path forward is clear: it demands the courage to implement deliberate, often disruptive, structural changes that interrupt bias at its source, coupled with a commitment to sponsor talent authentically and redefine leadership itself. Concurrently, the academic community must deepen its inquiry through longitudinal and intersectional research, building a more nuanced evidence base to guide future practice. By uniting actionable policy with rigorous continued investigation, we can transform the current reality—where resilience is too often a private burden—into a new paradigm where systemic support fosters the collective resilience and unleashed potential of all leaders.

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