

FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: LEADERSHIP–
ORIENTATION–PRACTICE INTEGRATION
IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

by

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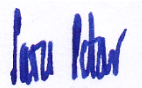
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents and my paternal grandfather, whose unconditional love, sacrifices, and example have been the foundation of all that I have accomplished. They have taught me the value of learning and hard work and have shaped the principles I have lived by throughout my career and my life.

I also dedicate this to my brother, who has been a pillar of strength and care during my darkest moments, and to my true friends, who have been with me through both good and difficult times. This work is in recognition of your support and is a reflection of my deep gratitude.

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ABSTRACT

FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: LEADERSHIP–
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Sustainability has emerged as a strategic imperative for organizations seeking to create long-term value. While prior research has established a relationship between leadership and sustainability, less is understood about the mechanisms through which women leaders translate sustainability intent into organizational outcomes, particularly in emerging-market contexts where cultural and institutional conditions shape leadership effectiveness.

This study investigates how leadership traits associated with women leaders are related to organizational sustainability in Romanian organizations. Drawing on the Triple Bottom Line theory and sustainable leadership frameworks, the research examines the relationships between leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and organizational sustainability outcomes.

Adopting an explanatory mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative survey data from senior women leaders (n = 45) with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews (n = 10) conducted across executive, operational, and governance levels. The quantitative analysis evaluates associations and mediation effects among leadership traits, individual-level sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, contextual conditions, and outcomes. The qualitative analysis provides process-level insights into how sustainability priorities are framed, integrated, and enacted within organizational contexts.

The findings indicate that leadership traits are positively associated with sustainability outcomes. Individual-level sustainability orientation serves as a partial mediating pathway through which leadership traits are translated into outcomes. Cultural and institutional constraints are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes, though they do not eliminate leadership's influence. Among leadership traits, transformational leadership is more strongly associated with the mobilization of sustainability initiatives, whereas values-based leadership is more strongly associated with the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks, operationalized as a composite measure of individual sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices.

By integrating these elements, the study develops the Leadership-Orientation-Practice (LOPI) Framework, which conceptualizes sustainability as a multi-level organizational process encompassing leadership activation, sustainability-oriented decision logic, organizational practices, and system-level integration. The framework provides an empirically informed explanation of how these elements interact, under cultural and institutional contextual conditions, to shape sustainability outcomes in an emerging-market environment.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The growing global emphasis on sustainability has repositioned it from a peripheral concern to a strategic priority for organizations seeking long-term viability (Mensah, 2019; Slaper and Hall, 2011). The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Elkington, 1994) provides a widely used foundation for conceptualizing sustainability across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This integrative perspective has been further elaborated in the sustainable leadership literature, notably by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), who developed the concept of sustainable leadership practices. However, translating principles into practice requires leadership capable of managing tensions between short-term performance pressures and long-term societal and environmental responsibilities (Hahn et al., 2015).

Existing leadership models, including transformational, responsible, and sustainable leadership (Brandt, 2016; Burns, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006), provide conceptual foundations for understanding leadership's role in sustainability. Sustainability-oriented organizational change involves multidimensional and long-term challenges that require leadership capable of managing competing economic, social, and environmental priorities within complex contexts (Hahn et al., 2015; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). Consequently, integrative leadership perspectives have increasingly been advanced as relevant for guiding sustainability transformation by enabling systemic thinking, stakeholder alignment, and long-term governance orientation (Boeske, 2023; Filho et al., 2023).

Empirical research suggests that women leaders are more frequently associated with leadership traits such as collaboration, ethical orientation, and stakeholder

sensitivity, reflecting relational and value-based leadership approaches (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Shinbrot et al., 2019). Building on this, studies on gender diversity in governance suggest that the presence of women in leadership and board roles has been associated with improved sustainability and corporate social performance (Boulouta, 2013; Galletta et al., 2022).

Despite this behavioral alignment, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly within emerging-market contexts such as Romania, where gender gaps in senior decision-making roles persist (Robayo-Abril et al., 2023; World Economic Forum, 2025). At the same time, research indicates that beyond representation, deeply embedded cultural norms, institutional biases, and restricted access to strategic networks and senior governance pathways continue to constrain women's advancement into leadership roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Shen and Joseph, 2021).

While an expanding body of research acknowledges the value of gender diversity in leadership, much of the empirical literature has been either conducted in developed-economy contexts or has predominantly emphasized firm-level governance and performance outcomes (Galletta et al., 2022; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016). As a result, the influence of cultural context, institutional conditions, and the broader social and environmental dimensions of sustainability remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in emerging-market contexts (Elango, 2019; Ionascu et al., 2018). Consequently, despite growing recognition of the potential contribution of women's leadership to sustainability governance, the behavioral leadership mechanisms through which such influence may facilitate the integration of sustainability practices in organizations remain insufficiently examined and theoretically underdeveloped (Cicchello et al., 2021; Pierli, Murmura and Palazzi, 2022).

This study addresses these gaps by examining how leadership traits associated with women leaders relate to sustainability outcomes, sustainability orientation, and the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks within Romanian organizations. By situating leadership–sustainability relationships within their cultural and institutional contexts, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of gender-inclusive leadership in an emerging-market environment.

1.2 Research Problem

One ongoing challenge in advancing sustainability is understanding how leadership traits translate sustainability commitments into measurable organizational outcomes (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). In emerging-market contexts, the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions limits opportunities to examine how leadership characteristics exhibited by women leaders contribute to long-term value creation (Arora, 2022; Pandey, Risal and Luitel, 2024). Although these leadership traits are conceptually aligned with sustainability-focused values, empirical evidence clarifying the mechanisms through which these traits shape sustainability orientation and outcomes remains comparatively limited and context-dependent (Adams et al., 2023; Saeed, Riaz and Baloch, 2023).

In Romania, gender parity in senior leadership and governance remains comparatively low within the European Union, reflecting structural and cultural barriers that continue to shape access to decision-making roles (EIGE, 2025a; European Commission, 2012). These barriers include constrained access to mentoring and sponsorship opportunities, hierarchical organizational cultures, and persistent gendered expectations regarding authority and legitimacy in leadership (Andrén and Andrén, 2015; Macarie and Moldovan, 2013). At the same time, sustainability adoption across Romanian organizations, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises, remains

uneven, influenced by regulatory and institutional volatility (Bîltac, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). In addition, constraints related to leadership capability may further limit the effective integration of sustainability practices within organizational strategies (Mihai and Aleca, 2023). This convergence of low female leadership representation and uneven integration of sustainability in Romania highlights an underexplored opportunity to consider leadership diversity as a potential contributor to sustainable organizational performance.

Beyond contextual and empirical challenges, limitations also persist at the theoretical level (Boeske, 2023). Commonly used leadership frameworks have only partially incorporated explicit gendered perspectives or have not systematically examined how leadership traits operate within culturally and institutionally constrained contexts (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Heilman, 2012). As a result, existing theory provides comparatively limited guidance on the mechanisms by which female leadership may influence sustainability outcomes, remaining largely normative or descriptive (Adams et al., 2023; Pierli, Murmura and Palazzi, 2022).

This research responds to these challenges by addressing four interrelated problem areas:

- i. The comparatively limited empirical evidence on how leadership traits exhibited by women leaders are associated with measurable organizational sustainability outcomes, particularly across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability in emerging-market contexts.
- ii. Limited understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership traits influence sustainability outcomes, specifically whether sustainability orientation operates as a mediating mechanism linking leadership to organizational sustainability outcomes.

- iii. Persistent cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints that may influence the relationship between leadership traits and sustainability outcomes, including institutional volatility, hierarchical organizational cultures, and gendered expectations surrounding leadership legitimacy in Romanian organizations.
- iv. Limited empirical insight into how leadership traits contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks, defined as the combined level of sustainability orientation (decision logic) and organizational sustainability practices (implementation).

1.3 Purpose of Research

This study examines the association between leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romania's emerging-market context.

Drawing on the Triple Bottom Line framework and the literature on sustainable leadership and organizational sustainability practices, the research investigates the extent to which these leadership traits are empirically associated with organizational sustainability outcomes. In addition, the study explores the mechanisms by which leadership traits influence sustainability orientation, the contextual conditions under which leadership influences operate, and the ways leadership values are integrated into organizational sustainability frameworks.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues four interrelated objectives:

- i. To examine the relationship between leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.
- ii. To investigate the extent to which sustainability orientation mediates the relationship between leadership traits and organizational sustainability outcomes.

- iii. To examine how cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints influence the relationship between leadership traits and organizational sustainability outcomes within Romanian organizations.
- iv. To examine how leadership traits contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks within organizational contexts in Romania.

These relationships are later synthesized into an integrative conceptual framework that captures the interactions among leadership traits, sustainability orientation, and organizational practices within a specific cultural and institutional context.

1.4 Significance of the Study

From an academic perspective, this study seeks to contribute to leadership and sustainability scholarship by offering a gender-sensitive, context-aware empirical examination of the relationship between the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in an emerging-market setting. By integrating leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual conditions, and the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks into a single analytical design, the research provides a structured perspective on how leadership-related processes operate amid institutional volatility and cultural constraints.

From a practical perspective, the research seeks to provide evidence-informed insights for organizational leaders, boards, and policymakers concerned with sustainability governance and inclusive leadership. By identifying leadership characteristics, governance mechanisms, and contextual factors associated with sustainability outcomes, the findings may inform leadership development initiatives, governance practices, and sustainability strategies within emerging-market organizational environments.

Finally, the study seeks to contribute to the broader dissemination of sustainable leadership knowledge by supporting both academic and practitioner-oriented communication. The research findings are intended to inform scholarly publications and conference presentations and to be translated into practitioner-oriented formats, such as executive summaries, and distributed across professional platforms, enhancing the study's accessibility, practical relevance, and potential impact.

1.5 Research Purpose and Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- i. How are leadership traits exhibited by women leaders associated with organizational sustainability outcomes across economic, social, and environmental dimensions in Romanian organizations?
- ii. To what extent does sustainability orientation mediate the relationship between leadership traits and organizational sustainability outcomes?
- iii. How are cultural and emerging-market contextual barriers associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, after accounting for the influence of leadership traits?
- iv. To what extent do leadership traits associated with women leaders contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks, understood as the combined level of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices?

Together, these research questions establish the conceptual and empirical focus of the study, which the following chapter addresses through a structured literature review that supports the development of the study's analytical framework.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This section provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how leadership supports sustainable business transformation. It begins with an exploration of the Triple Bottom Line theory (Elkington, 1994), which establishes the strategic framework for understanding sustainability. It then reviews three leadership models discussed in the literature in relation to sustainability and long-term value creation and concludes by introducing the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework, a practical model that translates theory into strategy through sustainable leadership practices. Together, these theoretical frameworks establish the conceptual logic that underpins the entire literature review, the hypotheses, and the overall study design.

2.1.1 The Triple Bottom Line theory

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, introduced by Elkington (1994), is a foundational framework in sustainability research that conceptualizes sustainability as the integration of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental stewardship. Challenging the traditional profit-centric model, TBL argues that organizations should balance financial performance with broader societal and environmental responsibilities. Building on the TBL theory, Slaper and Hall (2011) emphasize the 3Ps (People, Planet, and Profit) as a strategic model for aligning business objectives with sustainable outcomes. Mensah (2019) and Shinbrot et al. (2019) further advocate for embedding these dimensions into corporate strategy to enable long-term value creation, while Milenković, Vaseashta and Vasović (2021) expand the model's applicability by linking sustainable development with data analytics and actionable strategies at the operational level.

Empirical studies reinforce the business case for TBL adoption. Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2016) indicate that companies embracing TBL principles exhibit greater resilience during economic crises. Similarly, De Souza Barbosa et al. (2023) and Chen, Song and Gao (2023) show that integrating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria, an operationalization of TBL, enhances both long-term business performance and societal impact. Nevertheless, their practical implementation remains challenging. Sridhar and Jones (2013) highlight the fragmented adoption of TBL dimensions, where economic priorities often overshadow social and environmental concerns. Furthermore, in resource-constrained environments, these tensions are amplified as organizations struggle to balance competing objectives (Ozanne et al., 2016).

Leadership plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Hahn et al. (2015) argue that aligning sustainability with strategic goals requires leadership to integrate relevant metrics into core decision-making, a view echoed by Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos (2019). The paradox of sustainability, identified by Argento, Broccardo and Truant (2022), suggests that managing trade-offs effectively can drive both innovation and long-term success. Yet, the absence of standardized metrics continues to hinder progress, making measurable outcomes difficult to achieve (Srivastava, Dixit and Srivastava, 2022).

In response to these limitations, Elkington (2018) revisited his original theory, criticizing its evolution into a compliance-focused reporting mechanism rather than a catalyst for systemic change. He called for system-wide sustainability approaches, thus aligning with Hahn et al. (2018), who emphasize the need for leadership to bridge tensions between sustainability goals. These developments point to a need for leadership models that translate strategic sustainability frameworks into organizational practice.

2.1.2 Leadership models in the context of sustainability

While the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory offers a strategic foundation for sustainability, its effective implementation relies heavily on leadership that can translate these principles into actionable organizational strategies. Drawing from the definition of leadership as the capacity to influence others toward shared objectives (Winston and Patterson, 2006), leadership is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of sustainability-focused transformation. In this context, three leadership models have been increasingly examined in relation to long-term value creation: Transformational, Responsible, and Sustainable Leadership.

Burns (2010) defines Transformational Leadership (TL) as a model grounded in mutual goals, inspiring individuals to transcend self-interest in pursuit of long-term objectives. Rather than exercising authority top-down, transformational leaders engage followers through shared vision and commitment. Expanding on this, Jackson (2021) outlines four key components of TL: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, each instrumental in creating organizational transformation. Groves and LaRocca (2011) argue that TL cultivates an environment conducive to innovation, enabling organizations to respond effectively to environmental and social challenges, while Visser and Courtice (2011) assert that TL is a critical trait of effective sustainability leaders. Moreover, Hahn et al. (2015) highlight that leadership facilitates the balance between economic goals and sustainability imperatives, ensuring alignment between business growth and responsible practices. Consequently, although Burns (2010) did not explicitly address sustainability, the moral and value-driven orientation of transformational leadership provides a conceptual foundation for leadership approaches that prioritize long-term collective welfare and systemic responsibility.

Responsible Leadership (RL), as articulated by Maak and Pless (2006), adopts a relational and stakeholder-oriented perspective, emphasizing trust-building and ethical engagement across diverse constituencies. Building on this foundation, Pless and Maak (2011) associate RL with governance practices that reflect economic, social, and environmental accountability, aligning it conceptually with the principles underlying the Triple Bottom Line. Doh and Quigley (2014) further contend that RL plays an important role in integrating social and environmental considerations into corporate governance processes. Extending this perspective, Miska and Mendenhall (2018) highlight the relevance of RL in navigating institutional plurality and cultural complexity in global contexts, while Hahn et al. (2015) suggest that leadership approaches attentive to stakeholder accountability are instrumental in managing sustainability-related tensions and supporting long-term stakeholder value creation.

Sustainable Leadership (SL), as situated by Brandt (2016) within a broader typology, is distinguished from other leadership forms by its explicit emphasis on long-term organizational viability and on embedding sustainability in practice. Building on the motivational and relational foundations of transformational and responsible leadership, sustainable leadership extends this perspective by incorporating systemic thinking and a long-term orientation within strategic governance processes. Tideman, Arts and Zandee (2013) highlight competencies frequently associated with SL, including systems thinking and the capacity to encourage sustainability-oriented behaviors in complex organizational environments. McCann and Holt (2010) conceptualize SL as encompassing attention to both organizational sustainability and broader societal considerations, linking leadership practice to the creation of longer-term value. Liao (2022) further underscores the relevance of SL in addressing complex and uncertain contexts, where foresight,

adaptability, and a strategic balance between economic, social, and environmental objectives are critical.

To synthesize the theoretical distinctions and complementarities among these leadership models, Table 2.1 presents a structured comparative analysis that highlights differences in strategic orientation, stakeholder engagement, adaptability, and alignment with sustainability objectives.

*Table 2.1
Conceptual Comparison of Transformational, Responsible, and Sustainable Leadership Models*

Characteristic	Transformational Leadership	Responsible Leadership	Sustainable Leadership
Core focus	Visionary and innovation-driven	Ethics and accountability	Long-term orientation incorporating sustainability considerations
Stakeholder approach	Focus on internal teams and organizational culture	Broad stakeholder engagement	Long-term and intergenerational stakeholder awareness
Ethical orientation	Implicit through inspiration and values	Explicit and central to decision-making	Explicit integration of sustainability considerations into decision-making
Sustainability goals	Support for sustainability-focused change	Governance and accountability for sustainability	Strategic orientation toward economic, social, and environmental balance
Adaptability and change	High emphasis on innovation	Emphasis on relational stability and stakeholder trust	Emphasis on long-term adaptability and systemic thinking

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the literature cited above)

While all three models align with sustainability principles, they differ in emphasis and operational orientation and are frequently examined independently within the literature, despite offering complementary insights. Boeske (2023) argues that a more

integrated leadership perspective may help address the multidimensional and systemic demands of sustainability. To respond to this proposition, the next section introduces a framework that links leadership theory to practical organizational contexts.

2.1.3 Avery and Bergsteiner framework

Bridging the gap between leadership theory and organizational practice, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) provide a structured framework that integrates sustainability principles into organizational practice. The Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) model is structured as a pyramid, with a total number of 23 sustainable leadership practices divided as follows: 14 foundational practices at the base representing managerial focus, 6 higher-level practices in the middle emphasizing employee and team development, and 3 key performance drivers above that linking employee behaviors to customer-focused results. At the top are elements that the authors associate with long-term value creation for stakeholders, such as brand reputation, customer satisfaction, and financial performance. The framework illustrates how individual leadership traits, team dynamics, and organizational systems interact, emphasizing that sustainable leadership should be embedded in both organizational structures and cultural practices (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011).

The strategic integration of these principles in business practice is increasingly recognized as important for achieving lasting organizational results. Researchers such as Tideman, Arts and Zandee (2013) and Liao (2022) emphasize that embedding sustainability into leadership practice reinforces resilience and future-oriented value creation. In support of this, a global McKinsey survey indicates that sustainability-led

initiatives are associated not only with improved environmental outcomes but also with operational efficiencies, internal engagement, and market competitiveness (McKinsey & Company, 2011). Additional studies indicate that companies adopting sustainability-focused business models benefit from enhanced resource management, stakeholder trust, and improved performance across environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Nosratabadi et al., 2019; Stanescu et al., 2024). According to Mensah (2019), meaningful progress on the TBL's people dimension depends on organizational change in both policy and culture. Likewise, De Smet et al. (2021) highlight that companies with agile and focused sustainability strategies are better equipped to respond to evolving pressures, while Khan and Majava (2021) argue that recognizing stakeholder interdependence advances innovation through co-created solutions.

Moreover, the literature suggests that leadership approaches aligned with the principles articulated in the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework are associated with a shift from reactive compliance toward more proactive sustainability practices, contributing to strategic resilience and stakeholder legitimacy (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). However, balancing short-term financial imperatives with sustainability commitments remains a persistent challenge, one that demands leadership capable of navigating complexity and driving transformational change (Nosratabadi et al., 2019).

To synthesize the core elements of the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework and situate it within the broader sustainability literature, Table 2.2 presents a conceptual overview highlighting key focus areas, defining characteristics, primary areas of impact,

and relevant internal and external stakeholders. For practical reasons, the 23 practices are grouped here into eight categories (ethical governance, advancing innovation, stakeholder inclusivity, long-term vision, workplace well-being, environmental stewardship, social equity, and continuous learning), enabling a structured analysis of leadership traits and organizational mechanisms that support the integration of sustainability. Each category captures leadership characteristics, areas of impact, and stakeholders involved, illustrating how sustainable leadership operates across strategic, cultural, and operational dimensions.

Table 2.2
Conceptual Synthesis of the Avery and Bergsteiner Sustainable Leadership Practices Framework

Key Focus Area	Leadership Characteristic	Impact	Stakeholders (Internal/External)
Ethical governance	Transparency, accountability, and strategic clarity	Decision-making and trust	All
Advancing innovation	Creativity and forward-thinking	Continuous improvement	All
Stakeholder inclusivity	Active stakeholder engagement	Engagement and accountability	All
Long-term vision	Prioritization, responsibility, and execution capability	Strategic and financial sustainability	All
Workplace well-being	Positive mindset, care, and people focus	Organizational culture	Internal
Environmental stewardship	Responsibility mindset	Environmental stewardship	External
Social equity	Diversity, inclusion, and fairness	Social equity	All
Continuous learning	Adaptability, knowledge		d e

lopment, and

Organizational
adaptability

Internal

learning orientation

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the literature cited above)

Given the adaptive nature of the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework, understanding how it aligns with diverse leadership paradigms and organizational contexts is particularly critical in emerging-market environments, where institutional and socio-cultural constraints can shape its enactment.

2.2 Gender and Culture in Leadership Effectiveness

To position sustainability within the broader assessment of female leadership effectiveness, it is important to consider both gender-parity trends and the cultural norms that shape perceptions of leadership. While efforts to promote gender equality in leadership have shown measurable progress globally (World Economic Forum, 2025), systemic barriers and deeply embedded cultural biases continue to influence women's access to senior decision-making roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

2.2.1 Gender parity status

To contextualize gendered leadership, it is important to examine the current status of global gender parity, a persistent challenge in today's workforce. According to the latest Global Gender Gap Report, 68.8% of the global gender gap has been closed, a slight 0.3 percentage-point improvement from the previous year, while, at the current pace, full parity is projected to take another approximately 123 years (World Economic Forum, 2025). Moreover, progress in gender parity is not uniform across regions. Europe leads globally, having closed 75.1% of the gap. Several European countries, including Iceland (92.6%), Finland (87.9%), and Norway (86.3%), rank among the highest in gender parity, supported by policy measures including gender-balanced boards, leadership quotas, and equitable parental leave policies (World Economic Forum, 2025). By contrast, progress across other parts of Europe remains uneven, with persistent

challenges including lower female workforce participation, wider pay disparities, and limited access to leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2025).

This gap is further reflected in leadership representation. Despite women representing 40.3% of the workforce, only around 29.5% of tertiary-educated women reach top leadership positions, illustrating a persistent gap between women's workforce participation and their advancement into senior decision-making roles (World Economic Forum, 2025). The latest Women in the Workplace report reinforces this perspective, highlighting that for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 93 women advance, which, although an improvement from 87 in the previous year, still shows systemic inequities that persist across the leadership pipeline (McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, 2025). Additionally, gender disparities remain visible in economic participation and opportunity indicators. Although progress has been made, the global economic gender parity score stands at 60.7%, indicating persistent inequalities in income, labor-market participation, and advancement into higher-paying roles (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Even within Europe, the Eastern region presents a heterogeneous picture. Countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have aligned closely with EU gender equality directives, advancing inclusive leadership practices (EIGE, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d). However, other countries, including Romania, continue to face significant institutional gaps, rigid labor market segmentation, and slower progress in promoting women to senior roles (EIGE, 2025a). These patterns underscore the systemic barriers that continue to impede women's advancement, particularly in economies with weaker institutional frameworks.

2.2.2 Societal perceptions and barriers for female leadership

This section examines how societal expectations and organizational systems may function as barriers to women's leadership advancement.

A frequently cited framework for explaining gendered leadership challenges is Role Congruity Theory (RCT), proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002). RCT suggests that leadership roles are often culturally associated with traits stereotypically linked to masculinity, such as assertiveness and decisiveness. In contrast, women are more frequently expected to embody communal traits such as empathy, collaboration, and care. When leadership roles are perceived as incongruent with prevailing gender stereotypes, women pursuing leadership positions may encounter bias in evaluation, promotion, and legitimacy. This perceived role incongruity does not imply a lack of leadership capability but rather reflects the influence of socially constructed expectations regarding authority and gender (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Consequently, Role Congruity Theory distinguishes between two related forms of evaluative bias (Eagly and Karau, 2002):

- i. Descriptive stereotyping, which refers to assumptions regarding whether women possess traits culturally associated with effective leadership.
- ii. Prescriptive stereotyping, describing expectations about how women ought to behave, which may lead to more negative evaluations when women display agentic leadership traits that deviate from communal role norms.

These forms of bias may contribute to differences in how women leaders are perceived, particularly in contexts where leadership expectations are strongly gendered (Heilman, 2012).

Empirical evidence, however, suggests that performance differences between men and women in leadership roles are generally small and context dependent. In their analysis, Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr (2014) report that women tend to

receive slightly higher effectiveness ratings in certain contexts, including crisis-oriented environments, where relational and adaptive behaviors are valued. Similarly, Cuadrado et al. (2012) find that women who adopt participative and transformational leadership styles are more favorably evaluated than when they employ directive approaches, particularly in organizational settings that value collaboration. Koenig et al. (2011) further suggest that perceptions of effective leadership are evolving over time, with greater recognition of inclusive and collaborative behaviors.

Despite indications of evolving perceptions of leadership, structural barriers to women's advancement remain documented across multiple contexts. Carli and Eagly (2016) conceptualize women's leadership progression as a labyrinth, suggesting that advancement may require more complex and nonlinear navigation of organizational and societal constraints. Furthermore, Oakley (2000) highlights the role of limited access to mentorship, sponsorship, and institutional support, particularly in hierarchical, male-dominated organizational cultures. Recent workforce analyses also identify a trend in which women are promoted at lower rates than men at early career stages, constraining the pipeline for senior leadership roles (McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, 2025). The report also highlights growing concerns regarding burnout, job insecurity, and women's consideration of leaving their organizations, often associated with limited flexibility, perceived stagnation, and misalignment between organizational culture and career expectations (McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org, 2025).

Additional challenges have been documented for women entrepreneurs and executives. These include comparatively lower access to financing, uneven institutional support, and resource constraints that may affect the scalability of women-led ventures (Agarwal et al., 2020; Barrachina Fernández, García-Centeno and Calderón Patier, 2021). In sustainability-centered sectors, some studies suggest that women leaders may face

heightened scrutiny from investors and stakeholders, particularly regarding Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) expectations (Francis et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, policy-driven approaches provide illustrative examples of institutional intervention. For example, Norway is frequently cited for implementing a corporate board gender quota requiring approximately 40% female representation on the boards of publicly listed companies, which was fully enforced by 2008 (Nergaard, 2003; Teigen, 2012). Empirical studies examining the Norwegian case report associations between increased board gender diversity and changes in governance practices, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability-related decision-making (Gidlund and Lund, 2017; Wang and Kelan, 2013). In 2023, similar quota requirements were extended to certain larger private companies, further embedding gender representation within corporate governance structures (Selmer, 2024).

At the same time, literature on the Norway experience suggests that legislative mandates alone may not guarantee broader organizational transformation. Sustainable change appears to depend on complementary factors, such as enforcement mechanisms, organizational culture, and leadership pipeline development (Gidlund and Lund, 2017). The literature associates efforts to mitigate leadership barriers with a range of organizational and institutional interventions, including mentorship structures, leadership development initiatives, network access, and structural reforms aimed at reducing bias (Carli and Eagly, 2016; Gidlund and Lund, 2017; Oakley, 2000). However, evidence suggests that the impact of such interventions is highly context-dependent and shaped by broader cultural and institutional conditions.

Thus, as Shen and Joseph (2021) emphasize, leadership effectiveness cannot be fully understood in isolation from its socio-cultural environment. Accordingly, examining

how gendered leadership traits interact with contextual constraints becomes essential for understanding their potential relevance to sustainability outcomes.

2.2.3 Cultural context and leadership adaptation

To design effective, inclusive leadership models, it is important to understand how cultural norms shape perceptions of leadership and performance.

Leadership is not universally enacted; rather, it is shaped by the social values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations embedded in national cultures. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) provides a structured framework for analyzing how these cultural dimensions influence perceptions of leadership and strategic behavior across different countries. The model identifies six dimensions that shape organizational dynamics and leadership preferences: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR) (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

Aligning the three leadership models previously introduced—Transformational Leadership (Burns, 2010), Responsible Leadership (Maak and Pless, 2006), and Sustainable Leadership (Brandt, 2016)—with Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) highlights their cultural fit and strategic suitability across different national contexts, thus recognizing that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent.

Transformational Leadership (TL) appears to be more culturally congruent in contexts characterized by i) low PDI, where empowerment and decentralized decision-making are encouraged; ii) higher individualism, which supports autonomy and personal initiative; and iii) low UAI, which tolerates innovation and risk-taking. TL is also generally more compatible with i) cultures exhibiting a balanced masculinity-femininity

orientation, where achievement is complemented by relational leadership; ii) both high and low LTO contexts, as it supports short-term innovation while advancing a vision for the future; and iii) indulgent societies, where motivation and visionary influence are valued (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Jackson, 2021).

Responsible Leadership (RL) can be seen as more aligned with contexts characterized by i) high PDI, where hierarchical structures require trust-based authority; ii) collectivism, which prioritizes group harmony and shared responsibility; and iii) high UAI, where structured governance provides reassurance. RL also generally aligns better with i) more feminine cultures, emphasizing care and inclusivity; ii) high LTO as it integrates ethics with sustained benefits; and iii) with restraint-oriented societies, where discipline and accountability are culturally reinforced (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011).

Sustainable Leadership (SL) appears more compatible with contexts characterized by low PDI and moderate levels of individualism and collectivism, where a balance between personal growth and collective well-being is valued. SL generally adapts to both high and low UAI by combining strategic planning with flexibility. It also appears to fit long-term-oriented societies, where sustainability is embedded in planning. Its adaptability also makes it relevant across both indulgent and restrained cultures (Brandt, 2016; Liao, 2022; Tideman, Arts and Zandee, 2013).

Although Hofstede's model has been critiqued for its emphasis on national-level cultural traits and the potential oversimplification of complex cultural dynamics (McSweeney, 2002; Tung and Verbeke, 2010), subsequent empirical research continues to demonstrate its analytical utility in cross-cultural management and leadership studies when applied with contextual sensitivity (Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson, 2006). Integrating this framework with gendered and sustainability-oriented leadership scholarship offers a

multidimensional perspective on how leadership practices are shaped by socio-cultural conditions (Filho et al., 2023; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Shen and Joseph, 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant for organizations operating across borders or within culturally heterogeneous societies, where alignment between leadership practices and societal expectations influences long-term organizational legitimacy and sustainability (Elango, 2019; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

To synthesize the literature reviewed above, Table 2.3 presents a comparative alignment of the three leadership models reviewed in earlier sections with the cultural dimensions.

Table 2.3

Conceptual Alignment of Leadership Models with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Dimension	Transformational Leadership	Responsible Leadership	Sustainable Leadership
Power Distance (PDI)	More compatible with lower PDI contexts	More compatible with higher PDI contexts	More compatible with lower PDI contexts
Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV)	Tends toward individualistic contexts	Tends toward collectivist contexts	Balanced or mixed contexts
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)	More aligned with lower UAI contexts	More aligned with higher UAI contexts	Balanced or mixed contexts
Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS)	Balanced or mixed contexts	Tends toward lower MAS contexts	Tends toward lower MAS contexts
Long-Term Orientation (LTO)	Compatible across both short- and long-term orientations	Tends toward higher LTO contexts	Tends toward higher LTO contexts
Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR)	More aligned with indulgent contexts	More aligned with restraint contexts	Balanced or mixed contexts

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the literature cited above)

The comparative alignment highlights that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent, thus reinforcing the need to examine how gendered leadership traits interact with cultural and institutional conditions.

2.3 Female Leadership and Sustainability

The next section focuses on the empirical association between female leadership and sustainability. Increasing recognition of leadership as an important enabler of sustainability has drawn attention to the potential contributions of women leaders within this domain (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Hahn et al., 2015). While mainstream scholarship acknowledges conceptual alignment between leadership and sustainability, leadership traits frequently associated with women leaders remain comparatively underexamined as distinct mechanisms shaping sustainability-related outcomes (Cicchello et al., 2021; Shen and Joseph, 2021). Examining the theoretical foundations of women's leadership is therefore important for contextualizing how such traits may relate to sustainability practices and outcomes.

2.3.1 Gendered leadership research

A substantial body of research suggests that women leaders are more frequently associated with transformational leadership traits, particularly those emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and participative decision-making (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen, 2003). These studies link such leadership patterns to positive organizational outcomes and to value-driven, long-term organizational change. Similarly, Westermann, Ashby and Pretty (2005) highlight the role of consensus-oriented leadership approaches, often exhibited by women leaders, in supporting collective action and social cohesion within sustainability initiatives.

Subsequent research extends this line of inquiry by linking gendered leadership to organizational conditions that may support sustainability-focused change. Cuadrado et al.

(2012) and Shinbrot et al. (2019) report associations between women's leadership representation and the development of more inclusive organizational cultures, which may support longer-term orientation and stakeholder engagement. Groves and LaRocca (2011) highlight the role of emotional intelligence and empathy, traits frequently discussed in studies of gender and leadership, in fostering team cohesion and stakeholder trust, both of which are relevant to sustainability initiatives. Additionally, Bajcar and Babiak (2019) find that relational and goal-oriented leadership traits are statistically more frequent among women leaders, suggesting alignment with organizational contexts that prioritize sustainability-centered practices.

The relationship between women's leadership and sustainability-related outcomes is further examined through both theoretical and empirical lenses. Drawing on Role Congruity Theory, Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that leadership effectiveness may be influenced by the degree of alignment between gender role expectations and leadership traits. In contexts where participative or transformational approaches are valued, this alignment may enhance perceived legitimacy and leadership evaluations. Cuadrado et al. (2012) similarly suggest that organizational characteristics, such as flatter structures and team-based environments, can shape perceptions of leadership effectiveness. In a meta-analytic study, Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr (2014) report that women are rated slightly higher than men on transformational leadership dimensions, indicating differences in leadership evaluations rather than categorical superiority. Bajcar and Babiak (2019) further observe lower reported levels of destructive leadership traits among women leaders in their sample, pointing to potential variation in leadership style rather than inherent differences.

To systematize the insights discussed above and situate them within the conceptual logic of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory, Table 2.4 presents a literature-

based synthesis of leadership traits frequently associated with women leaders and their conceptual alignment with the People, Planet, and Profit dimensions of sustainability.

Table 2.4
Conceptual Alignment of Leadership Traits Associated with Women Leaders and the Triple Bottom Line Dimensions

Trait	Primary Impact	TBL Dimension	Sustainability Contribution
Collaboration and empowerment	Social equity	People	Supports inclusive decision-making processes that may help address gender and social inequalities.
Empathy and emotional intelligence	Social equity	People	Enhances workplace well-being and supportive organizational cultures.
Long-term vision	Environmental stewardship	Planet	Encourages ecological responsibility and future-oriented planning.
Innovation and inclusivity	Environmental stewardship	Planet	Supports the development of innovative responses to environmental challenges.
Ethical decision-making	Economic prosperity	Profit	Enhances trust, transparency, and ethical business practices.
Strategic thinking	Financial stability and growth	Profit	Facilitates consideration of both short-term financial objectives and longer-term sustainability goals.

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the literature cited above)

The table illustrates how leadership traits frequently associated with women leaders are conceptually aligned with the Triple Bottom Line framework, highlighting their correspondence to the dimensions of social cohesion, environmental stewardship, and responsible economic performance in the sustainability discourse. This synthesis provides a conceptual basis for examining how such leadership traits may operate as behavioral mechanisms associated with sustainability orientation and outcomes, while

remaining shaped by broader cultural and institutional conditions.

2.3.2 Female leadership traits in sustainability contexts

Building on the theoretical connections between gender and leadership, this section examines the leadership traits frequently associated with women that appear conceptually aligned with sustainability-centered roles. These traits provide a behavioral lens through which women's potential contributions to creating long-term value can be explored.

Research consistently shows that female leaders exhibit stronger pro-environmental attitudes and greater support for sustainability-focused initiatives. Zelezny, Chua and Aldrich (2000) show that women consistently prioritize environmental responsibility, encouraging organizations to harness these inclinations to advance sustainability goals. In natural resource management, Westermann, Ashby and Pretty (2005) highlight women's strengths in consensus-building, inclusion, and participatory decision-making, qualities that support collective outcomes. Additionally, Glass, Cook and Ingersoll (2016) show that female leaders are associated with enhanced corporate environmental performance, reinforcing their impact on sustainability governance.

Female leaders are also recognized for their emphasis on ethical governance and stakeholder accountability. Adams and Funk (2012) found that women in leadership positions strive to balance environmental and social concerns alongside financial outcomes, positioning them as key drivers of sustainable corporate strategy. Shinbrot et al. (2019) emphasize the integrative nature of female leadership, with women consistently engaging across environmental, social, and governance (ESG) priorities. Similarly, Cicchiello et al. (2021) note that female board members contribute significantly to sustainability reporting activities.

These attributes reinforce the alignment between female leadership, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, and its dimensions, as follows:

- i. Social/People dimension: female leaders support collaboration, empathy, and inclusive practices, contributing to equitable workplace cultures (Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Groves and LaRocca, 2011).
- ii. Environmental/Planet dimension: through long-term vision and strategic foresight, female leaders promote sustainable environmental practices (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen, 2003; Shinbrot et al., 2019; Zelezny, Chua and Aldrich, 2000).
- iii. Economic/Profit dimension: female leaders emphasize ethical decision-making, trust-building, and transparency, contributing to resilient and financially stable organizations (Adams and Funk, 2012; Galletta et al., 2022; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016).

While these traits indicate a conceptual alignment between female leadership traits and sustainability-focused roles, the following section examines empirical evidence of their contributions and illustrates how these qualities translate into measurable impact.

2.3.3 Female leadership contribution to sustainability

Empirical studies indicate that leadership traits frequently reported in the literature as associated with women leaders are also associated with measurable sustainability outcomes. For example, Brammer, Millington and Pavelin (2007) argue that gender-diverse boards enhance decision-making by bringing diverse perspectives, thereby improving organizational responses to sustainability challenges. Similarly, Wagner (2011) finds that companies with higher female representation report comparatively stronger performance on selected sustainability-related indicators, particularly in inclusive culture-building and stakeholder-centered governance.

Glass, Cook and Ingersoll (2016) further show that boards with greater gender diversity are more likely to implement proactive environmental policies and indicate

stronger commitment to TBL principles. This is supported by Boulouta (2013) and Galletta et al. (2022), who find that the presence of women in leadership enhances corporate alignment with societal expectations and sustainability standards. Additionally, Issa, Zaid and Hanaysha (2022) show that female directors with sustainability expertise significantly improve corporate sustainability performance.

Female leaders are often reported to demonstrate strong capability in balancing economic and non-economic stakeholder interests, aligning profit with social and environmental goals (Harrison and Coombs, 2012; Francis et al., 2021). According to Shen and Joseph (2021), their leadership is often transformational and innovation-driven, essential qualities for steering sustainability in evolving governance contexts. Moreover, Issa, Zaid and Hanaysha (2022) highlight how regional and cultural dynamics shape female leadership effectiveness in sustainability.

The practical impact of women-led sustainability efforts is visible across diverse industries and contexts (Syed, 2024). The following cases are illustrative examples drawn from public sustainability commitments and reporting, used here as illustrative examples of leadership enactment rather than as evidence of causal relationships:

- i. Automotive: Mary Barra (Chief Executive Officer, General Motors, USA) has led GM's transition toward sustainable transportation (General Motors Company, 2024).
- ii. Oil and Gas: Christina Verchere (Chief Executive Officer, OMV Petrom, Romania) spearheaded ESG initiatives and community development (OMV Petrom, 2024).
- iii. Consumer Goods: Rebecca Marmot (Chief Sustainability Officer, Unilever, UK) has successfully embedded sustainability into Unilever's corporate strategy (Unilever PLC, 2025).

- iv. Policy: Ursula von der Leyen (President, European Commission, European Union) drove the European Green Deal for climate neutrality by 2050 (European Commission, 2024).
- v. Global Climate: Christiana Figueres (former Executive Secretary, UNFCCC, United Nations) led the 2015 Paris Agreement negotiations (Binder, 2024).

Entrepreneurship also reflects women's leadership in sustainability. Barrachina Fernández, García-Centeno and Calderón Patier (2021) emphasize that women-led ventures are more likely to adopt environmentally responsible business models. Acevedo-Duque et al. (2021) and Weiner, Cyr and Burton (2021) highlight that women entrepreneurs lead with collaboration, adaptability, and long-term value creation, advancing innovation and resilience. Birsan et al. (2022) highlight women's capacity for crisis leadership, while Pierli, Murmura and Palazzi (2022) affirm their role in driving ESG objectives. Furthermore, Barna, Zbucnea and Stănescu (2023) emphasize the role of women-led enterprises in promoting circular economy models, job creation, and social inclusion, further reinforcing their role in sustainability innovation.

Collectively, these findings suggest that leadership traits frequently associated with women leaders in the literature demonstrate conceptual and empirical links with sustainability goals and contribute meaningfully to their advancement. This growing body of evidence underscores the need for a gender- and culturally responsive framework that builds on leadership traits reported in the literature as associated with women leaders, while addressing systemic barriers that may constrain their influence, particularly in emerging-market settings.

2.4 Sustainable Leadership in Emerging Markets

Building on the conceptual examination of sustainability-oriented leadership and gendered leadership dynamics discussed in the preceding sections, this section

contextualizes these relationships within emerging-market environments. Given the institutional volatility, socio-economic disparities, and cultural diversity often associated with such environments, leadership plays an important role in embedding longer-term sustainability considerations into organizational strategies (World Economic Forum, 2024). This section examines how sustainable leadership frameworks relate to practice in emerging-market contexts, with particular attention to leadership styles, development approaches, and gender inclusion.

2.4.1 Integration of the Avery and Bergsteiner framework

The literature consistently identifies leadership as central to translating sustainability principles into organizational practice. The Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework provides a model that operationalizes sustainability across eight areas: ethical governance, innovation, stakeholder inclusivity, long-term vision, workplace well-being, environmental stewardship, social equity, and continuous learning (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). Furthermore, this model has been associated with a shift from compliance-driven actions toward more proactive sustainability practices (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). However, to critically assess how this framework supports real-world sustainability within emerging-market contexts, it is important to examine its alignment with established leadership paradigms.

In this sense, Transformational Leadership (TL) can facilitate the alignment of economic objectives with environmental and social imperatives, though this requires intentional strategic integration (Hahn et al., 2015). Supporting this view, Groves and LaRocca (2011) associate TL traits, such as visionary leadership, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation, with sustainability-driven innovation. Wilkinson, Hill and Gollan (2001) further argue that adaptability in leadership is essential for navigating the dynamic nature of sustainability challenges. In contrast, Doh and Quigley

(2014) identify Responsible Leadership (RL) as particularly relevant for organizations undergoing sustainability transformation, underscoring the centrality of stakeholder engagement and ethical decision-making in building sustainable organizations. Among the three models, Sustainable Leadership (SL) appears closely aligned with the framework developed by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), as it prioritizes ethical governance, intergenerational responsibility, and holistic systems thinking as the foundations of long-term sustainability (Brandt, 2016).

However, the framework does not operate as a singular leadership paradigm. Its emphasis on innovation, adaptability, and continuous learning reflects core elements of Transformational Leadership, particularly its focus on organizational growth and strategic foresight (Burns, 2010; Jackson, 2021). At the same time, the framework’s commitment to workplace well-being, social equity, and stakeholder inclusivity closely mirrors the principles of Responsible Leadership, which emphasize ethical accountability and relational governance (Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011).

To synthesize these relationships, Table 2.5 presents a comparative matrix that maps the key components of the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework against the defining attributes of Transformational Leadership (Burns, 2010), Responsible Leadership (Maak and Pless, 2006), and Sustainable Leadership (Brandt, 2016). This mapping clarifies how different leadership models, individually and in combination, contribute to the embedding of sustainability within organizational practice.

Table 2.5
Conceptual Alignment of the Avery and Bergsteiner Sustainable Leadership Practices Framework with Leadership Models

Focus Area	Transformational Leadership (TL)	Responsible Leadership (RL)	Sustainable Leadership (SL)	Primary conceptual overlap

Ethical governance	Values-driven inspiration	Ethical accountability	Strategic integration of ethical governance	TL/RL/SL
Advancing innovation	Innovation-driven change	Less central emphasis	Long-term sustainability-focused innovation	TL/SL
Stakeholder inclusivity	Internal engagement	Broad stakeholder focus	Multi-stakeholder with long-term outlook	RL/SL
Long-term vision	Vision-led change	Long-term ethical orientation	Systemic long-term outlook	TL/RL/SL
Workplace well-being	Motivation and engagement	Ethical people management	Organizational well-being orientation	TL/RL
Environmental stewardship	Indirect emphasis	Accountability-oriented	Explicit sustainability focus	SL
Social equity	Values-based inclusion	Fairness and inclusion	Integrated within a sustainability-centered strategy	TL/RL/SL
Continuous learning	Adaptability and learning	Relational learning	Systemic learning orientation	TL/SL

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the literature cited above)

As shown in Table 2.5, the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework does not align exclusively with a single leadership paradigm, but integrates elements of transformational, responsible, and sustainable leadership, suggesting its potential analytical relevance for diverse emerging-market contexts.

2.4.2 Evidence of sustainable leadership in emerging markets

In emerging-market environments, where resource constraints, institutional gaps, and increasing stakeholder demands prevail, leadership plays a pivotal role in aligning

organizational strategies with long-term development goals (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Gupta and Zhang, 2020). As a result, leaders operating in such environments must

navigate complex cultural and institutional barriers to embed sustainability into business practices, reinforcing the need for context-specific leadership approaches (Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010). Consequently, divergent institutional and organizational priorities may intensify tensions between short-term performance pressures and long-term sustainability objectives, posing challenges to the development of cohesive sustainability strategies (Ozanne et al., 2016; Watkin et al., 2012).

Empirical evidence suggests that sustainability, when effectively integrated into leadership, can generate competitive advantages in these markets. Dögl and Behnam (2014) highlight that stakeholder pressure drives sustainability differently across economies, often leading to stronger business outcomes in emerging contexts. For example, Sustainable Leadership (SL) in emerging-market contexts has been linked to enhanced environmental performance through green innovation, resource efficiency, and organizational learning (Iqbal, Ahmad and Halim, 2020; Iqbal et al., 2020). Moreover, SL has been associated with the advancement of sustainability practices by enabling a culture of continuous improvement and employee empowerment (Iqbal, Ahmad and Li, 2021). Similarly, Responsible Leadership (RL) has been associated with enhanced stakeholder engagement and relational governance, promoting improved social and economic outcomes in similar emerging-market settings (Liao and Zhang, 2020).

Despite growing interest, research remains geographically uneven, with comparatively limited empirical evidence from Central and Eastern European emerging-market contexts. For example, Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal (2023) note that most studies are concentrated in Asia, with Eastern Europe largely underexplored. Also, Eastern European countries appear to significantly lag behind their Western counterparts in sustainability leadership (Pastore and Massacesi, 2020). The literature identifies key challenges, including low awareness of sustainability concepts, poor integration of Environmental,

Social, and Governance (ESG) goals, weak stakeholder engagement, and limited adoption of reporting frameworks (Pastore and Massacesi, 2020). To address these gaps, a comprehensive framework is needed, one that embeds sustainability into the core of organizational governance, strengthens leadership capacity through the development of systems thinking and complexity management skills, and promotes behavioral alignment with long-term sustainability objectives (Pastore and Massacesi, 2020).

However, the capacity to lead sustainability transformations depends not only on organizational structures but also on leadership development processes and the broader institutional environment. Research highlights that leadership development is essential to building competencies in systems thinking, ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, and long-term planning, skills necessary to navigate the trade-offs inherent in sustainability initiatives (Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Pless, Maak and Stahl, 2011; Tideman, Arts and Zandee, 2013). Nevertheless, many leadership development initiatives remain insufficiently aligned with the complexity of sustainability challenges. Without careful attention to cultural context and stakeholder plurality, such programs risk reinforcing short-term, performance-oriented leadership styles that are less compatible with sustainability objectives (Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). In emerging-market environments, these limitations may be amplified by institutional constraints and performance-driven governance structures (Sajjad, Eweje and Raziq, 2024).

The literature therefore suggests that sustainable leadership development in emerging-market contexts is closely associated with competencies such as systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, ethical reflexivity, and long-term strategic orientation (Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Pless, Maak and Stahl, 2011; Tideman, Arts and Zandee, 2013). However, how such competencies are embedded in practice and interact with

contextual and gender-related factors has been insufficiently examined. This gap reinforces the need for empirical investigation within specific emerging-market settings.

2.4.3 Evidence of female leadership in emerging markets

Female leadership has attracted increasing scholarly attention in emerging-market contexts, where institutional constraints and cultural dynamics shape leadership practice. In such environments, studies suggest that certain leadership traits frequently associated with women—such as relational engagement, adaptability, and collaborative decision-making—may align with longer-term value creation.

Arora (2022) reports associations between female leadership and the quality of financial decision-making, governance oversight, and risk-aware strategic planning in emerging economies. Similarly, Pandey, Risal and Luitel (2024) find that women leaders in emerging-market contexts are often characterized by leadership traits consistent with transformational leadership, including stakeholder engagement and adaptive strategic orientation.

Beyond governance considerations, some studies identify links between female leadership and innovation outcomes in emerging markets. Na and Shin (2019) find positive correlations between female ownership and product and process innovation, and between female presence in top management and enhanced marketing innovation capabilities. Adams et al. (2023) further observe that in environments with stronger institutional governance, board gender diversity is associated with higher reported levels of innovation and sustainability adoption, underscoring the role of institutional quality in moderating leadership effects.

Female leadership has also been examined in relation to corporate responsibility and sustainability practices. Saeed, Riaz and Baloch (2023) suggest that multinational enterprises in emerging economies may incorporate gender diversity as part of broader

legitimacy and governance strategies. In Eastern Europe, Ionascu et al. (2018) find that gender-diverse boards are associated with improvements in governance, particularly in firms operating under weaker regulatory oversight. In the microfinance sector, Strøm, D’Espallier and Mersland (2014) report that female-led institutions are associated with a stronger emphasis on social outreach while maintaining portfolio performance indicators.

Collectively, this body of research indicates that inclusive leadership environments may enable organizations to draw on a broader range of governance and strategic capabilities. Filho et al. (2023) argue that gender equality in leadership is associated with broader sustainable development objectives, while Elango (2019) emphasizes the influence of national institutional frameworks on women’s access to executive roles. These findings suggest that both institutional conditions and organizational practices influence how gender diversity is expressed in leadership across emerging-market contexts.

Cross-national analyses indicate that many emerging economies continue to face structural challenges in advancing gender parity and sustainability integration (World Economic Forum, 2024, 2025). Furthermore, Hewlett and Rashid (2010) describe female talent in emerging markets as both an opportunity and a structural constraint. Thus, rather than assuming uniform impact, the literature underscores the importance of examining how leadership traits, particularly those associated with women, interact with institutional and cultural conditions to influence sustainability orientation and organizational outcomes. In this respect, understanding sustainable female leadership in emerging-market contexts requires careful attention to contextual moderation effects rather than assuming uniform leadership advantages across institutional settings.

2.5 Romania Context: Leadership, Gender, and Sustainability

Building on the conceptual discussion of sustainability-oriented leadership, gendered leadership dynamics, and emerging-market contextual influences developed in the preceding sections, this section situates these relationships within Romania's specific institutional setting. While the country has experienced economic expansion and increased engagement with sustainability frameworks, disparities in gender representation in leadership and governance structures persist (World Economic Forum, 2024, 2025). This section, therefore, contextualizes the empirical analysis within Romania's socio-economic and institutional context, supporting a context-sensitive interpretation of leadership–sustainability relationships.

2.5.1 Romania's socio-economic and cultural context

Romania has recorded steady economic expansion, with a five-year average GDP growth rate of approximately 3.6%, while its sustainability pillar index score of 51.7 suggests a relatively strong performance relative to several other Central and Eastern European countries assessed in the Future of Growth Report (World Economic Forum, 2024).

However, improvements in economic and sustainability metrics are not uniformly reflected in gender equality indicators. A recent Global Gender Gap Report shows that Romania ranks 94th globally (down from 68th in the previous year) and 37th among European economies (down from 33rd in the previous year) (World Economic Forum, 2025). By contrast, several regional peers, including Poland (45th), Estonia (11th), Latvia (13th), and Slovenia (21st), have improved their positions compared with the previous year (World Economic Forum, 2025). These countries benefit, for example, from gender inclusion policies, including: i) legal frameworks for workplace equality in Poland (Government of Poland, 2026); ii) digital leadership and gender inclusion ecosystems in

Estonia and Latvia (EIGE, 2025b, 2025c); and iii) mandated gender quotas for corporate and political leadership in Slovenia (EIGE, 2025d).

The same Global Gender Gap Report indicates that Romania lags behind many European peers on indicators of women's representation in senior leadership and economic participation. Women remain underrepresented in senior decision-making positions and continue to face structural barriers to advancement, while several peer countries in Central and Northern Europe report substantially higher levels of female leadership participation and stronger labor-market parity (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Cultural dimensions provide additional insight into leadership dynamics (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). Based on the cultural dimensions model, Romania exhibits relatively higher Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, alongside collectivist tendencies. Additionally, the country shows a short-term orientation, low indulgence, and moderate masculinity. Such characteristics may influence decision-making structures, perceptions of authority, and access to leadership roles. These cultural features do not determine outcomes, but they may shape how leadership models are received and enacted within organizational contexts (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2026a, 2026b).

Compared with some neighboring countries characterized by different cultural orientations, Romania's institutional configuration may present distinct challenges and opportunities for gender-inclusive leadership development (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2026a, 2026b). These contextual features suggest that leadership approaches emphasizing relational accountability and institutional embeddedness may interact differently with prevailing norms than highly decentralized or empowerment-focused models (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and Van Engen, 2003; Jackson, 2021; Pless and Maak, 2011).

Examining how these socio-cultural and institutional characteristics intersect with leadership practices is therefore important for understanding the broader environment in which sustainability-oriented leadership operates.

2.5.2 Gender dynamics and leadership barriers in Romania

Gender representation in Romanian leadership remains uneven. According to the Gender Equality Index 2025: Sharper Data for a Changing World report, women occupy less than 14% of executive positions in Romania's largest companies, placing the country among the weakest performers in the EU in terms of gender balance in economic decision-making (EIGE, 2025a).

However, studies show that even modest increases in female leadership representation have been associated with measurable economic benefits. Empirical evidence from the Deloitte Romania and Professional Women's Network Romania report Women on Boards in Romania indicates that higher levels of female board representation are positively associated with improved financial performance, including higher return on equity among Bucharest Stock Exchange-listed firms (Deloitte Romania and PWN Romania, 2016). At the macroeconomic level, the World Bank report Gender Equality in Romania: Where Do We Stand? estimates that closing gender gaps in economic participation could increase Romania's GDP by approximately 8.7% by 2030 (Robayo-Abril et al., 2023).

Encouragingly, although the earlier study found that women occupied only 15% of board seats in Bucharest Stock Exchange-listed firms (Deloitte Romania and PWN Romania, 2016), a more recent Deloitte–PWN Romania report, Romania Reports Progress in Leadership Gender Balance, shows that 62% of listed companies now include at least one woman on their boards, while 65% include at least one woman on their executive committees (Deloitte Romania and PWN Romania, 2022). At the same time,

developments such as board-readiness initiatives and increased visibility of women in public leadership roles indicate gradual institutional shifts (Constantin, 2024; Profiroiu, Profiroiu and Nastaca, 2021).

Research on Romanian women entrepreneurs further illustrates the interaction between institutional context and leadership practice. Studies indicate that women-led SMEs contribute to economic resilience and sustainability-centered initiatives (Barna, Zbucnea and Stănescu, 2023). Additionally, Stefan et al. (2021) report that female entrepreneurs frequently cite intrinsic motivations, including professional autonomy and commitment to sustainability-related objectives. Barna et al. (2024) observe that women social entrepreneurs in Romania are often characterized by leadership approaches that emphasize relational engagement and an ethical orientation, which may support the balancing of social and economic objectives.

Nonetheless, structural and institutional constraints affecting women's leadership path remain documented. Research indicates that leadership bias continues to influence perceptions of women's suitability for senior decision-making roles, while cultural expectations and gender norms may further shape leadership pathways, particularly within environments characterized by relatively higher power distance and collectivist tendencies (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010).

Industry composition also appears relevant, as leadership positions in traditionally male-dominated sectors remain less accessible to women, and wage disparities may reinforce participation gaps (Andrén and Andrén, 2015). Despite comparatively high levels of tertiary education attainment among women, limited access to leadership networks, mentorship, and sponsorship opportunities may constrain advancement into senior roles (European Commission, 2012; Macarie and Moldovan, 2013).

At the governance level, women-led enterprises may face greater difficulty in securing institutional and financial support, potentially affecting their growth and innovation trajectories (IFC, 2022). Similarly, while policy initiatives and diversity targets have been introduced, enforcement mechanisms and implementation consistency vary (European Commission, 2012).

These dynamics suggest that Romania's leadership landscape is characterized by both structural constraints and emerging avenues for change. Understanding how these gender dynamics interact with sustainability imperatives is essential for interpreting the relationships between leadership and sustainability in this context.

2.5.3 Progress and gaps in sustainable leadership

Romania has increased engagement with sustainability frameworks in recent years. Larger corporations have increasingly implemented Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and adopted reporting practices that balance economic, environmental, and social considerations (Bîltac, 2023). The adoption of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards has grown among major firms, reflecting increased transparency (Mihai and Aleca, 2023).

Momentum is also observable in Circular Economy (CE) initiatives, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing sectors (Stanescu et al., 2024). Social enterprises show integration of CE principles with social inclusion objectives (Barna, Zbucnea and Stănescu, 2023). Initiatives such as the Female-Led Innovation in Farming and Rural Areas (FLIARA) Project showcase how Romanian women in agriculture and rural industries are adopting sustainable innovation models (FLIARA, 2026). Such developments illustrate the gradual embedding of sustainability considerations within selected sectors.

At the corporate governance level, studies examining Romanian firms suggest that board gender diversity is associated with selected market-based performance indicators (Ionascu et al., 2018). Cross-country analyses indicate that board diversity does not negatively affect financial performance and may contribute to governance quality under certain institutional conditions (Dobija et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2020; Suciu, Păun and Duma, 2021). These findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between gender diversity, governance structures, and sustainability-related outcomes.

Despite these developments, sustainability integration in Romania remains characterized by sectoral variation and uneven enforcement across institutions. Prior research has suggested that leadership capacity, policy coherence, and organizational commitment play important roles in determining whether sustainability initiatives move beyond compliance toward long-term strategic orientation (Vladutoiu, 2024).

Overall, Romania presents a context marked by economic growth, gradual engagement with sustainability, and persistent gender representation gaps in leadership. Earlier exploratory research has suggested that the interaction of cultural norms, institutional structures, and governance practices creates a complex environment in which leadership traits are enacted and interpreted within Romanian organizations (Vladutoiu, 2024).

This configuration provides a meaningful empirical setting for examining how leadership traits associated with women leaders interact with contextual conditions to influence organizational sustainability. Thus, rather than assuming uniform effects, the Romanian context allows for an investigation of how leadership–sustainability relationships are shaped by institutional and cultural dynamics.

2.6 Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarly attention to leadership and sustainability, gaps remain in the integration of theoretical perspectives, the depth of empirical evidence, and the contextual understanding of how leadership traits, particularly those associated with women, relate to sustainability in emerging-market settings (Boeske, 2023; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). Existing research has often examined leadership, sustainability, and gender as related yet analytically separate domains, providing limited insight into the mechanisms and contextual conditions through which leadership influences sustainability outcomes. This section synthesizes these gaps and clarifies how they inform the development of the study's hypotheses.

2.6.1 Theoretical gaps

The literature on leadership and sustainability remains conceptually fragmented across multiple theoretical directions (Hahn et al., 2015; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). Leadership models, such as transformational, responsible, and sustainable leadership, are normatively aligned with sustainability principles, yet they are typically developed and examined within distinct concepts rather than integrated into a unified explanatory framework (Brandt, 2016; Burns, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006). Moreover, much of this scholarship has emerged from Western environments, often implicitly assuming relatively stable institutional structures and consistent regulation, which may limit its generalizability to emerging-market settings characterized by volatility and uneven sustainability pressures (Boeske, 2023; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018).

A further limitation concerns the treatment of gender within sustainability leadership theory. While prior research associates leadership traits frequently exhibited by women, including ethical orientation, inclusiveness, collaboration, and long-term thinking, with sustainability-related values (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Shinbrot et al., 2019), these traits are seldom theorized as explanatory mechanisms within

leadership–sustainability models. Gendered leadership perspectives are often examined descriptively or normatively, rather than incorporated into integrative frameworks that explain how leadership traits influence sustainability orientation and organizational outcomes (Cicchello et al., 2021; Shen and Joseph, 2021).

In addition, existing sustainability leadership frameworks offer limited guidance on how leadership principles are embedded in organizational systems and routines, particularly under conditions of cultural constraints and institutional complexity (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Pless and Maak, 2011). Consequently, theoretical clarity remains limited regarding how leadership traits translate into durable sustainability outcomes across diverse and institutionally variable contexts.

2.6.2 Empirical gaps

Empirical research examining the relationship between leadership traits and sustainability outcomes remains uneven in scope and depth. A substantial portion of existing studies relies on board-level indicators, gender diversity proxies, or cross-sectional performance associations, which provide useful insights but offer limited visibility into leadership traits, decision-making processes, and strategic orientation at the organizational level (Galletta et al., 2022; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016).

Moreover, sustainability orientation has been examined only occasionally as a mediating mechanism linking leadership traits to sustainability outcomes. As a result, the empirical literature offers limited insight into how leadership influences sustainability-related priorities, trade-offs, and strategic integration, particularly in contexts where sustainability pressures are evolving or unevenly institutionalized (Cicchello et al., 2021; Shen and Joseph, 2021).

There is also comparatively limited empirical research that examines how contextual constraints, such as cultural norms, institutional instability, and resource

limitations, moderate or condition the effectiveness of leadership influence. In many studies, context serves as a background variable rather than as an analytically integrated factor, which can reduce the explanatory capacity of leadership–sustainability models in emerging-market environments (Boeske, 2023; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018).

2.6.3 Contextual gaps

Contextual influences on leadership and sustainability remain comparatively underexplored in emerging markets in Eastern and Central Europe (Pastore and Massacesi, 2020; Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal, 2023). In Romania specifically, while female labor market participation is relatively high, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership and governance roles (EIGE, 2025a). This pattern has been associated in the literature with informal norms, hierarchical organizational cultures, and constrained advancement pathways, rather than with formal exclusion mechanisms (Macarie and Moldovan, 2013; Andrén and Andrén, 2015).

Relatively few studies examine how these cultural and institutional conditions shape the translation of leadership traits into sustainability orientation and organizational outcomes. In particular, sector-specific research in high-impact industries—where sustainability challenges are pronounced, and leadership influence is strategically significant—remains limited in the Romanian and broader CEE context (Ionascu et al., 2018; Pastore and Massacesi, 2020).

Consequently, leadership and sustainability models developed in more institutionally stable environments risk overgeneralization when applied to emerging-market contexts characterized by cultural constraint and institutional variability (Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; Boeske, 2023). Greater empirical attention to contextual conditioning is therefore needed to understand how leadership traits are translated into sustainability orientation and outcomes under specific socio-institutional conditions.

Overall, these gaps suggest the need for an integrative analytical approach that examines leadership traits as behavioral antecedents of sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and sustainability outcomes, while accounting for contextual constraints. The present study examines how leadership traits exhibited by women leaders are associated with sustainability outcomes, how sustainability orientation may mediate this relationship, and how contextual conditions shape leadership effectiveness in Romanian organizations.

2.7 Hypothesis Development

This section develops the study's four hypotheses by integrating leadership and sustainability theories with relevant empirical findings and the institutional characteristics of Romania's emerging market context.

For the purpose of the research, leadership is conceptualized as a set of leadership traits examined in prior research on women leaders, rather than as a comparative evaluation of female and male leadership styles. Sustainability is examined at multiple analytical levels, addressing distinct dimensions related to individual sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and organizational sustainability outcomes. This distinction supports the empirical examination of the relationships among leadership traits and each of these dimensions.

2.7.1 Leadership traits and organizational sustainability outcomes

Leadership scholarship suggests that organizational sustainability outcomes are influenced not only by formal policies or regulatory compliance, but also by leadership traits that shape strategic priorities, ethical standards, and stakeholder engagement (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Hahn et al., 2015; Pless and Maak, 2011). Sustainability-focused change requires leaders to articulate long-term vision, legitimize non-financial objectives,

and align strategic priorities with sustainability considerations (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011).

Transformational Leadership (Burns, 2010) provides a theoretical pathway linking leadership to sustainability outcomes. Its emphasis on vision articulation, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and change agency enables leaders to mobilize organizational members around long-term objectives and to guide adaptation beyond short-term performance pressures. Empirical research associates transformational leadership with organizational resilience, innovation capacity, and sustainability-focused strategic alignment (Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Jackson, 2021).

Complementing this perspective, Responsible Leadership and Sustainable Leadership emphasize ethical grounding, stakeholder inclusivity, relational accountability, and long-term orientation (Brandt, 2016; Maak and Pless, 2006). These approaches highlight leadership traits that support the internalization and institutionalization of sustainability within organizational systems (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). In parallel, research on leadership traits frequently associated with women leaders identifies ethical decision-making, inclusiveness, empathy, collaboration, and long-term orientation as recurring characteristics (Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr, 2014). Rather than treating these perspectives as separate constructs, this study integrates ethical, relational, and long-term orientation leadership traits into a composite analytical construct termed values-based leadership. This construct does not introduce a new leadership theory, but rather aggregates leadership orientations that share a normative foundation centered on ethics, stakeholder considerations, and responsibility.

The relationship between leadership traits and sustainability outcomes may be particularly relevant in emerging-market contexts such as Romania, where institutional

volatility and uneven sustainability pressures may increase reliance on leadership discretion (Boeske, 2023; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). Consistent with multidimensional perspectives on sustainability performance, sustainability outcomes are broadly conceptualized to encompass economic, social, and environmental performance, as well as reputational and resilience-related dimensions (Chen, Song and Gao, 2023; Elkington, 1994; Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal, 2016). Governance-related inclusion, discussed in the broader literature as relevant to sustainability-related performance signals, is also treated as part of perceived sustainability outcomes, consistent with work linking gender-diverse governance to sustainability-related performance signals (Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016).

Accordingly, the following hypothesis (H1) is proposed: Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations.

2.7.2 The mediating role of sustainability orientation

While leadership traits are expected to be associated with organizational sustainability outcomes, prior research suggests that leadership influence is often indirect, operating through the strategic and cognitive frameworks through which leaders shape decision-making (Hahn et al., 2015; Pless and Maak, 2011). Leadership traits may influence how sustainability is interpreted, prioritized, and embedded within strategic processes rather than directly determining measurable outcomes.

In this study, sustainability orientation is conceptualized as a cognitive decision logic at the leadership level, reflecting the degree to which environmental, social, and economic considerations are systematically integrated into leaders' strategic and operational choices. Grounded in the Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington, 1994; Slaper and Hall, 2011), sustainability orientation reflects how leaders prioritize economic,

social, and environmental objectives within governance and decision-making processes, including long-term resilience, stakeholder consideration, and trade-off management. Empirical research on sustainability strategy integration further suggests that organizations demonstrating stronger strategic incorporation of sustainability considerations are more likely to achieve consistent sustainability performance (Hahn et al., 2015; Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019). Thus, rather than capturing leadership behavior itself, sustainability orientation reflects the strategic integration of sustainability priorities within individual decision-making logic.

The literature further suggests that leadership traits alone may not be sufficient to produce consistent sustainability outcomes unless they influence the underlying decision-making frameworks that guide organizational action (Hahn et al., 2015; Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019). Organizations may show ethical or transformational leadership without achieving sustained sustainability performance if sustainability is not integrated into strategic priorities and governance mechanisms (Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019). Sustainability orientation, therefore, represents a plausible mediating mechanism through which leadership traits are translated into coordinated sustainability outcomes. This mediating process may be particularly relevant in emerging-market contexts such as Romania, where regulatory enforcement and sustainability pressures are uneven. In such environments, internally enacted strategic orientation can function as an important governance mechanism guiding sustainability-related decisions (Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; Boeske, 2023).

In the present study, sustainability orientation is analytically distinguished from both leadership traits and sustainability outcomes to minimize conceptual overlap. More specifically, it is positioned as a mediating construct through which leadership traits may

influence sustainability outcomes by enabling the strategic and cognitive prioritization of sustainability in leaders' decision-making.

Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis (H2) is proposed: Sustainability orientation mediates the relationship between the leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations.

2.7.3 Contextual constraints and organizational sustainability outcomes

Leadership influence operates within cultural and institutional environments that shape how authority is interpreted, enacted, and sustained over time (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). Prior research indicates that contextual conditions can affect the stability and durability of leadership impact, particularly in emerging-market settings characterized by institutional volatility and changing governance systems (Boeske, 2023; Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015).

Cultural characteristics such as relatively higher power distance, traditional gender norms, and hierarchical expectations may influence how leadership authority is perceived and exercised within organizations (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). In such environments, participative, inclusive, or values-driven leadership approaches may require greater effort to achieve alignment and continuity, even when leaders occupy formal senior positions. Furthermore, recent research suggests that culturally embedded norms can shape the legitimacy of leadership and engagement in sustainability (Shen and Joseph, 2021).

Institutional features commonly associated with emerging-market contexts, including regulatory instability, resource constraints, and weak enforcement of governance, may further constrain leadership effectiveness (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010; Pastore and Massacesi, 2020). Sustainability-

centered leadership, which depends on long-term orientation, stakeholder integration, and strategic integration, may therefore be particularly sensitive to institutional instability and structural constraints. Importantly, the literature does not suggest that cultural and institutional barriers eliminate the influence of leadership. Rather, they represent structural conditions that can exert direct negative effects on organizational sustainability outcomes, conceptualized in this study as independent predictors alongside leadership traits.

Thus, the following hypothesis (H3) is proposed: Cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints are negatively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, after accounting for the influence of leadership.

2.7.4 Leadership traits and the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks

Beyond individual leadership traits and observable sustainability outcomes, durable sustainability performance depends on the extent to which sustainability principles are embedded within organizational systems (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Doh and Quigley, 2014; Nosratabadi et al., 2019). Sustainability frameworks appear to function as integrative structures that translate strategic intent and practices into long-term value. Thus, their effectiveness depends on internal coherence and institutionalization rather than episodic or leader-dependent initiatives.

Research on sustainable and responsible leadership suggests that sustainability efforts are more resilient when leadership principles are reflected in formal governance processes and organizational culture rather than remaining symbolic or individualized (Brandt, 2016; Maak and Pless, 2006). The translation of leadership values into organizational systems is expected to support continuity and strengthen internal coherence between sustainability intent and organizational practice. Values-based leadership traits, such as ethical judgment, inclusiveness, and relational accountability,

may contribute to the overall coherence between sustainability-oriented decision logic and the institutionalization of sustainability practices within organizational systems (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). While transformational leadership (Burns, 2010) can facilitate the initiation of sustainability-related change, the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks may depend on the extent to which ethical and relational leadership principles are reflected in governance structures. This distinction may be particularly relevant in emerging-market contexts characterized by institutional volatility and regulatory inconsistency (Boeske, 2023; Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015).

Thus, in the present study, the effectiveness of the sustainability framework is conceptually distinguished from sustainability outcomes. It refers to the degree of coherence between individual sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices, reflecting the extent to which sustainability is consistently translated into organizational systems.

In line with this reasoning, the following hypothesis (H4) is proposed: Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders are positively associated with the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks in Romanian organizations, operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices.

2.8 Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and empirical foundations for examining how leadership traits associated with women leaders relate to organizational sustainability outcomes in an emerging-market context. It positioned the Triple Bottom Line as the overarching sustainability perspective and reviewed several leadership models as conceptual pathways for advancing sustainability. The Avery and Bergsteiner framework was subsequently introduced as an integrative model, linking principles to practice and supporting long-term, sustainable value creation. The review also examined

research on leadership traits frequently exhibited by women leaders and their relevance to sustainability, as well as studies addressing persistent barriers to women's leadership, including culturally embedded expectations. By incorporating cultural dimensions and emerging-market institutional characteristics, it emphasized the importance of contextual conditioning in shaping how leadership traits are enacted and translated into outcomes.

The literature review further identified theoretical, empirical, and contextual areas requiring deeper integration. In particular, it has shown that prior research has rarely examined leadership traits, sustainability orientation, contextual constraints, and organizational practices within a unified analytical framework in emerging-market environments. These considerations informed the development of hypotheses H1–H4, structuring the empirical investigation across four distinct yet complementary dimensions of leadership influence.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview of the Research Problem

This research investigates the relationship between the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. Consequently, the study explores the links between these leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and observable sustainability outcomes. Romania provides a relevant empirical setting for this investigation, as organizations operate in a context of evolving sustainability expectations and institutional and cultural factors that shape leadership practice and sustainability implementation. Examining this relationship in this setting enables a contextualized understanding of how leadership and sustainability intersect in practice.

To investigate these relationships, the study adopts a mixed-methods research design, considered appropriate for integrating measurable associations with contextual and process-oriented explanations (Creswell and Creswell, 2022; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Quantitative survey data collected from senior women leaders are combined with qualitative insights derived from semi-structured interviews. This approach enables the analysis of measurable associations between leadership traits and sustainability outcomes, while also exploring the processes through which leadership influence is translated within organizational practices.

3.2 Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

The conceptual framework of this study translates the leadership–sustainability relationships developed in Chapter II into an empirically testable research design by specifying measurable constructs and their interrelationships. Accordingly, the operationalization of constructs is explicitly aligned with the final quantitative survey

instrument and complemented by qualitative inquiry, ensuring conceptual consistency across methods.

The model positions: i) leadership traits as antecedents; ii) sustainability orientation as an individual-level mediating mechanism; iii) sustainability practices as an organizational-level construct; iv) organizational sustainability outcomes as dependent variables; and v) cultural and emerging-market contextual conditions as constraining factors that exert a limiting influence. While the constructs are conceptually distinct, their relationships within the theoretical framework may lead to a degree of empirical proximity. To address this, the study maintains a clear conceptual distinction in the operationalization of constructs and adopts an analytical approach that treats leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and sustainability outcomes as analytically separable yet interconnected components of sustainability integration.

In line with the theoretical positioning adopted in Chapter II, the term “female leadership” in this study is used as a contextual descriptor for the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders, rather than as a leadership typology or a comparison between female and male leadership styles. Accordingly, the core independent construct of female leadership is operationalized through two complementary leadership dimensions: values-based leadership and transformational leadership.

Values-based leadership (Construct A) captures the ethical and relational foundations of leadership, including empathy, ethical decision-making, inclusiveness, collaboration, and recognition and reinforcement of values-driven behaviors. This construct reflects leadership traits that establish legitimacy, trust, and shared responsibility within organizations. It is operationalized through five survey indicators assessing: i) empathy and understanding; ii) ethical decision-making and fairness; iii)

inclusiveness and participation; iv) collaboration and shared responsibility; and v) perceived recognition of values-based leadership traits. The measurement justification for construct A is presented in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1
Measurement Justification for Construct A: Values-Based Leadership

Field	Content
Definition	Ethical and relational leadership traits, as exhibited by women leaders (e.g., empathy, fairness, inclusiveness, collaboration, values recognition), that build trust, legitimacy, and shared responsibility in support of sustainability-oriented decision-making.
Theoretical Anchor	Responsible Leadership and Sustainable Leadership literature, alongside empirical gendered leadership research examining associations between ethical and inclusive leadership traits and sustainability-related outcomes.
Scale/Source	Author-developed composite scale grounded in Responsible and Sustainable Leadership and prior gendered leadership empirical research.
Items	5
Themes	Empathy; ethical decision-making; inclusiveness; collaboration/shared responsibility; recognition of values-based behaviors.
Adaptations	Item wording tailored to the Romanian organizational context and sustainability relevance; framed as traits exhibited by women leaders, avoiding comparative gender claims.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through theory-driven item mapping; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent bivariate association patterns (Pearson and Kendall's tau-b) examined prior to regression modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating ethics, trust, and inclusion-related mechanisms consistent with the construct definition.
Key Sources	(Brandt, 2016; Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Maak and Pless, 2006; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr, 2014; Pless and Maak, 2011).

(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Transformational leadership (Construct B) reflects leaders' capacity to articulate a vision, motivate long-term commitment, stimulate innovation, and lead organizational change toward sustainability objectives. This construct emphasizes inspirational motivation and agency for change in sustainability-relevant contexts. It is operationalized through five indicators measuring: i) vision articulation; ii) motivation toward long-term goals; iii) encouragement of innovative problem-solving; iv) leadership of sustainability-driven change; and v) perceived contribution to advancing the sustainability strategy. The measurement justification for construct B is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Measurement Justification for Construct B: Transformational Leadership

Field	Content
Definition	Leadership traits focused on articulating a compelling vision, motivating long-term commitment, stimulating innovation, and enabling strategic and organizational change aligned with sustainability objectives.
Theoretical Anchor	Transformational Leadership, emphasizing vision, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and change-agency as drivers of organizational transformation and sustainability-related outcomes.
Scale/Source	Author-adapted composite scale informed by Transformational Leadership literature and prior empirical research, contextualized for sustainability purposes in an emerging-market setting.
Items	5
Themes	Vision articulation; long-term motivation; innovative problem-solving; leading sustainability change; contribution to sustainability strategy.
Adaptations	Sustainability-relevant framing and Romanian organizational context; framed as traits exhibited by women leaders, avoiding comparative gender claims.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through theory-driven item mapping; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent bivariate association patterns (Pearson and Kendall's tau-b) examined prior to regression modeling; qualitative evidence

Key Sources	illustrating change-agency, strategic direction, and mobilization mechanisms consistent with the construct definition. (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Hahn et al., 2015; Jackson, 2021).
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(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Sustainability Orientation (Construct C) functions as a mediating construct linking individual leadership traits to organizational sustainability outcomes. Grounded in empirical research on the Triple Bottom Line Theory (Elkington, 1994) and on sustainability strategy research, this construct captures the extent to which sustainability considerations are integrated into leaders' decision-making logic and strategic priorities. Sustainability orientation is operationalized through five indicators assessing leaders': i) integration of economic, social, and environmental considerations into decision-making; ii) prioritization of long-term organizational resilience over short-term profitability; iii) prioritization of sustainability objectives in strategic planning; iv) consideration of stakeholder engagement in sustainability-related decisions; and v) the importance attached to developing and monitoring sustainability goals. The measurement justification for construct C is presented in Table 3.3.

*Table 3.3
Measurement Justification for Construct C: Sustainability Orientation*

Field	Content
Definition	The degree to which sustainability considerations (economic, social, and environmental) are systematically integrated into leaders' decision-making logic, strategic prioritization, and trade-off management.
Theoretical Anchor	Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory and sustainability strategy integration empirical research linking leadership decision-making to sustainability-oriented strategic alignment.
Scale/Source	Author-developed composite scale grounded in TBL Theory and prior sustainability strategy integration empirical research.
Items	5

Themes	TBL integration; long-term resilience orientation; prioritization of sustainability objectives; stakeholder consideration; importance attached to sustainability goal setting and monitoring.
Adaptations	Framed explicitly as individual leadership decision logic and prioritization (mediating mechanism), analytically separated from both sustainability practices and sustainability outcomes to reduce construct overlap.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through systematic mapping to TBL dimensions; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent bivariate association patterns (Pearson and Kendall's tau-b) examined prior to regression-based mediation analysis; hypothesized mediation pathway examined through regression-based modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating sustainability trade-off narratives and strategic prioritization processes consistent with the construct definition.
Key Sources	(Elkington, 1994; Hahn et al., 2015; Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019; Slaper and Hall, 2011).

(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Organizational Sustainability Practices (Construct D) captures the institutionalization of sustainability beyond individual leadership orientation, operating at the organizational rather than the individual level. Drawing conceptually from the Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) framework, this construct reflects how sustainability principles are embedded within organizational systems, practices, culture, and governance arrangements. It is operationalized through five indicators, at the organizational level: i) trust and transparency; ii) structured leadership involvement in the design and implementation of sustainability strategies; iii) balanced stakeholder decision-making; iv) shared purpose and long-term cultural orientation; and v) the integration of gender-inclusive leadership principles into organizational strategy. Furthermore, this construct captures organization-level practices and processes rather than performance outcomes. Accordingly, gender-inclusive leadership elements within Construct D reflect strategic participation and governance processes rather than demographic representation or

outcome-level gender metrics. Table 3.4 presents the measurement justification for Construct D as an organizational-level construct.

Table 3.4

Measurement Justification for Construct D: Organizational Sustainability Practices

Field	Content
Definition	The extent to which sustainability principles are embedded in organizational systems, governance routines, cultural norms, and implementation processes, beyond the influence of individual leadership discretion.
Theoretical Anchor	Sustainable leadership practices framework and prior empirical research on organizational sustainability embedding.
Scale/Source	Author-developed composite scale conceptually derived from Avery and Bergsteiner framework and organizational sustainability embedding literature.
Items	5
Themes	Trust and transparency; formal inclusion of sustainability responsibilities within governance structures; stakeholder-balanced decision-making; shared purpose and long-term cultural orientation; integration of inclusive leadership principles into organizational strategy.
Adaptations	Designed explicitly to capture institutionalized sustainability practices (organizational level), analytically distinct from sustainability orientation (individual decision logic and prioritization).
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through systematic mapping to the Avery and Bergsteiner framework; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent positive associations with Sustainability Orientation (C) and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (G) examined prior to regression modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating governance, accountability, and embedding mechanisms consistent with the construct definition.
Key Sources	(Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Doh and Quigley, 2014; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016; Ionascu et al., 2018; Nosratabadi et al., 2019).

(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

The contextual environment is represented by two contextual constraint constructs that are hypothesized to be negatively associated with sustainability outcomes. Cultural

Contextual Constraints (Construct E), informed by cultural dimensions theory and related literature, captures national-level norms shaping leadership legitimacy and engagement in sustainability, including power distance, uncertainty avoidance, traditional gender norms, in-group loyalty, and short-term orientation. Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints (Construct F) reflects institutional and structural constraints characteristic of emerging economies and is operationalized using indicators of regulatory instability, resource constraints, weak institutional frameworks, organizational rigidity, and limited formal pathways for women’s leadership advancement. Tables 3.5 and 3.6 outline the measurement justification for constructs E and F, respectively.

Table 3.5

Measurement Justification for Construct E: Cultural Contextual Constraints

Field	Content
Definition	Perceived national and organizational cultural norms that are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes (e.g., hierarchy, risk aversion, traditional gender expectations).
Theoretical Anchor	Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions theory, Role Congruity Theory, and prior empirical research on gendered leadership.
Scale/Source	Author-developed contextual barriers scale, informed by Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Role Congruity theory, and gendered leadership literature.
Items	5
Themes	Power distance, uncertainty avoidance, traditional gender norms, collectivist orientation, in-group loyalty, and short-term orientation.
Adaptations	Operationalized as a contextual barrier reflecting structural cultural constraints on sustainability outcomes.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach’s α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through systematic mapping to Hofstede-based cultural mechanisms and Role Congruity Theory; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach’s α ; theoretically consistent negative associations with sustainability outcomes examined through regression modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating how cultural norms shape leadership legitimacy and sustainability embedding processes.

Key Sources	(Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Shen and Joseph, 2021).
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(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Table 3.6

Measurement Justification for Construct F: Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints

Field	Content
Definition	Institutional and structural constraints characteristic of emerging economies that are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes.
Theoretical Anchor	Empirical research on sustainability implementation in emerging-market contexts; sustainability leadership under resource and regulatory instability.
Scale/Source	Author-developed contextual barriers scale, grounded in emerging-market governance and sustainability implementation literature.
Items	5
Themes	Regulatory instability; financial and technical resource constraints; weak institutional enforcement; structural organizational rigidity; limited formal advancement pathways for women leaders.
Adaptations	Operationalized as a contextual barrier reflecting structural institutional constraints on sustainability outcomes.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through systematic mapping to emerging-market sustainability and institutional instability literature; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent negative associations with sustainability outcomes examined through regression modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating how regulatory instability, resource constraints, and institutional volatility shape sustainability implementation processes.
Key Sources	(Boeske, 2023; Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Elango, 2019; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; Pastore and Massacesi, 2020).

(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Finally, Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (Construct G) constitutes the dependent construct and reflects realized and observable sustainability performance across economic, social, environmental, reputational, and governance dimensions. Rather than capturing sustainability intent or orientation, this construct represents perceived

outcomes and performance, operationalized through five indicators that assess organizations' perceived improvements in: i) economic performance linked to sustainability initiatives; ii) social outcomes such as employee well-being and an inclusive organizational climate; iii) reductions in environmental impact; iv) enhanced organizational reputation and resilience; and v) gender-inclusive representation within leadership and governance structures. Table 3.7 summarizes the measurement justification for Construct G.

Table 3.7

Measurement Justification for Construct G: Organizational Sustainability Outcomes

Field	Content
Definition	Perceived organizational sustainability performance across economic, social, environmental, reputational, and governance dimensions, as reported by respondents.
Theoretical Anchor	Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory; sustainability performance, ESG integration, and organizational resilience literature.
Scale/Source	Author-developed organizational perceptual outcomes scale, anchored in TBL and sustainability performance literature.
Items	5
Themes	Economic performance improvements; social inclusion and employee well-being; reductions in environmental impact; organizational reputation and resilience; perceived improvement in gender-inclusive representation within leadership and governance structures.
Adaptations	Perceptual measurement was employed due to uneven availability and comparability of standardized sustainability metrics across Romanian organizations and sectors; items were explicitly framed as respondents' perceptions of realized outcomes rather than strategic intent.
Reliability	Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α (reported in Chapter IV).
Validity Support	Content validity established through systematic mapping to TBL outcome dimensions; internal consistency assessed via Cronbach's α ; theoretically consistent association patterns with leadership, orientation, and contextual constructs examined prior to multivariate regression modeling; qualitative evidence illustrating perceived outcomes and performance.
Key Sources	(Chen, Song and Gao, 2023; Elkington, 1994; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016; Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal, 2016).

(Source: Author's own conceptualization, based on the sources cited above)

Measurement design across the constructs prioritized theoretical grounding and analytical clarity, consistent with the study's exploratory nature. The development of constructs followed a theory-based approach, drawing on established leadership and sustainability frameworks to ensure conceptual coherence and contextual relevance. Given the integrative and context-specific nature of the model, scales were adapted and operationalized to reflect the study's conceptual structure. Construct validity was supported through theoretical justification, internal consistency reliability assessment, examination of expected associations among constructs, and qualitative triangulation. To facilitate understanding, Figure 3.1 summarizes the interrelationships among constructs A–G, translating the theoretical framework into measurable variables for the following empirical analysis.

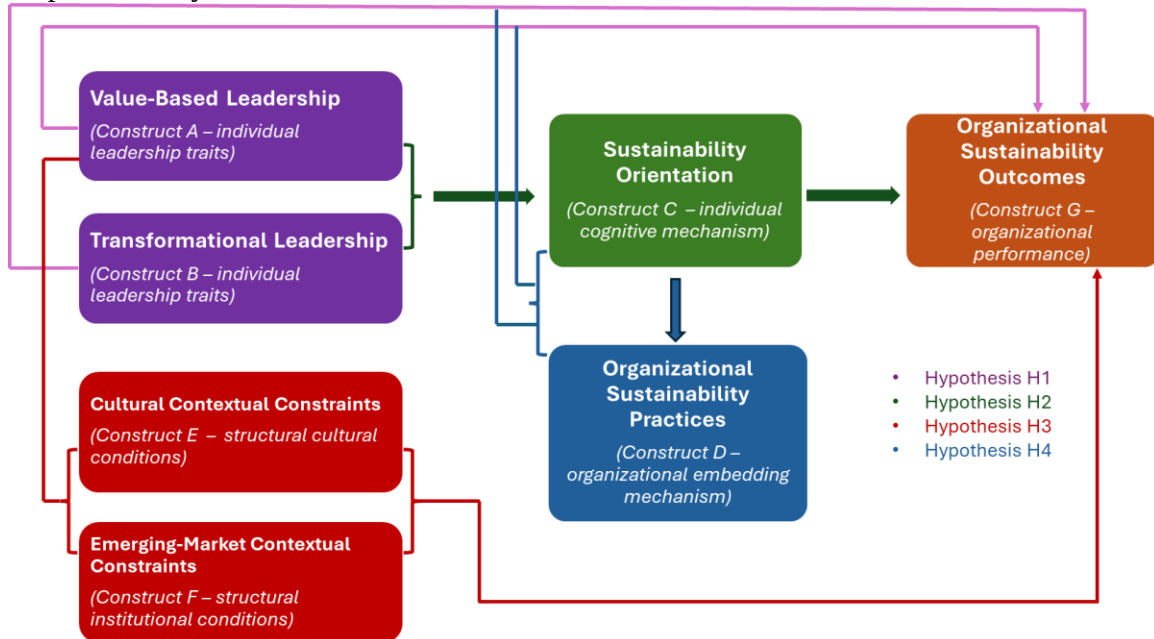


Figure 3.1

Conceptual Model of Interrelationships among the Study's Theoretical Constructs

(Source: Author's own conceptual model, developed for the research)

3.3 Research Purpose and Questions

Guided by the conceptual framework developed in Chapter II and the construct operationalization presented in Section 3.2, the empirical phase of this study is structured around four hypotheses (H1–H4), each reflecting the relationships among the key constructs included in the research model:

- i. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders (constructs A and B) are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G) in Romanian organizations.
- ii. Hypothesis 2 (H2): Sustainability orientation (construct C) mediates the relationship between the leadership traits associated with women leaders (operationalized as the composite of constructs A and B) and organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G) in Romanian organizations.
- iii. Hypothesis 3 (H3): Cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints (constructs E and F) are negatively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G) in Romanian organizations, after accounting for the influence of leadership.
- iv. Hypothesis 4 (H4): Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders (constructs A and B) are positively associated with the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks in Romanian organizations, operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices (composite of constructs C and D).

The study is guided by four research questions (RQ1–RQ4) that align with the study’s conceptual framework and correspond to the distinct analytical layers employed: outcomes, mechanisms, contextual constraints, and structural embedding.

- i. Research Question 1 (RQ1): How are leadership traits exhibited by women leaders associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, across economic, social, and environmental dimensions?
- ii. Research Question 2 (RQ2): To what extent does sustainability orientation mediate the relationship between the leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations?
- iii. Research Question 3 (RQ3): How are cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, after accounting for the influence of leadership?
- iv. Research Question 4 (RQ4): To what extent do leadership traits exhibited by women leaders contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks in Romanian organizations, operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices?

To address these research questions, the study employs a structured set of dependent, independent, mediating, contextual, and control variables aligned with the conceptual framework developed in Chapter II:

- i. Organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G) serve as the principal dependent variable in RQ1–RQ3, while sustainability framework effectiveness (composite of constructs C and D), representing a composite measure of sustainability orientation (individual-level decision logic) and sustainability practices (organizational-level institutionalization of sustainability), functions as the dependent variable in RQ4. For clarity, sustainability orientation is an individual-level construct, whereas organizational sustainability practices represent the organizational-level institutionalization of sustainability within

systems, culture, and governance arrangements, and are distinct from organizational sustainability outcomes.

- ii. Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders, namely values-based leadership (construct A) and transformational leadership (construct B), constitute the primary independent variables. Model-level specifications vary by research question. Leadership predictors are i) modeled separately for RQ1 and RQ4; ii) combined as a composite index for mediation testing in RQ2; and iii) specified parsimoniously in RQ3, where only values-based leadership (construct A) is retained alongside contextual predictors.
- iii. Sustainability orientation (construct C) is specified as a mediating mechanism in RQ2, capturing the integration of sustainability considerations into leaders' individual decision-making logic and strategic prioritization.
- iv. Cultural (construct E) and emerging-market contextual constraints (construct F) are specified as independent contextual predictors negatively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in RQ3.
- v. Control variables include leadership tenure, industry sector, competition intensity, organization size, and organization age. Additional individual and organizational characteristics (seniority level, annual turnover, organization type, and ownership structure) were collected for descriptive and contextual interpretation but not included in the inferential models.

Together, these variables provide an integrated analytical structure for examining how leadership traits are associated with sustainability outcomes, through individual-level mediating mechanisms and under contextual constraints, while accounting for relevant organizational characteristics.

To complement the hypothesis-driven quantitative analysis, the qualitative component of this study is guided by a set of analytical expectations that inform the exploration of leadership practices, contextual constraints, and mechanisms for embedding sustainability. Thus, rather than testing hypotheses, the qualitative part serves an explanatory and sense-making function within the mixed-methods design, clarifying how the leadership influence on sustainability is enacted, constrained, and institutionalized in practice:

- i. Leadership traits associated with women leaders are expected to be observable in how sustainability priorities are framed and enacted within organizational action, particularly in relation to economic, social, and environmental considerations.
- ii. Sustainability orientation is expected to emerge as a decision-making mindset that shapes how women leaders navigate trade-offs between short-term operational pressures and long-term economic, social, and environmental objectives in organizational decision-making.
- iii. Cultural and institutional constraints are expected to be described as persistent structural conditions that negatively influence organizational sustainability outcomes and shape the broader environment within which leadership is enacted.
- iv. Effective sustainability frameworks are expected to be reflected in governance and cultural mechanisms that institutionalize leadership values and reduce reliance on individual leadership discretion in sustaining organizational sustainability practices.

These qualitative expectations guide the thematic analysis of interview data, enabling the qualitative findings to explain, contextualize, and extend the quantitative results without implying hypothesis testing within the qualitative strand.

3.4 Research Design

To examine the relationship between leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in the Romanian context, the study adopts a mixed-methods research design. This approach is considered appropriate for the research, given the study's objective to investigate not only measurable relationships between leadership traits and sustainability outcomes, but also the mechanisms and contextual conditions through which leadership influence is enacted in practice (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

The research follows an explanatory pathway, in which quantitative analysis provides the primary test of hypothesized relationships and qualitative evidence contextualizes and explains the observed patterns. Quantitative data were used to test the proposed hypotheses and to estimate relationships among leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes. Contextual constraints were modeled as direct constraining influences rather than as moderation (interaction) effects, consistent with the study's exploratory scope. Qualitative data were employed to provide explanatory insight and contextual depth into how leadership influence operates under real-world conditions. This design supports triangulation and enhances interpretive validity by linking statistical associations with lived leadership experience (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Denzin, 2012).

The quantitative component of the study is survey-based and designed to provide standardized measurement of leadership traits, mediating mechanisms, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes across organizations. This component enables hypothesis testing and comparative analysis across respondents, and it forms the core of the empirical research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015).

The qualitative component complements the quantitative analysis by exploring the lived experiences of women leaders operating in Romanian organizations. Through semi-

structured interviews, the qualitative phase examined leadership practices, perceived barriers, and the processes through which sustainability is interpreted, prioritized, and embedded within organizational systems. This approach allows for depth, nuance, and contextual sensitivity that otherwise cannot be captured through survey data alone (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014; Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

The initial research design included cross-organizational case studies. However, rigorous case study analysis would have required access to internal governance and performance data beyond publicly available sources. As access could not be secured at sufficient depth, and to preserve analytical rigor and confidentiality, the study proceeded with an anonymized mixed-methods design based on survey and interview data.

The final design, therefore, combines a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews to form the study's final mixed-methods design. This integrated approach enables the examination of leadership–sustainability relationships across the intended multiple analytical levels (outcomes, mediating mechanisms, contextual constraints, and structural embedding) while maintaining coherence among theory, empirical measurement, and contextual interpretation.

3.5 Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprised women leaders in Romanian organizations operating in sustainability-relevant sectors, including manufacturing, agribusiness, and technology. These sectors were selected for their significant economic, environmental, and social impacts and for their relevance to sustainability transformation.

Given the absence of a centralized public database identifying women leaders in sustainability-related roles in Romania, the study adopted a purposive sampling strategy consistent with an exploratory mixed-methods design. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the research objective is to obtain information-rich insights from participants

possessing relevant leadership experience and contextual knowledge rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

The survey was distributed through professional networks, LinkedIn outreach, and peer referrals to potential participants meeting the following eligibility criteria:

- i. Self-identification as female.
- ii. Current employment in mid- to senior-level leadership roles.
- iii. A minimum of five years of leadership experience.
- iv. Involvement in organizations where sustainability considerations were relevant to strategic or operational decision-making.

Outreach exceeded 100 potential participants; however, because distribution relied on network-based sharing and referrals, the exact number of recipients cannot be determined. The outreach yielded 45 complete and usable responses, which were included in the final quantitative analysis. This sample size is considered acceptable for exploratory quantitative analysis in leadership and sustainability research, particularly where multiple constructs and regression-based models are employed (Creswell and Creswell, 2022; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). Furthermore, established multivariate analysis guidelines indicate that regression models can be estimated in smaller samples when the number of predictors is limited, and model complexity is carefully specified (Hair et al., 2018). Model specification was therefore restricted to a parsimonious number of predictors to maintain appropriate case-to-variable ratios in line with multivariate analysis guidelines (Hair et al., 2018).

In addition to leadership characteristics, respondents in the quantitative sample operated predominantly within private-sector organizations. Respondents' organizations are largely mature firms with established market presence across domestic, foreign-

owned, and mixed ownership structures. Likewise, annual turnover levels vary, with most organizations exceeding €10 million, indicating strategic and operational complexity.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was also used to achieve depth and contextual insight into leadership practices and the embedding of sustainability. Participants were selected to ensure variation across sectors, organizational size, and leadership roles, supporting analytical richness and comparative interpretation. As a result, ten (10) semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior women leaders operating at executive, operational, and governance levels across diverse organizational contexts. The qualitative sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic sufficiency within leadership-focused qualitative inquiry, where the emphasis is on depth of insight rather than numerical representation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).

Jointly, the quantitative and qualitative data provide complementary perspectives on leadership traits, sustainability mechanisms, and contextual constraints, supporting triangulation and enhancing the robustness of the mixed-methods research design.

3.6 Participant Selection

Participant selection was guided by a purposive logic aligned with the study's mixed-methods design and explanatory focus (Creswell and Creswell, 2022; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

For the quantitative component of the research, participant selection was guided by the need for breadth of leadership experience across sectors and organizational types in sustainability-related contexts. Purposive sampling was used to gain access to information-rich participants who met pre-specified eligibility criteria, consistent with the principles of exploratory research design (Creswell and Creswell, 2022; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). Potential participants were solicited through professional networks, LinkedIn, and peer referrals to reach women leaders actively engaged in strategic or

operational decision-making contexts where sustainability factors are present. This strategy helped gain access to leadership populations of interest in the absence of a formal sampling frame. Although organizational characteristics such as ownership type and turnover were considered during participant solicitation in order to increase contextual diversity, they were not included as explanatory variables in the quantitative models and are therefore reported only descriptively.

As for the qualitative component of the research, participant selection was informed by analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness, in line with qualitative research design principles that prioritize depth and contextual understanding (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014; Creswell and Creswell, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 senior women leaders who were active at executive, operational, and governance levels across various organizational settings. The selection criteria were designed to maximize variability across sectors, leadership types, and sustainability leverage, facilitating comparative analysis of leadership influence mechanisms and sustainability-embedding practices.

Sampling for the qualitative component was continued until thematic sufficiency was reached (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). During each post-interview iterative analysis, recurring patterns emerged regarding leadership influence mechanisms (e.g., strategic alignment, values-driven decision-making, governance discipline), contextual factors (e.g., cultural norms, institutional instability), and sustainability-embedding practices. Around the eighth interview, it was observed that no new significant analytical categories emerged during coding, and the subsequent interviews focused more on consolidating and refining existing themes than on exploring new territory. This was interpreted as an indication that sufficient analytical coverage had been achieved for the purposes of the study.

Overall, participant selection across both components was guided by relevance, experiential depth, and alignment with the research questions, ensuring coherence between research design, data sources, and analytical objectives.

3.7 Instrumentation

The study employed two primary research instruments, in line with the mixed-method research design:

- i. A structured quantitative survey questionnaire.
- ii. A semi-structured qualitative interview guide.

The quantitative instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire designed to measure leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and organizational sustainability outcomes. Structured questionnaires are considered appropriate for capturing standardized perceptions across respondents and enabling statistical examination of relationships among constructs (Nardi, 2018; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale to reflect attitudinal and perceptual constructs in a consistent, analytically tractable manner (Sauro and Lewis, 2016). Likert-type scaling facilitates the use of correlation- and regression-based analytical techniques to examine relationships among constructs.

Furthermore, survey items were explicitly aligned with the constructs operationalized in Section 3.2. Items were adapted from leadership and sustainability literature, with wording adjusted to reflect the Romanian organizational context and the study's focus on leadership traits exhibited by women leaders. This approach preserves theoretical grounding while allowing contextual specificity (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). Construct validity was supported through theory-driven item mapping linking

survey items to the conceptual definitions of each construct. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α coefficients, reported in Chapter IV.

The survey cover letter, including informed consent procedures, is presented in Appendix A. The full survey instrument, including item wording, response scales, and background variables, is provided in Appendix C.

The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore leadership traits, sustainability-related decision-making processes, contextual constraints, and mechanisms for embedding sustainability. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate when the objective is to balance thematic comparability with contextual depth and experiential insight (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014; Creswell and Creswell, 2022). The guide combined a set of core thematic questions aligned with the study's research questions and operationalized constructs, along with flexible probes that enabled participants to elaborate on context-specific experiences. This structure supported analytical triangulation by enabling systematic comparison between quantitative findings and qualitative interpretations. The interview guide is provided in Appendix D.

3.8 Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected via an online survey distributed to potential respondents. The survey was administered using Google Forms and was available in English. Data collection took place between October and November 2025 and remained open for approximately four weeks, during which time reminders were distributed at regular intervals to enhance response rates in line with survey research best practice. Prior to full survey deployment, the questionnaire was completed by a small number of individuals with relevant leadership experience to assess the clarity of wording, the conceptual relevance of the items, and the estimated completion time. Feedback from this

informal pre-testing stage led to minor refinements in item phrasing and survey flow. Item clarity and relevance were informally reviewed prior to distribution to ensure alignment with the study's constructs and research objectives. Given the theory-driven nature of the instrument and the seniority of the target respondents, a formal pilot study with separate statistical analysis was not conducted. The survey was designed to take 15–20 minutes to complete, in order to balance the level of data that can be collected with the risk of survey fatigue (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). In addition, the survey was conducted anonymously, with no personally identifiable information collected beyond general demographic and organizational characteristics required for analytical purposes.

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted either virtually or in person, depending on each participant's availability and preference. Interviews typically lasted between 75 and 90 minutes, allowing sufficient depth for participants to elaborate on leadership practices, contextual constraints, and sustainability-embedding processes, while following the thematic structure of the semi-structured interview guide. Considering the leadership level and nature of the participant group, as well as the small-scale context, particular emphasis was placed on confidentiality and on fostering an atmosphere conducive to participants' reflective responses to the questions. In line with participants' consent and ethical research guidelines, interviews were not audio- or video-recorded. This decision reflected both the seniority of participants and the sensitivity of leadership experiences discussed, consistent with qualitative research guidance indicating that elite or confidentiality-sensitive interviews may rely on contemporaneous notetaking rather than recording (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). For clarity, given that interviews were not audio-recorded, the quotations presented in Chapter IV are not verbatim transcripts. They were reconstructed from contemporaneous notes taken during interviews and immediately thereafter

expanded into detailed narrative accounts, with efforts to preserve participants' wording where possible.

Several procedures were adopted to improve the validity and credibility of the qualitative component (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). First, the post-interview field notes were systematically expanded to reduce the risk of recall bias. Second, an open, analytic audit trail approach was adopted, in which decisions on coding, theme identification, and their connections to the conceptual framework were documented. Third, when interpretation was ambiguous, selective member checking was conducted, thereby enabling validation of key results without compromising anonymity. Fourth, the continuous review of interview field notes during data collection helped identify emerging themes early.

Throughout the data collection process, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to stop the discussion and withdraw at any time. Information regarding the nature of the research, the procedures involved, and the participants' rights was provided prior to the data collection. The informed consent form is included in Appendix B.

The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were ensured by maintaining the anonymity of the collected data. All research materials were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Data were handled in accordance with ethical research standards and used exclusively for academic purposes.

3.9 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques appropriate for exploratory leadership research. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the distribution of leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and organizational sustainability

outcomes. Internal consistency reliability of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's α , with values ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable and ≥ 0.80 indicating good internal consistency in exploratory research contexts (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2018). Given the short five-item scales and the perceptual self-report design, Cronbach's α was interpreted as an indicator of internal consistency rather than as evidence of strict unidimensionality.

Correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of associations among leadership constructs, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to provide an initial overview of linear bivariate relationships and to maintain comparability with subsequent regression modeling (Hair et al., 2018). Given the ordinal nature of Likert-type data and the moderate sample size, Kendall's tau-b was additionally calculated as a non-parametric robustness check prior to multivariate analysis, as it provides an appropriate measure of ordinal association that does not require interval-level measurement or distributional normality (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2018). The convergence of parametric and non-parametric results increased confidence in the robustness of the observed associations. Where conceptually appropriate, particularly in mediation testing, leadership traits were operationalized as a composite index reflecting the joint enactment of values-based and transformational leadership.

Multiple regression models were applied to test the study's hypotheses, estimating direct and mediated relationships while accounting for contextual constraints and controlling for leadership tenure, firm size, industry sector, organizational age, and competition intensity (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). Given the exploratory design and modest sample size ($n = 45$), mediation was assessed using a regression-based framework consistent with established practice in applied research (Hair et al., 2018).

Evidence consistent with partial mediation was evaluated using a sequential regression modeling strategy, examining both coefficient attenuation and the joint significance of the indirect paths. Specifically, mediation was assessed using the joint significance approach, whereby evidence of an indirect effect is inferred when both the predictor–mediator relationship (path a) and mediator–outcome relationship (path b, controlling for the predictor) are statistically significant (Hayes, 2022; MacKinnon, Lockwood and Williams, 2004). This approach is widely used in regression-based mediation analysis and has been shown to provide adequate control of Type I error rates in small to moderate samples (MacKinnon et al., 2002).

To further strengthen the robustness of the mediation assessment, bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect were estimated using 5,000 resamples. However, latent-variable structural equation modeling (SEM) was not implemented due to sample size constraints and limited statistical power. Simulation studies indicate that complex mediation models and SEM generally require substantially larger samples to produce stable and unbiased estimates (Kline, 2023; MacCallum et al., 1999). Accordingly, the mediation findings are interpreted as evidence consistent with partial mediation within a regression-based framework rather than as definitive causal proof, particularly given the cross-sectional research design (Hayes, 2022).

Contextual constructs were modeled as direct constraining predictors rather than as interaction terms, as the study did not hypothesize moderated effects. Model specification was restricted to a parsimonious set of predictors, consistent with sample-size considerations (Hair et al., 2018). Bivariate correlations did not indicate levels typically associated with severe multicollinearity. These findings were subsequently confirmed through formal VIF diagnostics. This parsimonious modeling strategy aligns

with recommendations to maintain an appropriate predictor-to-sample-size ratio in small-sample regression contexts (Hair et al., 2018).

Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated for all regression models, including specifications with control variables, to assess potential multicollinearity among predictors (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2018). All VIF values remained well below commonly accepted thresholds, supporting the stability and interpretability of the estimated coefficients.

Although exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) are commonly used to assess construct validity (Brown, 2015; Fabrigar et al., 1999), the study's sample size ($n = 45$) is below thresholds recommended for stable factor solutions (Hair et al., 2018; MacCallum et al., 1999). Accordingly, construct validity was addressed through theory-driven item development, internal consistency reliability assessment, examination of theoretically consistent association patterns, and qualitative triangulation.

Qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using structured thematic analysis. Interview notes were systematically reviewed, coded, and grouped into themes aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. Both deductive coding (based on predefined leadership and sustainability constructs) and inductive coding (to capture emergent patterns) were applied, enabling a nuanced interpretation of leadership practices, institutional constraints, and processes of sustainability embedding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analytical process followed the systematic coding procedures proposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), including iterative coding cycles, code consolidation, and development of higher-order analytical themes.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through methodological triangulation across statistical results and qualitative themes. This process enhanced interpretive depth by linking observable quantitative relationships with leadership narratives and contextual dynamics (Denzin, 2012; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). To make this integration explicit, selected findings are presented through joint displays that link key quantitative results with qualitative explanatory insights (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

3.10 Research Design Limitations

While this study provides structured empirical insight into the relationships between leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the quantitative sample size ($n = 45$), although adequate for exploratory regression analysis with parsimonious model specification (Hair et al., 2018), constrains the feasibility and stability of more complex multivariate procedures. Findings should therefore be interpreted as directional and theory-informed rather than as population-level estimates. The study does not claim statistical generalizability beyond the sampled population and context.

Second, reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential common method variance and social desirability bias, particularly because leadership traits, sustainability orientation, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes were reported by the same respondents. While confidentiality assurances and neutral question framing were used to mitigate these risks, perceptual measures may still contribute to common method variance and potentially inflate the strength of observed associations.

Third, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. Although regression-based mediation models and bootstrapped indirect-effect estimates are consistent with theoretically specified pathways, the temporal ordering of variables cannot be definitively established. Accordingly, the observed mediation effects should be interpreted as evidence consistent with partial mediation rather than as definitive causal transmission.

Fourth, EFA/CFA were not conducted due to sample size constraints (MacCallum et al., 1999; Hair et al., 2018). Construct validity was therefore addressed through theory-driven construct operationalization, internal consistency reliability assessment, examination of theoretically expected association patterns, and qualitative triangulation.

Fifth, although formal multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), and all values remained well below conventional thresholds (Hair et al., 2018; Field, 2024), the modest sample size limits the precision of coefficient estimation. While no evidence of problematic multicollinearity was identified, small-sample regression models are inherently more sensitive to sampling variability. Accordingly, coefficient magnitudes should be interpreted as indicative of directional associations rather than precise population parameters.

Sixth, qualitative interviews were not audio-recorded at participants' request in order to preserve confidentiality in a relatively small national professional context. Although detailed contemporaneous notes were expanded immediately after each interview and an audit trail was maintained, the absence of full transcripts and the translation of interview material from Romanian into English may limit the depth of linguistic analysis.

Finally, the findings are shaped by Romania's specific institutional and cultural context, where informal norms, institutional volatility, and emerging-market characteristics may influence how leadership traits translate into sustainability outcomes.

As such, transferability to other national or institutional settings should be approached with caution.

Despite these limitations, several design features strengthen the credibility of the findings: i) a parsimonious model specification was maintained, consistent with sample-size considerations and the exploratory research design; ii) regression assumptions were examined through residual diagnostics and visual inspection; and iii) methodological triangulation across quantitative and qualitative data enhanced interpretive robustness. Together, these measures support confidence in the internal coherence of the findings while acknowledging appropriate boundaries of inference.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological design of this study, including participant selection, instrumentation, data collection procedures, analytical strategy, and the research design limitations.

The mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative survey analysis and qualitative interviews to provide a structured, context-sensitive examination of the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and their relationship to sustainability in Romanian organizations. Furthermore, the explanatory mixed-methods design enabled the study to test theoretically grounded hypotheses using regression-based quantitative models, while complementing these findings with qualitative insights into leadership practices, contextual constraints, and mechanisms for integrating sustainability into organizational processes. Parsimonious model specification, internal consistency testing, regression diagnostics, and thematic analysis procedures were applied to ensure methodological coherence and analytical transparency.

While acknowledging the limitations of sample size, self-reported data, and a cross-sectional design, methodological triangulation enhances interpretive depth and

strengthens the internal coherence between theoretical constructs, empirical measurement, and contextual interpretation.

Collectively, these methodological choices establish a coherent and theoretically aligned foundation for the empirical results presented in Chapter IV, enabling a systematic examination of leadership–sustainability relationships within the institutional and organizational context of an emerging market.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

4.1 Data Overview

This chapter reports the findings of the mixed-methods study described in Chapter III, integrating quantitative survey data from 45 respondents with qualitative evidence derived from 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with women leaders in organizations operating in Romania.

4.1.1 Quantitative data

The quantitative analysis examined leadership traits (constructs A and B), sustainability orientation (construct C), organizational sustainability practices (construct D), cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints (constructs E and F), and organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G), as well as organizational- and respondent-level control variables. The analysis was designed to identify directional relationships and explanatory patterns consistent with the exploratory research purpose, rather than to generate population-level estimates.

Survey respondents predominantly held senior decision-making positions, with 87% reporting C-level or top-management roles. Respondents reported substantial leadership experience and backgrounds in organizations operating across multiple industry sectors and competitive environments. To contextualize the quantitative findings, Table 4.1 presents an overview of the sample ($n = 45$), focusing on the organizational and leadership characteristics included as control variables in the regression analysis.

Table 4.1
Contextual Characteristics of the Quantitative Sample ($n = 45$)

Variable	Category	Percentage
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Leadership Tenure	<5	11%
(Years)	5-10	27%
	11-20	33%
	>20	29%
Industry Sector	Manufacturing	31%
	Agri-business	24%
	Technology	11%
	Consumer Goods	18%
	Other	16%
Competition Intensity	High	43%
	Moderate	33%
	Low	24%
Organization Size	<50	22%
(Number of Employees)	50-249	18%
	250-999	33%
	>1000	22%
	Prefer not to say	5%
Organization Age	<5	13%
(Years)	5-10	11%
	11-20	24%
	>20	47%
	Prefer not to say	5%

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

To clarify the empirical testing strategy, Table 4.2 summarizes the alignment among the research questions, constructs, and statistical models used in this chapter.

Table 4.2

Alignment of Research Questions, Constructs, and Quantitative Models

Research Question	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator	Controls	Statistical Model
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RQ1	G_mean (Construct G)	A_mean, B_mean (Constructs A and B)	—	Size, Industry, Age, Competition, Tenure	Multiple Regression
RQ2	G_mean (Construct G)	AB_mean (Composite of Constructs A and B)	C_mean (Construct C)	Size, Industry, Age, Competition, Tenure	Regression-based Mediation
RQ3	G_mean (Construct G)	A_mean, E_mean, F_mean (Constructs A, E, and F)	—	Size, Industry, Age, Competition, Tenure	Multiple Regression
RQ4	CD_mean (Composite of Constructs C and D)	A_mean, B_mean (Constructs A and B)	—	Size, Industry, Age, Competition, Tenure	Multiple Regression

(Source: Author's own conceptualization)

Unless otherwise indicated, all regression coefficients reported in this chapter are unstandardized estimates (B), as the analyses were conducted on observed composite variables without prior standardization (Field, 2024).

Prior to hypothesis testing, internal consistency of all five-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's α . As shown in Table 4.3, Cronbach's α values ($n = 45$) range from 0.83 to 0.94, indicating good to excellent internal consistency and supporting the aggregation of individual items into composite constructs for subsequent correlation, regression, and mediation analyses (Field, 2024; Hair et al., 2018).

Table 4.3
Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's α) of the Study Constructs ($n = 45$)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α
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A – Values-Based Leadership	A1-A5	0.828
B – Transformational Leadership	B1-B5	0.900
C – Sustainability Orientation	C1-C5	0.919
D – Organizational Sustainability Practices	D1-D5	0.868
E – Cultural Contextual Constraints	E1-E5	0.912
F – Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints	F1-F5	0.930
G – Organizational Sustainability Outcomes	G1-G5	0.940

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Descriptive statistics for all constructs were also examined, with the results presented in Table 4.4. Mean values for leadership constructs, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and organizational sustainability outcomes are all above the midpoint of the scale. This pattern is also observed for the composite constructs AB_mean and CD_mean. Cultural and emerging-market contextual constructs show lower mean values, indicating moderate perceived constraints. Additionally, median and mode values across constructs are predominantly 4, while contextual constraints exhibit a median of 3, further indicating generally high self-reported levels across the sample. The observed dispersion across constructs reflects sufficient variability to support subsequent correlational and regression analyses.

Table 4.4
Descriptive Statistics for the Study Constructs (n = 45)

Construct	Description	Mean	Standard Deviation
A_mean	Values-Based Leadership	3.693	0.674
B_mean	Transformational Leadership	3.551	0.982
C_mean	Sustainability Orientation	3.476	0.949
D_mean	Organizational Sustainability Practices	3.502	0.931
E_mean	Cultural Contextual Constraints	2.893	1.025
F_mean	Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints	2.858	1.105

G_mean	Organizational Sustainability Outcomes	3.520	1.020
AB_mean	Composite of Constructs A and B	3.622	0.723
CD_mean	Composite of Constructs C and D	3.489	0.797

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

As a preliminary step to multivariate analysis, bivariate correlations between composite construct means were also examined. Pearson correlation coefficients are reported descriptively, while non-parametric correlations were computed as robustness checks. As shown in Figure 4.1, Pearson correlation coefficients ($n = 45$) indicate moderate positive associations between leadership constructs, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and organizational sustainability outcomes. Sustainability outcomes are moderately correlated with values-based leadership ($r = 0.52$), transformational leadership ($r = 0.64$), and sustainability orientation ($r = 0.64$), whereas cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints exhibit weak-to-moderate negative correlations. No bivariate correlations approached levels typically associated with potential multicollinearity concerns in exploratory regression contexts (Hair et al., 2018).

Correlation Matrix	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A	1,000	0,510	0,582	0,167	0,107	-0,137	0,522
B	0,510	1,000	0,479	0,142	-0,023	-0,204	0,636
C	0,582	0,479	1,000	0,439	-0,136	-0,187	0,638
D	0,167	0,142	0,439	1,000	-0,206	0,018	0,329
E	0,107	-0,023	-0,136	-0,206	1,000	0,136	-0,205
F	-0,137	-0,204	-0,187	0,018	0,136	1,000	-0,413
G	0,522	0,636	0,638	0,329	-0,205	-0,413	1,000

Figure 4.1
Correlation Matrix of Construct Means ($n = 45$)

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Given the ordinal nature of the Likert-type scales and the moderate sample size ($n = 45$), Kendall's tau-b coefficients were additionally computed for construct–outcome relationships as a non-parametric robustness check (Field, 2024). The tau-b coefficients

are directionally consistent with the earlier reported Pearson correlations, reinforcing confidence in the stability and direction of the observed associations prior to multivariate hypothesis testing; results are presented in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5
Non-parametric Robustness Check: Kendall's tau-b (n = 45)

Predictor Construct	Description	Kendall's tau-b with G_mean
A_mean	Values-Based Leadership	0.395
B_mean	Transformational Leadership	0.469
C_mean	Sustainability Orientation	0.451
D_mean	Organizational Sustainability Practices	0.204
E_mean	Cultural Contextual Constraints	-0.087
F_mean	Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints	-0.303

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Jointly, these descriptive patterns indicate relatively high self-reported levels of leadership engagement with sustainability, alongside acknowledgment of contextual constraints.

4.1.2 Qualitative insights

Qualitative insights were derived from ten semi-structured interviews with senior women leaders operating in Romanian organizations. Interviewees held operational, executive, and governance roles across industrial, energy, consumer goods, and technology sectors, spanning large and medium-sized organizations, enabling examination of sustainability leadership across multiple organizational levels. Given the seniority of participants and the depth of the interviews, the qualitative sample (n = 10) provided sufficient thematic breadth and depth to enable identification of recurring analytical patterns presented in this chapter. The interview excerpts presented in this chapter are reconstructed from contemporaneous interview notes and therefore reflect

participants' perspectives rather than verbatim transcripts; however, they preserve the substantive meaning and intent expressed during the interviews.

To preserve anonymity, Table 4.6 summarizes the qualitative interview sample (n = 10) in aggregate, highlighting variation in leadership level, sector context, career trajectory, and perceived sustainability leverage.

Table 4.6

Qualitative Sample Characteristics by Analytical Dimensions (n = 10)

Dimension	Category	Interviewee
Leadership Level	Operational / Control	5, 7
	Executive / Strategic	1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10
	Board / Governance	2, 9
Industry Sector	Industrial and Manufacturing	1, 7, 10
	Energy and Utilities	2
	Consumer Goods / FMCG	3, 6
	Technology and Tech-Enabled Services	4, 8
	SME / Entrepreneurship	5
	Multi-Industry	9
Career Trajectory	Crisis / Turnaround	1, 3
	Corporate Succession	4, 6, 7
	Entrepreneurial / Founder	5
	Scale-up / Growth	8, 10
	Governance-focused	2, 9
Primary Sustainability	Operations and Execution	1, 3, 4, 5
Leverage	People and Culture	6, 8
	Risk and Compliance	7
	Strategy and Allocation	2, 10
	Governance and Oversight	9

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on interview data)

Interview notes were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach informed by established qualitative research procedures, as outlined in Chapter III. Coding was conducted iteratively, combining deductive and inductive logic. An initial deductive coding structure was derived from the theoretical framework and research questions, ensuring alignment between qualitative analysis and the quantitative constructs used in the survey instrument. Subsequent inductive refinement consolidated overlapping categories and clarified conceptual boundaries, ensuring that themes reflected recurring patterns across interviews rather than isolated or idiosyncratic statements. This process resulted in a final qualitative codebook comprising eight Level 2 analytical themes that demonstrated cross-interview recurrence (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Figure 4.2 illustrates the progression from raw interview data through Level 1 and Level 2 coding to the alignment of analytical themes with the study’s research questions and qualitative expectations.

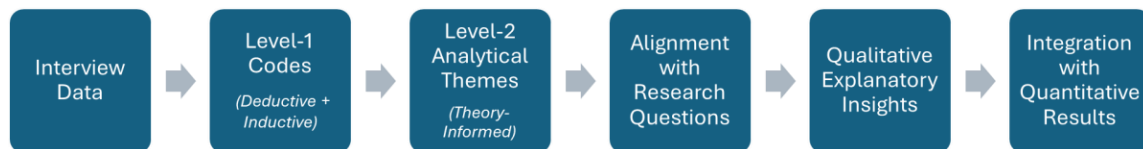


Figure 4.2
Qualitative Analysis and Coding Process Structure (n = 10)

(Source: Author’s own analysis, based on interview data)

The eight themes identified were not treated as independent variables but rather as interrelated dimensions through which leadership is expressed, constrained, and embedded in organizational sustainability processes. To facilitate integration, Table 4.7

summarizes the qualitative themes and their alignment with the research questions and quantitative findings.

Table 4.7
Level-2 Analytical Themes Derived from Interviews (n = 10)

Level-2 Themes	Analytical Category	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4
Strategic Direction and Alignment	Leadership influence mechanisms	x	x		x
Long-Term Orientation and Stewardship	Leadership influence mechanisms	x	x		x
Governance and Accountability	Embedding and institutionalization processes	x			x
People Development and Inclusion	Leadership influence mechanisms		x		
Ethical and Values-Based Leadership	Leadership influence mechanisms	x	x		x
Cultural and Informal Norms	Structural and contextual conditions			x	
Adaptive Leadership in Volatility	Structural and contextual conditions			x	x
Gendered Barriers and Credibility Building	Structural and contextual conditions			x	

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on interview data)

Across the interviews, five of the eight Level 2 themes were present in all interviews, indicating strong cross-contextual consistency. Two themes appeared in nine interviews, while one appeared in five, reflecting contextual specificity. This distribution does not imply relative importance or causal weight, nor should it be interpreted as an indicator of explanatory strength. It highlights the breadth of thematic coverage and the

extent to which certain leadership mechanisms and contextual conditions recur across roles, sectors, and organizational settings. Figure 4.3 provides a visual summary of the recurrence of Level 2 analytical themes across the interview dataset.

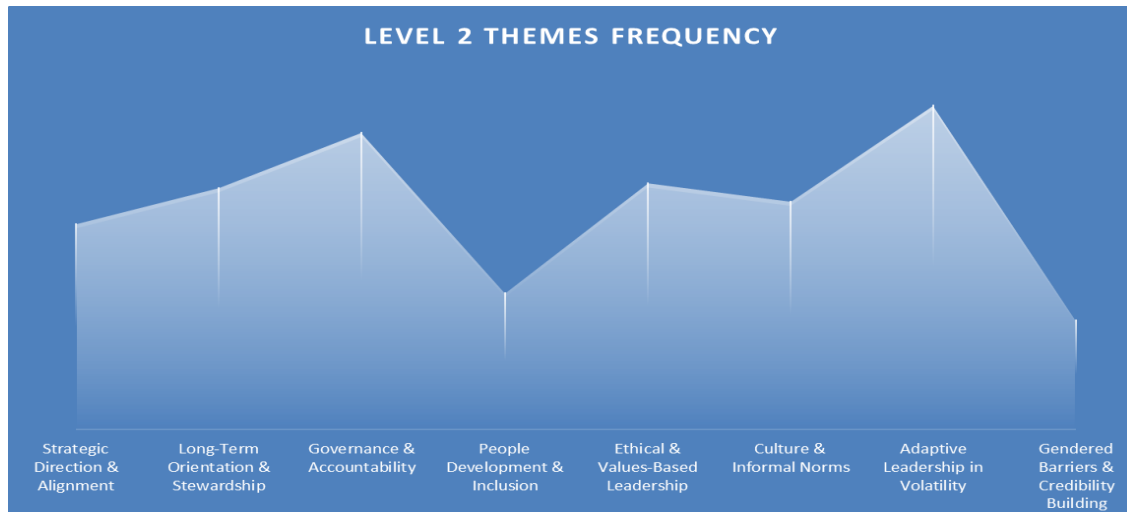


Figure 4.3
Frequency of Level 2 Analytical Themes Across Interviews (n = 10)

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on interview data)

Overall, the qualitative analysis provides structured thematic coverage of leadership practices, contextual conditions, and sustainability-related dynamics across the interview sample, while the identified themes establish the analytical foundation for the following sections. The following sections present the quantitative and qualitative findings structured by research question, from RQ1 to RQ4.

4.2 Research Question One

Research Question One (RQ1) examines the relationship between the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, without comparing female and male leadership. This research question is addressed through Hypothesis H1, which proposes that leadership traits associated with women leaders, captured in constructs A and B (values-based and

transformational leadership), are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G). Quantitative analysis assesses these relationships using correlation and regression techniques, consistent with the analytical strategy outlined in Chapter III, while qualitative interview data provide contextual insight into how these leadership traits influence sustainability-related practices and outcomes.

4.2.1 Quantitative results RQ1

For the quantitative analysis of RQ1, descriptive statistics were computed for each of the leadership traits A1–A5 and B1–B5. Table 4.8 reports the mean scores and standard deviations for each item.

Table 4.8

Descriptive Statistics for Values-Based and Transformational Leadership Traits (n = 45)

Construct Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Empathy and Understanding (A1)	3.689	0.821
Ethical Decision-Making (A2)	3.778	0.850
Inclusiveness (A3)	3.644	0.857
Collaborative Orientation (A4)	3.578	1.011
Recognition and Valuing (A5)	3.778	0.823
Visionary Orientation (B1)	3.622	1.154
Long-Term Goal Orientation (B2)	3.644	1.151
Innovative Problem-Solving (B3)	3.511	1.254
Sustainability Change Agency (B4)	3.444	1.139
Sustainability Strategic Focus (B5)	3.533	1.079

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

As the results show, all leadership trait items exhibit mean values above the midpoint of the scale. However, standard deviation values indicate variation across respondents, with lower dispersion observed for relational and ethical indicators (A1, A2,

A3, A5) and higher dispersion observed for indicators related to strategic orientation, innovation, and sustainability change (B1–B4). Mean scores for values-based leadership indicators are relatively tightly grouped, with the greatest dispersion observed for collaborative orientation (A4). Transformational leadership indicators exhibit greater overall dispersion than values-based indicators, with the greatest variability observed for innovative problem-solving (B3) and the lowest for sustainability strategic focus (B5). For clarity, this pattern reflects variation in the distribution of transformational leadership scores across respondents.

Descriptive statistics were also computed for each item in the organizational sustainability outcomes construct, with results presented in Table 4.9 below:

Table 4.9
Descriptive Statistics for Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (n = 45)

Construct Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Economic Performance (G1)	3.556	1.159
Social Performance (G2)	3.556	1.179
Environmental Performance (G3)	3.489	1.079
Reputation and Resilience (G4)	3.533	1.179
Governance (G5)	3.467	1.079

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

All items in the organizational sustainability outcomes construct exhibit mean values above the midpoint of the scale, relatively tightly grouped, while the standard deviation values indicate variation across respondents, with lower dispersion observed for environmental performance and governance indicators (G3 and G5) and higher dispersion observed for indicators related to social performance and resilience (G2 and G4).

Additionally, descriptive statistics were computed at the composite mean level (A_mean, B_mean, and G_mean) to summarize the distributions of leadership traits and

organizational sustainability outcomes among the 45 respondents; results are presented in Table 4.4 in section 4.1.1. The observed dispersion across constructs reflects sufficient variability to support subsequent inferential analysis.

To further assess the relationship between leadership traits exhibited by women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes, a multiple linear regression model (Model 1) was estimated with sustainability outcomes (G_mean) as the dependent variable and values-based leadership (A_mean) and transformational leadership (B_mean) as independent variables. Results of the baseline model, estimated without the control variables, are presented in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10

Multiple Regression Model 1: Leadership Traits and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (without Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	0.184	0.656	0.28	0.781
A_mean	0.404	0.200	2.02	0.050
B_mean	0.519	0.137	3.78	< 0.001

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The baseline model is statistically significant ($F = 17.67$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 45.7% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.457$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.431$). Both leadership traits exhibit positive coefficients, with transformational leadership showing a larger and more statistically significant coefficient than values-based leadership.

To assess the robustness of the observed relationships, Model 1 was re-estimated by incorporating five organizational and respondent-level control variables (organization size, industry sector, organization age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure). Results are presented in Table 4.11 below.

Table 4.11

Multiple Regression Model 1: Leadership Traits and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (with Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	-0.557	0.813	-0.68	0.498
A_mean	0.435	0.216	2.02	0.051
B_mean	0.524	0.150	3.49	0.001
Organization Size	0.006	0.186	0.32	0.748
Industry Sector	0.065	0.088	0.75	0.461
Organization Age	-0.165	0.200	-0.83	0.414
Competition Intensity	0.271	0.151	1.80	0.080
Leadership Tenure	0.072	0.124	0.58	0.566

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The controlled model remains statistically significant ($F = 5.72$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 52.0% of the variance in sustainability outcomes, with only a negligible change in adjusted R^2 relative to the baseline model ($R^2 = 0.520$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.429$).

Transformational leadership maintains a positive, statistically significant association with sustainability outcomes, while values-based leadership remains positive but marginally significant. Among the control variables, competition intensity shows a marginal positive association, whereas the remaining control variables are not statistically significant in this specification.

Residual diagnostics were examined for both regression specifications, with and without controls. Visual inspection of residual and normal probability plots indicates that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and approximate normality of the residuals are broadly satisfied. The inclusion of control variables does not materially alter model behavior, and no influential observations were identified that would compromise model stability.

To assess potential multicollinearity in Regression 1, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated for all predictors in both model specifications. In the baseline model estimated without control variables, VIF values were 1.35 for both values-based leadership (A_mean) and transformational leadership (B_mean), indicating low multicollinearity among predictors. In the model including control variables, VIF values increased slightly but remained low (VIF_A = 1.57; VIF_B = 1.61). All values are well below the conservative threshold of 5, indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity and that coefficient estimates are stable and reliable across specifications.

Overall, the quantitative results for RQ1 indicate positive associations between leadership traits and organizational sustainability outcomes. Transformational leadership remains positively and statistically significantly associated with sustainability outcomes across model specifications, whereas values-based leadership remains positively associated but marginally significant once controls are introduced.

4.2.2 Qualitative insights RQ1

Qualitative interview data (n = 10) provide context to the first qualitative expectation set for the research, with leadership traits associated with women leaders expected to be observable in how sustainability priorities are framed and enacted within organizations across the three sustainability pillars. Across interviews, sustainability was consistently framed as an embedded leadership responsibility rather than a peripheral reporting or compliance activity. Participants described leadership influence on sustainability as operating through four closely connected mechanisms: strategic direction and alignment; long-term orientation and stewardship; governance and accountability; and ethical and values-based leadership.

First, respondents emphasized that sustainability outcomes become tangible only when sustainability is embedded into strategic direction and alignment. Leaders described integrating sustainability considerations into priority-setting, resource allocation, and decision frameworks, particularly when navigating trade-offs between short-term financial pressures and longer-term environmental or social goals. As one executive reflected, *“Sustainability is linked to efficiency and compliance... it is part of strategy discussions, not just reporting”* (Interviewee 1, Senior executive role, Industrial / Manufacturing sector). Another participant explained, *“Sustainability is not separate from strategy... treated as a business decision”* (Interviewee 3, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). Similarly, a board-level respondent emphasized that *“...sustainability topics were formally included in board agendas and strategic discussions”* (Interviewee 9, Board-level role, Multi-industry context). Sustainability was thus framed not as a separate agenda but as a criterion that shapes how strategy is formulated and success is defined.

Second, long-term orientation and stewardship emerged as a defining lens through which leaders interpreted sustainability responsibility. Respondents frequently referred to responsibility for future consequences, organizational resilience, and intergenerational impact, often contrasting this perspective with short-term performance logics. One participant explained, *“Leadership means responsibility... for people, culture, and the future”* (Interviewee 1, Senior executive role, Industrial / Manufacturing sector), while another described deliberately prioritizing long-term considerations under pressure, noting the importance to *“think long-term and invest in people even when pressure is high”* (Interviewee 6, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). A third interviewee emphasized the need for innovation that can be sustained over time, stating that *“without long-term thinking, growth becomes fragile and reactive”* (Interviewee 8,

Senior executive role, Technology sector). These narratives describe how participants articulate long-term thinking in relation to sustainability outcomes.

Third, particularly among respondents with board exposure, governance and accountability mechanisms were closely associated with sustainability performance. Participants pointed to formal oversight structures, transparency, and clear accountability as safeguards against sustainability drift. One board-level participant highlighted the importance of “*setting rules and making sure they are applied consistently, not only when convenient*” (Interviewee 2, Board-level role, Energy sector). Another participant described “*strengthening governance and compliance processes, even when this slowed down certain opportunities*” (Interviewee 7, Senior executive role, Industrial sector). A further respondent, with both executive and board-level experience, emphasized that “*it is not about authority or power, but accountability for outcomes, culture, and the long-term consequences of decisions*” (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector). Such mechanisms were described by participants as supporting continuity and credibility, ensuring that sustainability commitments persist beyond individual leadership tenures.

Fourth, ethical and values-based leadership was consistently presented as the normative foundation supporting all others. Interviewees emphasized coherence between values and decisions, integrity under pressure, and a refusal to take unethical shortcuts as prerequisites for trust and legitimacy. As one respondent described, “*decisiveness and trust...are key.... people need to trust you,*” particularly when “*doing the right things consistently, not only when there is pressure from outside*” (Interviewee 4, Senior executive role, Technology sector). Another interviewee emphasized adaptability as critical for survival in “*doing what you have to do, especially when things get hard*”, but only when “*...staying true to yourself while adjusting constantly*” (Interviewee 5,

Entrepreneurial role, SME / Technology services context). A third participant highlighted the “*consistency between values and decisions, the ability to resist short-termism, and a clear sense of responsibility for long-term consequences,*” alongside the importance of “*ethical clarity*” and a “*leadership style that is strategic, ethical, and transformational*” (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector). Participants framed ethics not as abstract principles but as practical guides that shape daily leadership choices with direct implications.

Together, these qualitative insights align with the quantitative patterns observed in RQ1, illustrating how leadership traits translate sustainability priorities into organizational action, particularly with respect to economic, social, and environmental considerations.

4.3 Research Question Two

Research Question Two (RQ2) examines the extent to which sustainability orientation mediates the relationship between the leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. RQ2 is addressed by Hypothesis H2, which posits that sustainability orientation (construct C) mediates the relationship between these leadership traits, measured as a composite of constructs A and B (values-based and transformational leadership), and organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G). Quantitative analysis tests this mediation pathway using regression-based models, while qualitative interview evidence contextualizes how sustainability orientation is shaped and enacted in practice and how it translates leadership intent into sustainability-related outcomes.

4.3.1 Quantitative results RQ2

Prior to inferential analysis, descriptive statistics were examined to assess central tendency, dispersion, and suitability for regression analysis at the composite mean level

for leadership traits and sustainability orientation (AB_mean and C_mean); results are presented in Table 4.4 in section 4.1.1. The composite leadership index (AB_mean) shows greater dispersion than its values-based leadership component alone (0.723 vs. 0.674) and lower dispersion than its transformational leadership component alone (0.723 vs. 0.982), indicating an intermediate distribution relative to its component constructs. The observed dispersion across constructs reflects sufficient variability to support subsequent inferential analysis.

To test the mediating role of sustainability orientation, regression-based mediation analyses were conducted using Models 2a, 2b, and 2c. In line with the operationalization defined in Chapter III, for regression purposes, leadership traits were modeled as a composite construct (AB_mean, composite of A and B), reflecting the combined enactment of values-based and transformational leadership traits, rather than isolated leadership dimensions.

In the first step (Model 2a), sustainability orientation (C_mean) was regressed on the composite leadership traits variable (AB_mean). Results are presented in Table 4.12 below.

Table 4.12

Multiple Regression Model 2a: Composite Leadership Traits and Sustainability Orientation (without Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	0.642	0.593	1.08	0.285
AB_mean	0.782	0.161	4.87	< 0.001

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Model 2a is statistically significant ($F = 23.71$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 35.5% of the variance in sustainability orientation ($R^2 = 0.355$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.340$). Leadership

traits are strongly and positively associated with sustainability orientation ($B = 0.782$, $p < 0.001$), meeting the statistical criterion for path a of the mediation model.

To assess the robustness of Model 2a, a new estimation was conducted that included organizational and respondent-level control variables (organization size, industry sector, organization age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure). Results are shown in Table 4.13 below:

Table 4.13

Multiple Regression Model 2a: Composite Leadership Traits and Sustainability Orientation (with Control Variables, $n = 45$)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	0.237	0.722	0.33	0.744
AB_mean	0.851	0.154	5.52	< 0.001
Organization Size	0.250	0.168	1.49	0.144
Industry Sector	-0.054	0.080	-0.67	0.506
Organization Age	-0.211	0.175	-1.20	0.236
Competition Intensity	0.337	0.137	2.47	0.018
Leadership Tenure	-0.155	0.112	-1.38	0.176

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The controlled model 2a remains statistically significant overall ($F = 6.92$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 52.2% of the variance in sustainability orientation ($R^2 = 0.522$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.447$). Leadership traits remain strongly and positively associated with sustainability orientation ($B = 0.851$, $p < 0.001$), satisfying the statistical conditions for path a of the mediation model. Among the control variables, competition intensity shows a positive association, whereas the other controls do not exhibit statistically significant effects.

In the second step (Model 2b), organizational sustainability outcomes (G_mean) were regressed on both leadership traits (AB_mean) and sustainability orientation (C_mean). Results are reported in Table 4.14 below.

Table 4.14

Multiple Regression Model 2b: Composite Leadership Traits, Sustainability Orientation, and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (without Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	-0.179	0.551	-0.33	0.747
AB_mean	0.643	0.184	3.50	0.001
C_mean	0.394	0.140	2.82	0.007

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Model 2b is also statistically significant ($F = 24.81$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 54.1% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.542$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.519$). When both leadership traits (AB_mean) and sustainability orientation (C_mean) are included in the model, each shows a positive, statistically significant association with sustainability outcomes. Sustainability orientation shows a statistically significant effect ($B = 0.394$, $p = 0.007$), while leadership traits retain a statistically significant direct effect ($B = 0.643$, $p = 0.001$).

To assess robustness, Model 2b was re-estimated to include organizational- and respondent-level control variables (organization size, industry sector, organization age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure). Results are shown in Table 4.15 below.

Table 4.15

Multiple Regression Model 2b: Composite Leadership Traits, Sustainability Orientation, and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (with Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	-0.712	0.726	-0.98	0.333
AB_mean	0.616	0.208	2.96	0.005
C_mean	0.427	0.163	2.63	0.013

Organization Size	-0.038	0.173	-0.22	0.825
Industry Sector	0.087	0.081	1.08	0.288
Organization Age	-0.091	0.179	-0.51	0.616
Competition Intensity	0.122	0.148	0.82	0.416
Leadership Tenure	0.144	0.115	1.25	0.220

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The controlled model 2b remains statistically significant overall ($F = 7.75$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 59.5% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.595$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.518$). Both leadership traits (AB_mean: $B = 0.616$, $p = 0.005$) and sustainability orientation (C_mean: $B = 0.427$, $p = 0.013$) remain positively and significantly associated with sustainability outcomes.

To conclude the analysis, a third regression model (Model 2c) was estimated, in which sustainability outcomes (G_mean) were regressed directly on the composite leadership traits variable (AB_mean), without considering the sustainability orientation (C_mean). Results are presented in Table 4.16 below.

Table 4.16

Multiple Regression Model 2c: Composite Leadership Traits and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (without Control Variables, $n = 45$)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	0.074	0.586	0.13	0.901
AB_mean	0.951	0.159	5.99	< 0.001

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Model 2c is statistically significant ($F = 35.90$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 45.5% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.455$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.442$). Without the sustainability orientation effect, leadership traits (AB_mean) show a larger, statistically significant effect ($B = 0.951$, $p < 0.001$) than in Model 2b ($B = 0.643$, $p = 0.001$).

To assess the robustness of Model 2c, the same step of re-estimating it with organizational- and respondent-level control variables (organization size, industry sector, organization age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure) was taken. Results are shown in Table 4.17 below.

Table 4.17

Multiple Regression Model 2c: Composite Leadership Traits and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (with Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	-0.611	0.779	-0.78	0.438
AB_mean	0.979	0.166	5.89	< 0.001
Organization Size	0.068	0.181	0.38	0.707
Industry Sector	0.064	0.087	0.74	0.462
Organization Age	-0.181	0.189	-0.96	0.344
Competition Intensity	0.266	0.147	1.80	0.079
Leadership Tenure	0.078	0.121	0.64	0.525

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The controlled model 2c remains statistically significant ($F = 6.83$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 51.9% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.519$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.443$), with leadership traits (AB_mean) remaining strongly and positively associated with sustainability outcomes ($B = 0.979$, $p < 0.001$).

Comparing the total effect of leadership traits on sustainability outcomes (Model 2c) with the direct effect estimated after inclusion of sustainability orientation (Model 2b) reflects a substantive reduction in the leadership coefficient in both the non-controlled ($B = 0.951$ to $B = 0.643$) and controlled specifications ($B = 0.979$ to $B = 0.616$). This reduction is consistent with a partial mediation pattern within the estimated regression framework.

Mediation was first examined with the joint significance approach. As shown in Table 4.18 below, leadership traits (AB_mean) are positively and significantly associated with sustainability orientation (C_mean) (path a), both without controls ($B = 0.782$, $p < 0.001$) and with controls ($B = 0.851$, $p < 0.001$). When sustainability orientation is included in the model predicting sustainability outcomes (G_mean), its effect remains positive and statistically significant (path b), both without controls ($B = 0.394$, $p = 0.007$) and with controls ($B = 0.427$, $p = 0.013$). The direct effect of leadership traits on sustainability outcomes (path c') remains statistically significant in both specifications, although smaller than the total effect observed in Model 2c. Therefore, as both path a ($AB \rightarrow C$) and path b ($C \rightarrow G$, controlling for AB) are statistically significant across specifications, the joint significance criterion for mediation is satisfied.

Table 4.18

Mediation Analysis (Model 2): Joint Significance Test (Unstandardized OLS Estimates, $n = 45$)

Model	Path	Description	Controls	Coefficient (B)	p-value	R ²
2a	a	$AB \rightarrow C$	No	0.782	< 0.001	0.355
2a	a	$AB \rightarrow C$	Yes	0.851	< 0.001	0.522
2b	b	$C \rightarrow G$ (controlling for AB)	No	0.394	0.007	0.542
2b	c'	$AB \rightarrow G$ (direct effect)	No	0.643	0.001	0.542
2b	b	$C \rightarrow G$ (controlling for AB)	Yes	0.427	0.013	0.595
2b	c'	$AB \rightarrow G$ (direct effect)	Yes	0.616	0.005	0.595
2c	c	$AB \rightarrow G$ (total effect; no mediator)	No	0.951	< 0.001	0.455
2c	c	$AB \rightarrow G$ (total effect; no mediator)	Yes	0.979	< 0.001	0.519

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

To further strengthen the mediation test, a bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted with 5,000 resamples, and the results are presented in Table 4.19 below. The

results indicate a significant indirect effect of leadership traits on sustainability outcomes through sustainability orientation ($B = 0.308$, 95% CI [0.056, 0.593], $p = 0.027$). Because the bootstrapped confidence interval does not include zero, the indirect effect is statistically supported, consistent with the presence of a mediation pathway.

Table 4.19

Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for Model 2 Regression: Indirect, Direct, and Total Effects (n = 45)

Effect	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	95% Confidence Interval	Z	p-value
Indirect	0.308	0.139	0.056 – 0.593	2.21	0.027
Direct	0.643	0.171	0.328 – 1.004	3.77	< 0.001
Total	0.951	0.145	0.693 – 1.265	6.54	< 0.001

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Residual diagnostics were examined for all three regression models in RQ2, both with and without control variables. Visual inspection of the residual plots indicates no systematic patterns, suggesting that the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity are broadly satisfied. Normal probability plots indicate that the residuals are approximately normal, and no influential observations were identified that would materially compromise model stability.

To evaluate potential multicollinearity in the mediation model (Regression 2), Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated for the predictor and mediator across both model specifications. In the baseline model estimated without control variables, VIF values were 1.55 for both AB_mean and C_mean. In the specification including control variables, VIF values increased moderately but remained low ($VIF_{AB} = 1.98$; $VIF_C = 2.09$). All values are well below the conservative threshold of 5, indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity and supporting the stability and interpretability of the mediation estimates.

Overall, the quantitative results for RQ2 are consistent with a partial mediation pattern. Leadership traits are positively associated with sustainability orientation, and both remain significantly and positively associated with sustainability outcomes when included in the same model. The following qualitative findings describe how sustainability orientation is articulated and enacted in practice.

4.3.2 Qualitative insights RQ2

Qualitative interview data (n = 10) provide insights into the second qualitative expectation defined in the research design, with a sustainability orientation expected to emerge as a decision-making mindset that shapes how women leaders navigate trade-offs between short-term operational pressures and long-term sustainability objectives. Across interviews, respondents described sustainability-oriented leadership as grounded in a set of interrelated behavioral dimensions that align with the leadership traits operationalized in the survey and reinforced by disciplined trade-off decision-making. These include ethical judgment and values consistency, people development and inclusion, strategic direction and alignment, and long-term orientation and stewardship.

First, ethical judgment and values consistency were repeatedly framed as foundational to sustainability-centered leadership. Respondents emphasized that integrity and principled decision-making become particularly relevant under pressure, when short-term incentives may lead to compromises that undermine long-term goals. One executive highlighted “*decisiveness, trust, fairness, consistency, respect-based values, accountability, and honesty*” as core leadership attributes, concluding that “*being honest matters...people may not always agree with you, but they will trust you*” (Interviewee 4, Senior executive role, Technology sector). A board-level participant similarly emphasized “*ethics, standards, fairness, and trust*”, describing an inclusive approach in which “*listening carefully, bringing people together, and building shared understanding*

before decisions are made” were viewed as essential for maintaining ethical consistency (Interviewee 2, Board-level role, Energy sector). A third respondent, drawing on both executive and governance experience, linked ethical judgment with long-term orientation, emotional intelligence, and empowerment, reflecting that the leadership aim was to “create trust, set direction, and empower others while maintaining high standards and accountability” (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector). These accounts describe ethical judgment and values consistency as recurring elements of sustainability-oriented leadership under conditions of complexity and pressure.

Second, people development and inclusion emerged as a central mechanism through which sustainability orientation is translated into organizational practice. Respondents highlighted capability-building, empowerment, and shared ownership as necessary conditions for embedding sustainability across functions and levels. One respondent described leadership responsibility as extending beyond performance to encompass “*people, culture, and the future*” (Interviewee 1, Senior executive role, Industrial / Manufacturing sector). Another emphasized the importance of sustained investment in people even under pressure, emphasizing the need to “*think long-term and invest in people even when pressure is high*” (Interviewee 6, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). A third respondent linked people's direct involvement to sustainable growth, reflecting that “*long-term growth only works when innovation, purpose, and people evolve together*” (Interviewee 8, Senior executive role, Technology sector). Across interviews, collaboration was framed not as a discretionary leadership behavior, but as a prerequisite for sustaining sustainability efforts beyond individual roles or departments.

Third, respondents emphasized strategic direction and alignment as a defining leadership trait in shaping sustainability orientation. Leaders described integrating

sustainability into strategic priorities, performance criteria, and decision frameworks as essential for guiding organizational behavior. One executive emphasized that sustainability must be “*built directly into strategy, not added later,*” highlighting the importance of early deliberate integration into core decision-making processes (Interviewee 3, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). A board-level respondent similarly highlighted the role of formal governance mechanisms, reflecting on the importance of “*ensuring sustainability topics are formally included in board agendas and strategic discussions*” (Interviewee 9, Board-level role, Multi-industry context). A senior financial leader highlighted the connection between sustainability orientation and risk discipline, describing that “*good leadership is about protecting the organization from unnecessary risk*” (Interviewee 7, Senior executive role, Industrial sector). Overall, these insights show that participants described sustainability orientation in terms of governance, risk management, and strategic alignment rather than as a standalone policy initiative.

Finally, long-term orientation and stewardship were consistently identified as distinguishing features of sustainability-centered leadership. Respondents highlighted responsibility for future consequences, organizational resilience, and resistance to short-termism as critical leadership traits shaping sustainable business practices. One participant reflected that without long-term thinking, “*growth becomes fragile and reactive*” (Interviewee 8, Senior executive role, Technology sector). Another emphasized accountability for “*the long-term consequences of decisions, not just immediate outcomes,*” highlighting stewardship as a core leadership responsibility (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector). An entrepreneurial leader framed long-term orientation in terms of survival and disciplined trade-offs, explaining that “*there is always a trade-off between survival and growth,*” and that leadership requires pacing

decisions to protect organizational viability over immediate gains (Interviewee 5, Entrepreneurial role, SME / Technology services context). These accounts show that long-term orientation and stewardship were described across executive, governance, and entrepreneurial contexts as part of sustainability-oriented leadership.

Together, these qualitative findings correspond to the quantitative results for RQ2 by providing contextual depth on the leadership mindset through which women leaders described navigating both short-term pressures and long-term sustainability objectives.

4.4 Research Question Three

Research Question Three (RQ3) examines how cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints are associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, after accounting for leadership influence. RQ3 is addressed through Hypothesis H3, which proposes that cultural (construct E) and emerging-market (construct F) contextual constraints are negatively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (construct G), after accounting for the influence of leadership traits associated with women leaders. Quantitative analysis assesses these associations using regression-based models incorporating contextual variables, while qualitative interview data provide insight into how women leaders experience, interpret, and navigate these systemic constraints in practice.

4.4.1 Quantitative results RQ3

For the quantitative analysis, given contextual constraints theorized to operate primarily through norms of legitimacy, patterns of authority recognition, and gendered institutional expectations, leadership influence is represented by the values-based leadership dimension (construct A). This construct captures ethical grounding, relational legitimacy, and norm-sensitive leadership traits that are particularly embedded within cultural and institutional environments. Transformational leadership is therefore not

included in this specification, as the model focuses on norm-sensitive, context-embedded leadership mechanisms rather than on change activation dynamics.

First, mean scores were calculated for each item of constructs E and F, with dispersion expressed using the sample standard deviation. Table 4.20 reports the mean scores and standard deviations for each indicator.

Table 4.20

Descriptive Statistics for Cultural and Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints (n = 45)

Barrier Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Power Distance – PDI (E1)	2.933	1.214
Uncertainty Avoidance – UAI (E2)	2.800	1.160
Masculinity vs Femininity – MAS (E3)	3.022	1.118
Individualism vs Collectivism – IDV (E4)	2.867	1.272
Long-term vs Short-Term Orientation – LTO (E5)	2.844	1.186
Regulatory Instability (F1)	2.822	1.211
Financial and Technical Resource Constraints (F2)	2.867	1.217
Weak Institutions (F3)	2.867	1.290
Resistance to Change (F4)	2.867	1.254
Limited Formal Pathways for Women's Advancement (F5)	2.867	1.272

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Across both contextual constructs, mean values cluster between 2.80 and 3.02, indicating moderate perceived constraints rather than uniformly high-intensity barriers. Within the cultural contextual constraints, Masculinity versus Femininity (E3) records the highest mean score (M = 3.022), followed by Power Distance (E1) (M = 2.933), indicating that traditional gender role expectations and hierarchical authority structures received comparatively higher mean scores within the cultural context items.

Within the emerging-market contextual constraints, Regulatory Instability (F1) presents a moderate mean value ($M = 2.822$), while Financial and Technical Resource Constraints (F2), Weak Institutions (F3), Resistance to Change (F4), and Limited Formal Pathways for Women's Advancement (F5) share similar mean values ($M = 2.867$), indicating a comparable perceived intensity across these institutional barriers.

Standard deviation values indicate meaningful variation in perceived contextual constraints across respondents. Cultural context shows high dispersion (SD range: 1.118–1.272), with Masculinity versus Femininity (E3) at the lower bound and Individualism versus Collectivism (E4) at the upper bound. This pattern reflects that perceptions of cultural barriers vary across respondents and organizational contexts.

A moderate but meaningful level of dispersion is observed for emerging-market context indicators (SD range: 1.211–1.290). Within this construct, Weak Institutions (F3) and Regulatory Instability (F1) exhibit the highest variability, indicating differences in how institutional constraints are experienced across respondents.

Additionally, descriptive statistics were examined to assess central tendency, dispersion, and suitability for regression analysis at the composite mean level for the cultural and emerging-market contextual constructs (E_mean and F_mean); results are presented in Table 4.4 in section 4.1.1. The observed dispersion across constructs reflects sufficient variability to support subsequent inferential analysis.

Testing of Hypothesis H3 was conducted using a multiple linear regression model (Model 3), with organizational sustainability outcomes (G_mean) as the dependent variable, and values-based leadership (A_mean), cultural (E_mean), and emerging-market context barriers (F_mean) as independent variables. The baseline model, estimated without control variables, is presented in Table 4.21 below.

Table 4.21

Multiple Regression Model 3: Cultural and Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (without Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	1.807	0.785	2.30	0.026
A_mean	0.839	0.174	4.83	< 0.001
E_mean	-0.257	0.115	-2.24	0.031
F_mean	-0.221	0.108	-2.04	0.048

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

Values-based leadership traits (A_mean) display a strong, positive, and statistically significant association with organizational sustainability outcomes ($B = 0.839$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, both contextual barrier constructs exhibit negative and statistically significant coefficients. Cultural context barriers (E_mean) are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes ($B = -0.257$, $p = 0.031$), while emerging-market context barriers (F_mean) are also negatively associated ($B = -0.221$, $p = 0.048$).

The baseline model results indicate that higher perceived cultural and institutional barriers are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes, even after accounting for values-based leadership. These coefficients are estimated as direct associations rather than interaction effects, consistent with the specified model structure. The baseline model is overall statistically significant ($F = 12.88$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 48.5% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.485$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.447$).

To assess the robustness of these relationships, Model 3 regression was re-estimated by introducing five organizational and respondent-level control variables: organization size, industry sector, organization age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure. Results are presented in Table 4.22 below.

Table 4.22

Multiple Regression Model 3: Cultural and Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (with Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	1.632	1.087	1.50	0.142
A_mean	0.887	0.185	4.80	< 0.001
E_mean	-0.239	0.124	-1.93	0.062
F_mean	-0.219	0.115	-1.90	0.065
Organization Size	0.034	0.187	0.18	0.855
Industry Sector	-0.011	0.092	-0.12	0.909
Organization Age	-0.196	0.195	-1.00	0.323
Competition Intensity	0.152	0.154	0.99	0.328
Leadership Tenure	0.061	0.124	0.49	0.629

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The controlled model remains statistically significant overall ($F = 5.06$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 52.9% of the variance in sustainability outcomes ($R^2 = 0.529$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.425$). Values-based leadership traits (A_mean) remain positive and highly significant ($B = 0.887$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating robustness across organizational contexts. Cultural Context (E_mean) and Emerging-Market Context (F_mean) retain negative coefficients but fall to marginal statistical significance ($p < 0.10$), indicating that contextual barriers continue to exhibit negative associations consistent with the model's structural specification. However, none of the control variables exhibit statistically significant effects, suggesting that organizational size, industry sector, organizational age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure alone do not independently explain variation in sustainability outcomes, even after accounting for leadership traits and contextual barriers.

Residual diagnostics were examined for both regression specifications, with and without controls. Visual inspection of residual and normal probability plots indicates that assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and approximate normality of residuals are

broadly satisfied. The inclusion of control variables does not materially alter the behavior of the residuals, and no influential observations were identified that would compromise model stability.

To assess potential multicollinearity in Regression 3, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated for all predictors across both model specifications. In the baseline model estimated without control variables, VIF values ranged from 1.06 to 1.10 (VIF_A = 1.10; VIF_E = 1.06; VIF_F = 1.10), indicating minimal multicollinearity among predictors. In the model including control variables, VIF values increased marginally but remained low (VIF_A = 1.20; VIF_E = 1.19; VIF_F = 1.19). All values are well below the conservative threshold of 5, indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity and that the estimated regression coefficients are stable and reliable across specifications.

Overall, the quantitative results for RQ3 indicate negative associations between contextual barriers and organizational sustainability outcomes within the estimated model specifications. In the baseline model, both cultural (E_mean) and emerging-market (F_mean) contextual barriers have statistically significant negative coefficients. With controls included, these coefficients remain negative but attenuate to marginal statistical significance, while retaining the same direction across specifications. The following qualitative findings describe how these constraints were reported and navigated in practice.

4.4.2 Qualitative insights RQ3

Qualitative interview data (n = 10) provide an insider view of the third qualitative expectation by clarifying how cultural and institutional constraints are experienced as structural conditions that negatively influence sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations and the environment in which leadership is enacted. Across interviews, respondents consistently described these constraints not as isolated obstacles, but as

structural features of the leadership environment that shape decision authority, slow change processes, and increase the effort required to sustain long-term priorities. Consequently, participants' insights can be grouped into three key areas: cultural and informal norms, gendered credibility expectations, and adaptive leadership under conditions of volatility.

First, cultural and informal norms were described as persistent background conditions shaping leadership legitimacy and decision-making authority. Hierarchical norms, deference to power, and informal influence mechanisms were frequently emphasized as constraining participatory leadership and slowing sustainability-related initiatives, though they did not preclude leadership influence altogether. One executive described a “*strongly performance-driven culture...characterized by a high demand for results*”, combined with a “*strong tendency to avoid risks*” and “*increased resistance to change in difficult times*” (Interviewee 3, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). Another respondent highlighted a “*strong respect for formal rules and authority*,” referring to a control-oriented organizational culture in which conservative leadership teams can continue to influence perceptions of women leaders, even when policies are neutral (Interviewee 7, Senior executive role, Industrial sector). A board-level participant similarly reflected that cultural expectations around hierarchy and authority, while supporting discipline and structure, can also “*slow down debates*” and contribute to “*making women less visible in discussions, even when formal roles are equal*” (Interviewee 2, Board-level role, Energy sector). Jointly, these accounts describe cultural constraints as persistent background conditions that shape leadership enactment, consistent with the broad recurrence of these themes across interviews.

Second, gendered credibility expectations emerged as a distinct and recurring constraint shaping leadership enactment and organizational dynamics. Women leaders

described heightened scrutiny, narrower margins for error, and the need for continuous credibility-building, particularly in strategic and governance contexts. One respondent explained that “*double standards still exist...the same behavior can be judged differently depending on who shows it*” (Interviewee 4, Senior executive role, Technology sector). Another participant observed that while formal attitudes toward women leaders may appear supportive, “*informal attitudes change more slowly,*” explaining that women leaders often bring a stronger focus on “*long-term consequences and people*” (Interviewee 1, Senior executive role, Industrial / Manufacturing sector). A third interviewee reflected on the cumulative nature of these expectations, emphasizing that “*needing to demonstrate technical credibility has been a recurring challenge*” throughout her career (Interviewee 8, Senior executive role, Technology sector). Even at the board level, gendered norms were described as persistent, with one participant reflecting that “*old norms at board level can still act as barriers,*” while also observing that women leaders are often willing to “*work toward long-term outcomes without immediate recognition*” (Interviewee 9, Board-level role, Multi-industry context). Together, these accounts describe gendered credibility dynamics as an ongoing constraint affecting leadership enactment, visibility, and resilience.

Lastly, adaptive leadership under conditions of volatility emerged as a central mechanism by which women leaders navigated institutional and resource constraints in Romania. Rather than framing regulatory instability and resource scarcity as isolated barriers, respondents emphasized how these conditions reshape governance, accountability, and decision-making discipline, requiring leaders to recalibrate how leadership is enacted in practice. From an entrepreneurial perspective, institutional volatility was experienced as a continuous condition for survival. A business owner participant highlighted that limited access to financing and external support forces strict

prioritization, noting that “*you cannot afford ideal solutions*” and that “*sustainability choices must be balanced continuously against business viability*” (Interviewee 5, Entrepreneurial role, SME / Technology services context). Adaptive leadership in this context involved careful cash management, phased implementation, and rapid decision-making aligned with organizational capacity. At a regional executive level, volatility was described as compressing time horizons while simultaneously increasing the importance of long-term direction. One respondent emphasized that constant market pressure “*makes long-term decisions more challenging but also more important,*” requiring sustained stakeholder alignment and disciplined prioritization to prevent sustainability objectives from being crowded out by short-term demands (Interviewee 6, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). From an executive and board-level perspective, uncertainty was described as reinforcing the need for pragmatism and ethical clarity, while constraining the scale and speed of sustainability initiatives. Sustainability was explained as needing to be “*phased and realistic rather than idealized,*” with leaders occasionally shifting toward more directive governance approaches when immediacy and execution took precedence over participation (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector). Across these accounts, adaptive leadership did not imply abandoning long-term goals, but recalibrating governance, pacing, and accountability under volatile conditions. As a result, leadership influence was exercised through disciplined prioritization, phased execution, and situational adaptability. Together, these accounts describe adaptive leadership responses to regulatory instability, resource constraints, and organizational volatility across different organizational contexts.

Overall, these qualitative findings align with the quantitative results for RQ3, illustrating how cultural and institutional constraints are experienced as structural

conditions that negatively influence organizational sustainability outcomes and shape sustainable leadership.

4.5 Research Question Four

Research Question Four (RQ4) examines the extent to which leadership traits exhibited by women leaders contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks in Romanian organizations. RQ4 is addressed through Hypothesis H4, which posits that leadership traits (constructs A and B) are positively associated with the overall effectiveness of the sustainability framework in Romanian organizations, operationalized as a composite index (CD_mean) of sustainability orientation (construct C) and organizational sustainability practices (construct D). Quantitative analysis assesses this relationship using regression-based models that examine leadership traits in relation to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks, while qualitative interview data provide insight into the mechanisms by which leadership traits are embedded and sustained within organizational sustainability frameworks.

4.5.1 Quantitative results RQ4

For the quantitative analysis of RQ4, descriptive statistics were computed for each item in constructs C and D, with mean scores and standard deviations presented in Table 4.23 below. Indicators C1–C5 capture the individual sustainability orientation of leaders, while indicators D1–D5 reflect organizational sustainability practices and governance mechanisms through which sustainability is operationalized, rather than sustainability performance outcomes.

Table 4.23
Descriptive Statistics for Sustainability Orientation and Organizational Sustainability Practices (n = 45)

Construct Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
TBL Decision Orientation (C1)	3.578	1.097

Long-Term Resilience Orientation (C2)	3.467	1.079
Strategic Sustainability Orientation (C3)	3.511	1.100
Stakeholder Engagement Orientation (C4)	3.489	1.141
Sustainability Stewardship Orientation (C5)	3.333	1.044
Trust and Transparency Practices (D1)	3.422	1.177
Leadership Inclusion in Sustainability Strategy (D2)	3.467	1.160
Stakeholder-Balancing Decision Practices (D3)	3.511	1.100
Shared Purpose and Long-Term Culture Practices (D4)	3.511	1.141
Gender-Inclusive Leadership Integration Practices (D5)	3.600	1.176

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

These results indicate that both sustainability orientation (construct C) and organizational sustainability practices (construct D) display mean values above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that respondents reported moderate to relatively strong levels of sustainability-related thinking and organizational integration mechanisms.

Within the individual sustainability orientation indicators, leaders report relatively strong integration of Triple Bottom Line considerations into decision-making (C1) and strategic sustainability planning (C3), while stewardship-oriented engagement in monitoring sustainability goals (C5) displays slightly lower mean values. This pattern reflects relatively higher reported levels of strategic and decision-related sustainability orientation compared with stewardship-related engagement.

At the organizational level, sustainability practices show comparable mean values across all indicators. Practices related to gender-inclusive leadership integration (D5) and stakeholder-balanced decision-making (D3) display relatively higher mean values, indicating that respondents perceive sustainability integration as supported by formal organizational routines and strategic participation mechanisms. Trust and transparency practices (D1) and shared-purpose cultural practices (D4) also exhibit moderately high

values, suggesting governance and cultural conditions conducive to the embedding of sustainability.

Additionally, descriptive statistics were examined to assess central tendency, dispersion, and suitability for regression analysis at the composite mean level for sustainability orientation and sustainability practices (C_mean, D_mean, and CD_mean); results are presented in Table 4.4 in section 4.1.1. The descriptive results indicate mean values above the midpoint of the scale for all three constructs, suggesting a generally strong presence of sustainability-centered leadership and sustainability-related organizational practices within the sample. The composite framework effectiveness index (CD_mean) exhibits lower dispersion than its component dimensions (0.797 compared to 0.949 for C_mean and 0.931 for D_mean), reflecting a more stable combined distribution when sustainability orientation and sustainability practices are considered jointly rather than separately. At the same time, the observed variability across constructs remains sufficient to support subsequent inferential analysis.

To test Hypothesis H4, a multiple linear regression model (Model 4) was estimated, with sustainability framework effectiveness (CD_mean) as the dependent variable, and values-based leadership (A_mean) and transformational leadership (B_mean) as independent variables. Results for the baseline model, estimated without control variables, are presented in Table 4.24 below.

Table 4.24

Multiple Regression Model 4: Leadership Traits and Sustainability Framework Effectiveness (without Control Variables, n = 45)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	1.424	0.612	2.33	0.025
A_mean	0.410	0.187	2.19	0.034
B_mean	0.156	0.128	1.21	0.232

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The baseline model is statistically significant ($F = 6.06$, $p < 0.01$) and explains approximately 22.4% of the variance in sustainability framework effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.224$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.187$). These results indicate that leadership traits are associated with variations in the overall effectiveness of the sustainability framework. At the individual-predictor level, values-based leadership (A_mean) shows a positive and statistically significant association with framework effectiveness ($B = 0.410$, $p = 0.034$). By contrast, transformational leadership (B_mean) shows a positive but statistically non-significant coefficient ($B = 0.156$, $p = 0.232$).

To assess the robustness of these findings, Model 4 regression was re-estimated by including organizational and contextual control variables: organizational size, industry sector, organizational age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure. Results for the controlled model are presented in Table 4.25 below.

Table 4.25
Multiple Regression Model 4: Leadership Traits and Sustainability Framework Effectiveness (with Control Variables, $n = 45$)

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t Stat	p-value
Intercept	0.837	0.705	1.19	0.243
A_mean	0.401	0.187	2.15	0.039
B_mean	0.169	0.130	1.30	0.202
Organization Size	0.284	0.161	1.77	0.086
Industry Sector	-0.066	0.076	-0.87	0.390
Organization Age	-0.242	0.173	-1.40	0.169
Competition Intensity	0.321	0.130	2.46	0.019
Leadership Tenure	0.021	0.108	0.20	0.846

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey data)

The inclusion of control variables increases the proportion of explained variance (adjusted R^2 increases from 0.187 to 0.298), indicating that organizational context contributes to variation in the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks. Importantly, the coefficient for values-based leadership remains positive and statistically significant with minimal change in magnitude, demonstrating robustness across organizational settings. Transformational leadership retains a positive but non-significant association. Among the control variables, competition intensity exhibits a statistically significant positive relationship with framework effectiveness ($B = 0.321$, $p = 0.019$). Other control variables do not display statistically significant effects.

Residual and line-fit diagnostics indicate that assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and approximate normality of residuals are adequately satisfied for both model specifications. The inclusion of control variables does not materially alter the behavior of the residuals, and no influential observations were identified.

To assess potential multicollinearity in Regression 4, Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated for all predictors. Because the predictor structure (A_mean and B_mean, estimated with and without the same set of control variables) is identical to that used in Regression 1, the VIF values are correspondingly identical. In the model without control variables, VIF values were 1.35 for both predictors. In the controlled model, VIF values were 1.57 (A_mean) and 1.61 (B_mean). All values remain well below the conservative threshold of 5, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity and supporting the stability of the estimated coefficients.

Overall, the quantitative results for RQ4 provide partial support for Hypothesis H4. Values-based leadership shows a positive and statistically significant association with sustainability framework effectiveness across model specifications, whereas transformational leadership shows a positive but statistically non-significant coefficient.

The following qualitative findings examine organizational mechanisms through which leadership traits are embedded into sustainability frameworks.

4.5.2 Qualitative insights RQ4

Qualitative interview data (n = 10) provide insights into the fourth qualitative expectation, that effective sustainability frameworks are supported by mechanisms that institutionalize leadership values and reduce reliance on individual leadership discretion. Across interviews, participants' accounts revealed five themes, based on their recurrence, representation across leadership roles, and direct relevance to the sustainability framework's effectiveness: strategic direction and alignment; governance and accountability; long-term orientation and stewardship; ethical and values-based leadership; and adaptive leadership under conditions of volatility.

Embedding sustainability into strategic direction and alignment appeared as a primary leadership mechanism through which sustainability frameworks become effective rather than symbolic. Interviewees emphasized that leadership influence is institutionalized when sustainability is integrated into core strategic priorities, decision criteria, and performance expectations, rather than treated as a parallel or discretionary initiative. One executive explained that “*sustainability has to be built directly into strategy, not added later,*” and described sustainable leadership as “*purpose-driven leadership that stays strong and consistent, even under pressure*” (Interviewee 3, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector). A board-level respondent similarly highlighted the importance of long-term strategic anchoring, indicating that “*sustainability means taking responsibility toward future generations, not only current stakeholders,*” and explaining effective leadership as “*systemic thinking*” that connects strategy, values, and execution (Interviewee 9, Board-level role, Multi-industry context).

Governance and accountability emerged as mechanisms through which leadership traits are institutionalized into sustainability frameworks, reducing dependence on individual leaders and protecting sustainability commitments over time. Interviewees consistently emphasized that formal governance structures, such as oversight processes, reporting routines, and decision protocols, are essential for sustaining a sustainability orientation under pressure, leadership turnover, and competing short-term demands. One senior financial leader indicated that “*sustainability means managing risks responsibly so the business can remain stable over time,*” and explained sustainable leadership as “*consistency in values and decisions,*” supported by “*ethical discipline, strong governance, and rational decision-making*” (Interviewee 7, Senior executive role, Industrial sector). At the board level, accountability mechanisms were similarly emphasized as safeguards of long-term credibility. One respondent highlighted the importance of “*strong governance, diverse voices, and real dialogue*” in sustainability-related decisions, describing sustainable leadership as ensuring that “*the business can continue and remain credible over the long term,*” while considering “*long-term consequences for the organization and its stakeholders*” (Interviewee 2, Board-level role, Energy sector).

Long-term orientation and stewardship emerged as defining leadership principles shaping the design of sustainability frameworks that remain effective over time. Participants emphasized that embedding sustainability requires frameworks that outlast individual leadership tenures and resist short-term pressures, particularly in volatile, resource-constrained environments. From an executive perspective, stewardship was described as a leadership responsibility embedded in how sustainability frameworks shape decisions, investments, and innovation. One respondent cautioned against growth driven by short-term gains, emphasizing that “*sustainability means innovating in a way*

that supports long-term growth rather than short-term wins,” and describing sustainable leadership as *“the ability to balance innovation with stability while keeping a clear long-term direction”* (Interviewee 8, Senior executive role, Technology sector). At the executive and board level, stewardship was further associated with accountability for future consequences and disciplined resistance to short-term validation. As an example, another respondent highlighted the importance of *“acknowledging trade-offs and prioritizing long-term viability,”* explaining that sustainable leadership entails being *“responsible for the long-term consequences of decisions”* and *“resisting short-term validation”* (Interviewee 10, Executive and board-level role, Industrial sector).

Ethical and values-based leadership emerged as the normative foundation that underpins the internal coherence and legitimacy of sustainability frameworks. Interviewees emphasized that ethical clarity and consistency shape how trade-offs are justified, accountability is enforced, and trust is sustained, particularly when formal rules alone are insufficient to guide complex sustainability decisions. One respondent highlighted the importance of integrity, responsibility, and consistency of values, describing sustainable leadership as *“doing the same thing when times are good and when times are difficult, without compromising values”* (Interviewee 1, Senior executive role, Industrial / Manufacturing sector). From an entrepreneurial perspective, a business owner participant emphasized that sustainability embedding requires *“surviving without losing your values”* and cautioned leaders to *“not compromise yourself, even when survival is at stake,”* defining sustainable leadership as *“leadership that adapts, but also has the courage to say no”* (Interviewee 5, Entrepreneurial role, SME / Technology services context).

Adaptive leadership under conditions of volatility emerged as a complementary mechanism that enables sustainability frameworks to remain effective in emerging

markets. Rather than undermining goals, adaptability was described as recalibrating the pursuit of sustainability amid institutional uncertainty, market pressure, and resource constraints, ensuring continuity between intention and practice. One operational executive described sustainability leadership as navigating persistent trade-offs between efficiency and people, explaining, “*There is often a tension between efficiency and people. I try not to solve efficiency problems by creating people problems*” (Interviewee 4, Senior executive role, Technology sector). In this view, adaptive leadership serves as a stabilizing mechanism that preserves principles while responding pragmatically to day-to-day operational pressures. At the executive level, adaptability was associated with disciplined execution under uncertainty rather than with opportunistic flexibility. One respondent emphasized the recurring trade-offs between financial pressure and human impact, noting that “*there is often a trade-off between margin and people. I try to avoid decisions that deliver profit at the expense of people,*” and highlighting that leadership credibility and sustainability effectiveness are “*built over time, through hard work, not quick wins*” (Interviewee 6, Senior executive role, Consumer goods / FMCG sector).

In sum, these qualitative mechanisms correspond to the quantitative association observed in RQ4, showing how leadership traits translate into organizational structures that strengthen the overall effectiveness of sustainability frameworks.

4.6 Summary of Findings

Table 4.26 synthesizes the empirical findings for Research Questions One to Four by combining the study's principal quantitative results with the corresponding qualitative observations reported in this chapter.

Table 4.26

Summary of Empirical Quantitative and Qualitative Results by Research Question

Research Question	Quantitative Analysis	Qualitative Insights
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RQ1	Quantitative results support H1. Leadership traits exhibited by women leaders (A_mean, B_mean) are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (G_mean). Transformational leadership (B_mean) shows a positive, statistically significant association in both baseline and controlled models. Values-based leadership (A_mean) remains positive but reaches only marginal significance in the controlled model.	Interviewees described leadership traits associated with women leaders as shaping both the framing and enactment of sustainability priorities, particularly through strategic direction and alignment, long-term orientation and stewardship, governance and accountability, and ethical and values-based behavior.
RQ2	Quantitative results support H2. Leadership traits (AB_mean) significantly predict sustainability outcomes (G_mean) in the total-effect model. When sustainability orientation (C_mean) is introduced, the coefficient for leadership traits decreases, although it remains significant, while sustainability orientation is positively and significantly associated with sustainability outcomes. This pattern is consistent with a partial mediation relationship within the estimated regression framework.	Interviewees described sustainability orientation as a leadership mindset that shapes how leaders navigate trade-offs between short-term operational pressures and longer-term economic, social, and environmental objectives. This orientation is emphasized in practices such as ethical and values-based decision-making, attention to people development and inclusion, articulation of strategic direction, and a long-term stewardship perspective.
RQ3	Quantitative results provide partial support for H3. Cultural (E_mean) and emerging-market contextual (F_mean) constraints are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes (G_mean) in the baseline model. When controls are introduced, both coefficients remain negative but become marginally significant. Values-based leadership (A_mean) remains positive and statistically significant across both models.	Interviewees described cultural and institutional constraints as structural conditions that shape organizational dynamics and influence the pace, scope, and durability of sustainability initiatives. Participants reflected in particular on cultural and informal norms, gendered credibility pressures, and the need for adaptive leadership responses in volatile environments.

RQ4	Quantitative results provide partial support for H4. Values-based leadership (A_mean) is positively and significantly associated with the effectiveness of the sustainability framework (CD_mean) in both baseline and controlled models. Transformational leadership (B_mean) remains positive but non-significant. Competition intensity is positively and significantly associated with framework effectiveness in the controlled model.	Interviewees described effective sustainability embedding as emerging through governance, accountability, and cultural mechanisms that institutionalize leadership values and reduce reliance on individual leaders. Participants highlighted the importance of strategic direction, governance and accountability structures, long-term orientation, ethical and values-based leadership, and adaptive leadership amid
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volatility.

(Source: Author's own analysis, based on survey and interview data)

Together, these findings summarize the relationships among the key constructs examined in this chapter, providing a consolidated empirical overview.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the empirical findings of the mixed-methods study on the relationships between leadership traits associated with women leaders, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. Findings were reported by research question and drew on both quantitative survey data (n = 45) and qualitative interview evidence (n = 10).

The results indicate that leadership traits exhibited by women leaders are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes, and that sustainability orientation serves as an important mediating mechanism linking leadership traits to outcomes. Additionally, cultural and institutional contextual conditions were negatively associated with sustainability outcomes within the estimated model specifications; however, this did not eliminate the positive association between leadership and outcomes.

Among leadership traits, transformational leadership is more strongly associated with sustainability outcomes and the mobilization of sustainability initiatives, while values-based leadership is more sensitive to contextual conditions. Furthermore, the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks, operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices, was positively associated with values-based leadership, whereas transformational leadership was positive but not statistically significant.

Overall, the findings show that sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations are shaped through the combined influence of leadership traits, sustainability-oriented decision logic, organizational practices, and contextual constraints. These results provide the empirical basis for the discussion presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of Results

This chapter interprets the empirical findings presented in Chapter IV by situating them within the literature on sustainable leadership, gendered leadership traits, and sustainability integration in an emerging-market context. Rather than restating statistical results, the discussion explains how and why the observed quantitative relationships and qualitative patterns emerge, and what they reveal about the role of leadership traits associated with women leaders in shaping sustainability outcomes within Romanian organizations. Consistent with the exploratory design, modest sample size, and cross-sectional nature of the study, the findings are interpreted as evidence of statistically supported associations and indicative explanatory mechanisms, rather than as definitive causal relationships or broadly generalizable conclusions. In addition, although the use of self-reported data introduces potential common method bias, the integration of qualitative evidence provides complementary contextual insights that support the interpretation of the observed quantitative patterns.

Across the four research questions, the findings indicate that the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders influence sustainability outcomes through multiple, interrelated mechanisms rather than isolated behavioral effects. The quantitative analysis shows consistent positive associations between leadership traits, sustainability orientation, and sustainability outcomes, while the qualitative evidence provides insights into the mechanisms underlying these relationships. These findings extend earlier exploratory observations on the role of female leadership in advancing sustainability practices in Romanian organizations (Vladutoiu, 2024) by providing systematic empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which leadership traits interact with contextual

conditions to shape sustainability orientation, organizational embedding processes, and sustainability outcomes.

The explanatory mixed-methods design facilitates a layered and integrated understanding of these dynamics. Quantitative results provide evidence regarding the direction, strength, and stability of relationships between leadership traits, mediating factors, contextual influences, and sustainability outcomes. Qualitative findings extend this analysis, providing a more nuanced understanding of the nature of leadership influence, sustainability priorities, and cultural and institutional conditions. Integration, therefore, is achieved through interpretive inference that connects statistical associations with contextualized leadership processes (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Denzin, 2012).

The discussion is structured around the four research questions, with a joint display for each question, making the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings explicit. Each joint display applies a consistent integration logic: statistical associations from the quantitative component of the study are linked to evidence from the qualitative component, and the two are synthesized into an integrated interpretive inference rather than into parallel findings. As such, this structure enables a multi-level examination of leadership's relationships with four analytically distinct dimensions: i) organizational sustainability outcomes (RQ1); ii) sustainability orientation as a mediating mechanism (RQ2); iii) contextual constraints shaping these relationships (RQ3); and iv) the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks within organizations (RQ4).

5.2 Discussion of Research Question One

Research Question One (RQ1) examines how the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders relate to organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. Quantitative analysis assesses the strength and direction of these

relationships, while qualitative insights complement these findings by illustrating how leadership traits are enacted in practice and translated into sustainability-related outcomes.

To integrate the quantitative and qualitative evidence supporting this relationship, Table 5.1 presents a joint display that synthesizes the principal statistical findings with insights from the interviews.

Table 5.1

Joint Display for RQ1: Leadership Traits and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Insights	Integrated Interpretation
Values-based leadership (A) and transformational leadership (B) are positively associated with organizational sustainability outcomes (G).	Sustainability is framed as a core leadership responsibility rather than a compliance activity.	Leadership influence on sustainability is reflected in consistent decision-making and leadership enactment, rather than in isolated initiatives.
Transformational leadership (B) exhibits a strong, statistically significant association with sustainability outcomes across model specifications.	Strategic direction-setting, vision articulation, and alignment of sustainability with business priorities are core leadership behaviors.	Transformational leadership emerges as a principal mechanism for translating sustainability intent into measurable outcomes.
Values-based leadership (A) remains positive but reaches marginal significance in the controlled model.	Ethical judgment, integrity, inclusiveness, and consistency of values are emphasized across leadership contexts.	Values-based leadership provides normative legitimacy and trust, enabling sustainability outcomes but remains sensitive to organizational context.
Transformational leadership (B) effects remain robust after controlling for firm size, industry, organizational age, competition intensity, and leadership tenure.	Governance discipline, accountability, and long-term stewardship are emphasized, particularly at executive and board levels.	Sustainability outcomes are associated with leadership traits that reinforce consistency and continuity beyond short-term pressures.

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on research results)

The evidence presented in Table 5.1 suggests that the leadership traits observed in women leaders are empirically associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations.

Transformational leadership emerges as the most statistically robust predictor of sustainability outcomes, consistent with prior research highlighting its role in driving change and organizational alignment (Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Jackson, 2021). Its consistency across model specifications indicates a stable positive association with sustainability outcomes in the sample. Leadership traits related to vision articulation, long-term orientation, innovation, and change agency are particularly relevant in this regard. Interview narratives reinforce this interpretation by emphasizing leaders' role in aligning sustainability with strategic priorities, performance expectations, and decision-making processes. In this sense, transformational leadership may be interpreted as an activation mechanism that enables sustainability to move from aspiration to organizational performance (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011).

Values-based leadership, while positive and empirically meaningful, is more sensitive to organizational and contextual conditions. Traits such as ethical decision-making, empathy, inclusiveness, collaboration, and recognition are widely enacted across the sample, as reflected in higher mean scores and relatively lower dispersion than transformational leadership. Qualitative evidence suggests that these traits appear to function as enabling foundations rather than direct performance levers, consistent with the attenuation of statistical significance after the inclusion of organizational controls. Consequently, values-based leadership may be interpreted as providing a normative foundation that supports trust, legitimacy, shared responsibility, and continuity (Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011). In this sense, it appears to create the conditions

under which sustainability priorities gain acceptance and continuity (Brandt, 2016; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Across interviews, sustainability was consistently framed not as a peripheral reporting requirement but as an intrinsic leadership responsibility oriented toward long-term impact. Leaders described sustainability in terms of strategic direction and alignment, long-term orientation and stewardship, governance and accountability, and ethical and values-based leadership. This framing helps explain how leadership influence on sustainability outcomes extends beyond isolated initiatives and is instead anchored in decision logics that balance competing economic, social, and environmental objectives (Elkington, 1994; Hahn et al., 2015). This interpretation is consistent with broader leadership perspectives that emphasize the integration of long-term stewardship, governance, and values-based decision-making (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Elkington, 2018).

Synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative findings, the results indicate that leadership influences sustainability outcomes through a combination of normative, relational, and strategic dimensions. Rather than acting as isolated traits, these leadership characteristics appear to shape how sustainability priorities are framed, justified, and enacted within organizational contexts.

These findings resonate with established leadership and sustainability theories and prior empirical research. The prominence of transformational leadership aligns with its emphasis on vision, inspiration, and change agency (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Jackson, 2021). The contextual role of values-based leadership reflects perspectives that foreground ethical consistency, people development, and relational continuity as foundations for long-term performance (Brandt, 2016; Maak and Pless, 2006). Moreover, the integrated treatment of economic, social, and environmental

outcomes reflects the logic of the Triple Bottom Line, as leaders navigate sustainability by managing tensions across interdependent objectives (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Elkington, 1994; Hahn et al., 2015).

Summing up, RQ1 indicates that the leadership traits observed in women leaders function as an empirically supported explanatory factor for sustainability outcomes in an emerging-market context. At the same time, the findings raise a critical question: through which specific behavioral and cognitive mechanisms does this influence operate? This question is addressed in the following section through the analysis of sustainability orientation as a mediating pathway.

5.3 Discussion of Research Question Two

Research Question Two (RQ2) examines the extent to which sustainability orientation mediates the relationship between the leadership traits associated with women leaders and organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. In line with Chapter IV, the mediation analysis operationalizes leadership as an aggregated composite (AB_mean), while trait-level differences are interpreted using descriptive patterns. Quantitative analysis assesses the presence and strength of the mediating relationship, while qualitative insights complement these findings by explaining how sustainability orientation is articulated and enacted.

To make the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings explicit, Table 5.2 presents a joint display that links the quantitative results to insights identified in the interviews.

*Table 5.2
Joint Display for RQ2: Leadership Traits, Sustainability Orientation, and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes*

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Insights	Integrated Interpretation

Aggregated leadership traits (AB_mean) are positively and significantly associated with sustainability orientation (C).	Sustainability is described as a leadership mindset that guides priorities, trade-offs, and decision-making.	Leadership traits shape sustainability in part by influencing how leaders frame, justify, and prioritize it.
Sustainability orientation (C) is positively associated with sustainability outcomes (G).	Ethical judgment, people development, strategic direction, and long-term thinking are emphasized in leadership accounts.	Sustainability orientation functions as a cognitive–strategic mediating mechanism between leadership traits and outcomes.
The inclusion of a sustainability orientation reduces, but does not eliminate, the leadership coefficient in outcome models.	Leadership influence is described as both value-driven and action-oriented.	Evidence is consistent with partial mediation, with leadership associated with outcomes both directly and indirectly through sustainability orientation.
Values-based leadership traits (A) show higher means and lower dispersion; Transformational leadership traits (B) show greater variability.	Values-based behaviors are described as consistent foundations, while strategic and change-oriented behaviors vary by context.	Values-based traits provide a more stable foundation for sustainability orientation, whereas transformational traits become particularly relevant when sustainability priorities must be translated into mobilization and implementation.

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on research results)

The integrated findings presented in Table 5.2 provide evidence consistent with the mediation pathway proposed in Hypothesis H2 and help explain how leadership traits examined in this study influence sustainability outcomes through sustainability orientation.

Descriptive analysis indicates a differentiated distribution of leadership traits. Values-based leadership traits exhibit relatively high mean values and lower dispersion across respondents, suggesting that these behaviors are widely enacted leadership expectations within the leadership contexts represented in the sample (Brandt, 2016;

Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011). By contrast, transformational leadership traits display greater variability. This pattern suggests that while transformational behaviors are present, their enactment may depend more heavily on organizational context and leadership practices. These descriptive patterns complement the RQ1 findings by illustrating differences in the distribution of leadership traits across the sample without altering the overall positive association between leadership and sustainability outcomes (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Jackson, 2021).

The mediation analysis introduces an additional explanatory layer to the observed leadership–outcome relationship. The strong, statistically significant association between aggregated leadership traits and sustainability orientation suggests that leadership influence operates in part through the cognitive framing of sustainability. When sustainability orientation is included in the outcome model, the leadership coefficient decreases but remains significant, indicating partial mediation. This interpretation is further supported by the bootstrapped indirect-effect test, which confirmed a statistically significant indirect effect. However, given the cross-sectional nature of the data, these findings should be interpreted as evidence consistent with a mediating pathway rather than as confirmation of causal mediation.

Qualitative evidence reinforces and deepens this interpretation. Across interviews, sustainability orientation was not framed as a formal policy stance or reporting framework, but rather as a leadership mindset embedded in decision-making processes. Leaders consistently referred to ethical judgment, people development and inclusion, strategic direction-setting, and long-term stewardship as interconnected dimensions shaping how sustainability trade-offs are navigated under pressure (Hahn et al., 2015; Hahn et al., 2018). Interviewees emphasized that consistency between values and decisions sustains credibility and commitment over time. People development and

inclusion were identified as essential for distributing sustainability ownership across the organization. This helps ensure that sustainability does not remain concentrated at the top but is integrated into organizational processes. At the same time, respondents highlighted strategic alignment and long-term orientation as critical for translating sustainability orientation into action. Integrating sustainability into strategic priorities, performance criteria, and decision frameworks was described as a key condition for managing trade-offs between economic, social, and environmental objectives (Elkington, 1994; Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019; Slaper and Hall, 2011). Long-term stewardship further characterizes sustainability-centered leadership enactment by reinforcing responsibility for future consequences and disciplined resistance to short-termism.

Together, these findings indicate that sustainability orientation can be understood as a mediating leadership mindset through which different leadership traits play complementary roles. Values-based leadership traits appear to enable sustainability orientation by establishing trust, legitimacy, and shared meaning, while transformational traits activate this orientation by aligning strategy, mobilizing stakeholders, and guiding organizational change. As a result, sustainability outcomes appear to be associated not with isolated leadership traits alone, but with a combination of leadership traits operating through a shared sustainability-oriented decision logic.

By clarifying this mediating pathway, RQ2 extends RQ1's findings and provides an important empirical bridge to the next stage of the analysis. If leadership traits are associated with sustainability outcomes through sustainability orientation, it becomes relevant to examine how broader cultural and institutional conditions are independently associated with these outcomes. This issue is addressed directly in the discussion of the next research question.

5.4 Discussion of Research Question Three

Research Question Three (RQ3) examines how cultural and emerging-market contextual constraints are associated with organizational sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations, after accounting for the influence of leadership. Specifically, it evaluates whether these constraints are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes and considers the role of leadership in relation to these contextual factors. Quantitative analysis examines the direction and strength of these contextual associations, while qualitative insights complement these findings by articulating how women leaders experience and navigate such constraints in practice.

To integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings, Table 5.3 presents a joint display that links statistical results with interview-based insights into contextual constraints and adaptive responses.

Table 5.3
Joint Display for RQ3: Contextual Constraints and Organizational Sustainability Outcomes

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Insights	Integrated Interpretation
Cultural (E) and Emerging-Market contextual barriers (F) are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes (G). With controls included, these effects remain negative but attenuate to marginal statistical significance.	Cultural norms, informal hierarchies, and institutional instability are described as persistent constraints in the background.	Contextual barriers are consistently associated with comparatively lower sustainability outcomes within the sample.
Cultural barriers (E) appear to exhibit a more consistent pattern of association within the sample.	Masculinity norms, power distance, and legitimacy expectations are consistently referenced across interviews.	Cultural constraints appear to shape leadership credibility and authority more consistently within the sample.

Institutional barriers (F) show meaningful dispersion across organizations within the sample.	Regulatory volatility, weak institutions, and resource constraints are experienced unevenly across settings.	Institutional constraints vary across organizations, contributing to uneven sustainability outcomes across contexts.
Leadership influence remains positively associated with sustainability outcomes, even in the presence of contextual barriers.	Leaders describe adaptive responses, such as governance discipline, alliance-building, formalization, and pacing.	Leadership remains positively associated with sustainability outcomes, indicating a persistent positive association under contextual constraints.

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on research results)

The findings presented in Table 5.3 provide partial support for Hypothesis H3, indicating that cultural and institutional contextual constraints are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes.

Quantitative analysis shows that both cultural and emerging-market contextual barriers exhibit negative coefficients across model specifications. Although these effects attenuate to marginal statistical significance once organizational controls are introduced, the direction remains consistent. At the same time, leadership remains positively associated with sustainability outcomes, indicating that although contextual constraints are associated with lower outcomes, they do not eliminate leadership influence.

Descriptive results suggest that contextual barriers operate as persistent structural conditions rather than extreme constraints (Hahn et al., 2015). Within the cultural dimension, masculine norms and hierarchical power distance appear as comparatively more salient, suggesting that traditional gender expectations and hierarchical authority structures are associated with leadership legitimacy in senior decision-making environments (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Shen and Joseph, 2021). Other cultural dimensions appear less dominant, suggesting that these contextual constraints cluster primarily around legitimacy and authority rather than generalized resistance to change.

Institutional barriers associated with the emerging-market context exhibit a different empirical pattern. While mean values for regulatory instability, resource constraints, weak institutions, and resistance to change are comparable, dispersion across respondents suggests uneven institutional conditions across organizations. This pattern is consistent with a heterogeneous institutional landscape, in which multinational corporations, large domestic firms, and smaller enterprises operate under different governance standards, resource availability, and regulatory exposure (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Elango, 2019; Pastore and Massacesi, 2020).

Regression analysis further examines how these contextual constraints relate to sustainability outcomes. In baseline models, both cultural and institutional barriers show statistically significant negative associations with sustainability outcomes, with cultural barriers exhibiting a slightly stronger effect. When controls are introduced, these effects attenuate to marginal significance, suggesting that some of the variation captured by the contextual variables is shared with the organizational characteristics captured in the control variables. These findings are consistent with the interpretation of contextual barriers as structural conditions associated with differences in sustainability outcomes across organizations (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010).

Qualitative interview evidence further deepens this interpretation. Across interviews, respondents consistently identified cultural and informal norms as features that increase the leadership effort required to sustain influence and protect long-term sustainability priorities. Hierarchical routines, deference to positional authority, and informal decision-making channels were frequently cited as limiting participatory leadership and slowing sustainability-related change. Gendered credibility pressures emerged as a particularly persistent constraint. Women leaders described heightened scrutiny, narrower margins for error, and continuous expectations to re-establish

authority, especially in high-stakes or crisis contexts. Furthermore, institutional volatility was experienced as constraining sustainability-oriented leadership by undermining continuity. Regulatory unpredictability, shifting policy priorities, and resource instability disrupted long-term planning and weakened the durability of sustainability initiatives (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010). Unlike cultural norms, however, these institutional barriers were experienced unevenly across organizations, mirroring the dispersion observed in the quantitative data. Importantly, interviewees also articulated adaptive leadership responses that function as compensatory mechanisms under constraint. These included strengthening governance discipline, formalizing decision-making processes, building alliances and shared ownership, and adjusting leadership style to the situation while maintaining ethical and strategic anchors. While such strategies did not eliminate contextual barriers, they mitigated their constraining effects and supported continuity in sustainability progress.

Collectively, the findings for RQ3 indicate that cultural and institutional constraints can be interpreted as structural contextual factors that are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes in Romanian organizations. Rather than negating leadership influence, these constraints coexist with it and are associated with variation in sustainability outcomes across organizational contexts.

By examining how contextual conditions relate to sustainability outcomes, RQ3 provides a conceptual bridge to the final research question. Given that sustainability outcomes vary across contexts, enhancing the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks at the organizational level becomes critical.

5.5 Discussion of Research Question Four

Research Question Four (RQ4) examines the extent to which leadership traits exhibited by women leaders contribute to the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks

in Romanian organizations. In this study, sustainability framework effectiveness (CD_mean) is operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices. The qualitative analysis complements this operationalization by examining the governance and organizational mechanisms that support the integration of sustainability within organizational processes.

To make the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings explicit, Table 5.4 presents a joint display linking statistical results on the effectiveness of the sustainability frameworks with qualitative insights.

Table 5.4
Joint Display for RQ4: Leadership Traits and Sustainability Framework Effectiveness

Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Insights	Integrated Interpretation
Values-based leadership (A) is positively and statistically significantly associated with the effectiveness of the sustainability frameworks (CD_mean).	Ethical consistency, inclusiveness, and relational legitimacy are emphasized as foundations of sustainability integration.	Sustainability frameworks appear to be most effective when grounded in shared values that institutionalize the leadership intent.
Transformational leadership (B) is positively associated with the effectiveness of the sustainability framework, but the association is not statistically significant.	Change-oriented leadership is viewed as necessary but insufficient without governance and accountability.	Transformational leadership activates sustainability initiatives, whereas values-based leadership supports their integration within organizational systems.
Sustainability framework effectiveness (CD_mean) exhibits lower dispersion than its component constructs (C and D).	Coherent integration of sustainability orientation and sustainability practices is described as stabilizing organizational behavior.	Structural coherence increases when sustainability integration is institutionalized through governance mechanisms.
Competition intensity is significant in the controlled model.	Competitive pressure reinforces the need for clarity, accountability, and consistency.	External pressure underscores the importance of integrated sustainability frameworks over isolated initiatives.

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on research results)

The integrated findings presented in Table 5.4 provide partial support for Hypothesis H4 and offer consistent evidence across both quantitative and qualitative components.

Quantitatively, values-based leadership is positively and statistically significantly associated with sustainability frameworks effectiveness, operationalized as a composite measure of sustainability orientation and sustainability practices. By contrast, although positively associated, transformational leadership does not explain additional variance in framework effectiveness. This distinction is both theoretically and empirically meaningful. Earlier findings indicated that transformational leadership is critical for mobilizing sustainability initiatives and driving sustainability outcomes. RQ4, however, addresses a different analytical level: the coherence of sustainability frameworks rather than behavioral activation. At this level, change-oriented leadership alone appears insufficient for sustaining structural coherence. Instead, sustainability frameworks appear to function more coherently as integrated systems when they are grounded in ethical consistency, inclusiveness, relational legitimacy, and accountability, all core elements of values-based leadership (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Brandt, 2016; Maak and Pless, 2006; Nosratabadi et al., 2019).

The lower dispersion observed for the composite sustainability framework effectiveness index (CD_mean) compared with its component constructs suggests that sustainability integration may become more stable when sustainability orientation and organizational sustainability practices co-occur. Under these conditions, sustainability appears less dependent on individual leadership discretion and more resilient to contextual volatility (Boeske, 2023; Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015).

Qualitative insights further deepen this interpretation. Interviewees consistently described sustainability integration as a process through which leadership values are translated into enduring systems that guide decision-making beyond individual leaders. This process was associated with strategic direction, governance discipline, accountability mechanisms, cultural reinforcement, and long-term stewardship. Sustainability frameworks were thus perceived as credible and durable when leadership values were codified into formal structures, routines, and decision-making criteria, rather than relying on individual advocacy or informal influence. Values-based leadership emerged as the normative foundation of this process, shaping how sustainability trade-offs were justified, accountability was enforced, and continuity was preserved during periods of uncertainty. In contrast, transformational leadership was described as enabling change and mobilization, but, on its own, it is insufficient to ensure sustained coherence of sustainability frameworks over time (Burns, 2010; Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011).

In all, these findings indicate that the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks in emerging-market organizations depends less on individual leadership agency alone and more on the institutionalization of leadership values within organizational systems. This interpretation aligns with sustainable leadership perspectives that emphasize embedding values through organizational structures and practices rather than relying on individual agency (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). Values-based leadership provides the normative foundation that supports this process, enabling continuity and coherence beyond individual leadership discretion.

Consequently, RQ4 serves as the conceptual bridge between this study's empirical findings and the managerial and theoretical implications developed in the following chapter.

5.6 Conclusion

The interpretation of the integrated quantitative and qualitative findings from this study indicates that leadership traits are positively associated with sustainability outcomes (RQ1), and that sustainability orientation functions as a partial cognitive–strategic pathway through which this influence translates into results (RQ2). At the same time, cultural and institutional contextual constraints specific to the Romanian market are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes, contributing to variation in sustainability performance across organizational settings, without eliminating the relevance of leadership agency (RQ3). Moreover, the findings indicate that long-term sustainability outcomes depend not only on the mobilization of initiatives but also on the integration of leadership orientation into governance routines, decision frameworks, and organizational sustainability systems (RQ4). In this respect, sustainability outcomes appear to reflect the interaction between leadership traits, sustainability orientation, contextual structural conditions, and organizational sustainability practices.

Overall, the discussion advances a layered and integrative understanding of sustainability leadership in emerging-market organizations. This perspective highlights how leadership influence operates simultaneously at behavioral, cognitive, contextual, and organizational levels, thereby shaping both the trajectory and the durability of sustainability outcomes. The synthesis developed in this chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the theoretical implications, managerial insights, and policy-relevant recommendations elaborated in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary

This study has examined how the leadership traits exhibited by women leaders relate to organizational sustainability in organizations operating within Romania's cultural and institutional environment.

Rather than focusing on representation or comparative leadership styles, the research investigated the mechanisms through which leadership translates into sustainability outcomes. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews to examine the relationships between leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes. The quantitative analysis identified statistically significant associations among these constructs, while the qualitative data provided complementary interpretative insights into how sustainability priorities are integrated into organizational sustainability frameworks.

Across the four research questions, the findings indicate that leadership traits are positively associated with sustainability outcomes, but that this influence operates through differentiated pathways. Transformational leadership is associated with the activation of sustainability through mobilization and strategic alignment, while values-based leadership supports continuity and organizational coherence by reinforcing ethical consistency, relational legitimacy, and accountability. The results are also consistent with sustainability orientation functioning as a mediating pathway through which leadership traits are translated into a consistent decision-making logic. At the same time, cultural norms and institutional volatility are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes; however, they do not preclude leadership agency. Importantly, the findings further

suggest that long-term sustainability depends not only on the mobilization of initiatives but also on the extent to which orientation and organizational practices are aligned within organizational sustainability frameworks. This indicates that sustainable leadership extends beyond the initiation of change to the institutionalization of sustainability within governance structures, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms.

Overall, these findings support the conceptualization of sustainable leadership as a multi-level organizational process in which leadership traits, sustainability orientation, and organizational sustainability practices interact within contextual conditions to shape sustainability outcomes.

6.2 Implications

This section translates the empirical findings into theoretical and practical implications grounded in the observed associations across the four research questions. Building on the integrated discussion in Chapter V, this section articulates how the identified relationships and mechanisms contribute to existing scholarship on sustainable leadership and the integration of sustainability and inform organizational practice within an emerging-market institutional environment.

6.2.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on leadership and sustainability in four distinct yet interrelated ways.

First, the research contributes to the sustainability leadership literature by empirically specifying a mechanism through which leadership traits are associated with sustainability outcomes. While previous studies have identified positive associations between leadership and sustainability performance (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Hahn et al., 2015; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006), this study provides evidence consistent with sustainability orientation functioning as a mediating decision

logic that links leadership traits to organizational sustainability outcomes. Findings consistent with partial mediation move the analysis beyond simple bivariate associations and support a process-based explanation of how sustainability is framed, prioritized, and translated into consistent organizational practice. In doing so, the study advances earlier exploratory work on female leadership and sustainability practices in Romanian organizations (Vladutoiu, 2024) by providing systematic empirical evidence on mechanisms that link leadership traits, contextual conditions, and sustainability outcomes.

Second, the research adds nuance to the role of leadership in sustainability processes and extends existing perspectives on sustainability leadership (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Burns, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006; Nosratabadi et al., 2019). Transformational leadership, reflecting leaders' capacity to articulate a vision, motivate long-term commitment, stimulate innovation, and mobilize organizational change, is more strongly and consistently associated with sustainability outcomes. By contrast, values-based leadership, which is not treated here as a standalone leadership theory but rather as an aggregate of ethical, relational, and responsibility-oriented leadership dimensions, is more strongly associated with the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks. Consequently, while transformational leadership activates sustainability initiatives, values-based leadership supports their stabilization as organizational priorities. Qualitative evidence further highlights an adaptive dimension of sustainability leadership that is not directly captured in the quantitative models. Interviewees described leadership influence as contingent upon the ability to navigate contextual constraints through situational adjustments, including pacing change, strengthening governance discipline, building coalitions, and formalizing decision processes. These findings add to leadership theory by suggesting that sustainability-oriented leadership operates simultaneously

across levels of analysis, enabling sustainability outcomes through mobilization, sustaining progress through organizational integration, and maintaining continuity through adaptive responses to contextual volatility.

Third, the research contributes to contextualized leadership theory by empirically demonstrating that cultural and institutional conditions serve as structural constraints that are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes (Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Hahn et al., 2015; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). In Romania's emerging-market context, hierarchical norms, gendered legitimacy, and institutional instability contribute to variation in sustainability outcomes across organizational contexts, yet they do not eliminate the relevance of leadership agency. These findings extend the sustainability leadership literature by demonstrating that leadership operates within socio-cultural and institutional environments that are themselves associated with sustainability outcomes, thereby contributing to variation across organizational contexts.

Finally, the study contributes to gender and leadership research by operationalizing female leadership not as a comparative construct relative to male leadership, but rather as the observed leadership qualities demonstrated by women leaders (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016). This approach avoids essentialist connotations and instead locates both the potential and the constraints of leadership influence within behavioral and contextual conditions. Thus, the research further advances the study of the intersection of gender, leadership, and sustainability by moving beyond comparative gender frameworks and offering a contextually grounded, mechanism-based account of how leadership traits associated with women leaders relate to sustainability outcomes.

Taken together, these contributions advance sustainability leadership research by integrating behavioral, cognitive, contextual, and organizational dimensions into a unified explanatory perspective.

6.2.2 Practical implications

The research findings suggest a practical, multi-layered mechanism through which leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and contextual conditions are associated with sustainability outcomes, as represented in Figure 6.1. This empirical model, titled the Leadership–Orientation–Practice Integration (LOPI) Framework, provides a structured representation of how these elements interact to deliver long-term value.



Figure 6.1
Multi-layered Leadership–Orientation–Practice Integration (LOPI) Framework

(Source: Author's own synthesis, based on the study's empirical findings)

In simplified terms, the LOPI Framework operates across four interrelated layers. Leadership (Layer 1) activates sustainability by shaping vision and strategic priorities.

Sustainability orientation (Layer 2) reflects how sustainability is embedded in leaders' decision-making logic. Organizational practices (Layer 3) translate this orientation into governance structures and operational processes. Finally, integration (Layer 4) captures the degree of coherence between leadership sustainability orientation and organizational practices, determining the extent to which sustainability is consistently integrated within organizational systems. Cultural and institutional contextual conditions operate as cross-layer constraints, shaping, but not eliminating, the effectiveness of leadership across all stages of the framework. Together, these layers are associated with the extent to which organizations generate long-term economic, social, and environmental value. Thus, the LOPI Framework captures a practice-oriented synthesis of the study's empirical findings rather than a formal theoretical model, and it should be interpreted as intended to support managerial understanding and application. While grounded in existing theoretical perspectives, its primary contribution lies in structuring practical insights into how leadership traits, decision-making orientation, organizational practices, and contextual conditions interact to shape sustainability outcomes in emerging-market environments.

Furthermore, the findings yield several additional implications at organizational and managerial levels, each corresponding to a specific layer of the LOPI framework.

Transformational leadership plays a critical role in mobilizing sustainability initiatives and aligning them with long-term strategic direction. Leaders who articulate a clear vision, connect sustainability to competitive positioning, and actively mobilize organizational commitment are more likely to establish sustainability as a strategic priority rather than a peripheral initiative. Thus, organizations should prioritize developing transformational leadership capabilities that enable leaders to mobilize sustainability as a core strategic objective.

Values-based leadership enhances the effectiveness of sustainability frameworks by reinforcing consistency, inclusiveness, and accountability. These elements contribute to the stabilization of sustainability priorities within governance structures and organizational routines, ensuring continuity beyond individual leadership influence. Organizations should therefore formalize values-based leadership through governance mechanisms that sustain sustainability commitments over time.

However, mobilization alone is insufficient to ensure a durable impact. Sustainability orientation functions as a mediating mechanism linking leadership traits to organizational outcomes. This implies that sustainability must be consistently embedded in leaders' decision-making processes, including strategic deliberations, resource allocation, and performance-related judgments. Leaders should therefore intentionally integrate sustainability into their decision-making logic by consistently incorporating long-term economic, social, and environmental considerations into strategic and operational choices.

Equally important is translating leadership sustainability orientation into concrete organizational practices. Sustainability practices operationalize strategic intent through governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and operational processes that guide day-to-day decision-making. Without such implementation mechanisms, sustainability remains conceptual rather than actionable. Organizations should therefore establish formal sustainability practices, including performance indicators and operational procedures, that embed sustainability in business activities.

At the same time, organizations should acknowledge that cultural and institutional characteristics of emerging-market environments are negatively associated with sustainability outcomes. In such contexts, governance structures play a critical stabilizing role by protecting sustainability priorities from external volatility, regulatory uncertainty,

and shifting institutional conditions. Consequently, organizations operating in volatile environments should strengthen governance systems by integrating sustainability oversight into board agendas, risk management frameworks, and formal review processes.

Finally, the research carries important implications for leadership development. The mediating role of sustainability orientation suggests that leadership development should focus on shaping decision-making mindsets rather than isolated competencies. Furthermore, values-based leadership should be cultivated as an organizational capability rather than relying solely on individual leaders. Leadership development efforts must also address contextual constraints, including gender legitimacy pressures and hierarchical organizational norms. As a result, organizations should design leadership development programs that strengthen sustainability-oriented decision-making, values-based leadership, and the capacity to navigate contextual constraints.

Collectively, these implications indicate that sustainable leadership operates most effectively when activation (leadership), orientation (decision logic), implementation (practices), and integration (system coherence) are aligned within organizational systems and supported by appropriate governance structures. In emerging-market contexts, sustainability is not sustained by leadership intent alone, but by the extent to which leadership is translated into shared decision logics and consistently reflected within organizational systems and governance structures. Organizations should therefore ensure the alignment of leadership, orientation, practice, and integration mechanisms to achieve sustainable and resilient outcomes.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Although the study provides empirical insight into how the leadership traits associated with women leaders relate to sustainability outcomes in Romanian

organizations, several directions for future research emerge directly from its scope and methodological boundaries.

First, larger-scale quantitative studies are recommended. While the present sample size ($n = 45$) was adequate for exploratory regression analysis, future research with larger sample sizes would enable confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling of the activation, mediation, and framework-effectiveness mechanisms proposed in this study.

Second, longitudinal research designs are strongly encouraged. The cross-sectional nature of the study limits causal inference and the ability to observe how sustainability-embedding processes evolve over time. Future studies could examine leadership transitions, governance changes, or the implementation of sustainability strategies at different time points. This would provide deeper insight into temporal dynamics, particularly the mediating role of sustainability orientation and the stabilizing role of sustainability integration within organizational systems.

Third, multi-source and multi-stakeholder data collection would strengthen the construct validity and reduce the potential risk of common-method bias. Future research may complement self-reported data with perspectives from employees, board members, or external stakeholders, as well as with objective indicators of organizational sustainability performance.

Fourth, future studies should further refine the operationalization and validation of the constructs. Although internal consistency reliability was satisfactory, latent variable validation through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis was not feasible due to sample size limitations. Subsequent research should assess measurement invariance across organizational settings and examine whether the distinction between

transformational and values-based leadership remains stable across sectors and institutional contexts.

Fifth, cross-national comparative research would strengthen external validity and support analytical generalization. Comparative studies across emerging and developed economies could help differentiate universal leadership–sustainability mechanisms from context-specific effects and clarify how cultural norms and institutional volatility shape sustainability outcomes.

Finally, future research should provide confirmatory testing of the proposed Leadership-Orientation-Practice Integration (LOPI) Framework using structural equation modeling (SEM). While this study provides exploratory regression-based evidence supporting the activation, mediation, and sustainability-integration mechanisms identified in the model, SEM designs with larger sample sizes would enable simultaneous testing of the structural relationships among leadership traits, sustainability orientation, sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and sustainability outcomes. Such confirmatory analysis would enable assessment of overall model fit and strengthen the framework’s empirical validation and generalizability.

Overall, these research avenues support a shift from association-based analyses toward longitudinal, multi-level, and theory-driven research designs that examine how leadership characteristics activate, mediate, and support sustainability within organizational contexts.

6.4 Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of sustainability leadership by demonstrating that integrating sustainability within organizations is not simply the result of strategic intent or policy design, but the outcome of a multi-level organizational process.

The empirical findings indicate that leadership influence operates through four interconnected mechanisms: i) activation through transformational leadership; ii) mediation through sustainability-oriented decision logic; iii) interaction with cultural and institutional contextual conditions; and iv) stabilization through integration with organizational systems. These mechanisms are synthesized in the newly developed Leadership-Orientation-Practice Integration (LOPI) Framework.

The LOPI Framework should be interpreted as an empirically informed conceptual model that integrates the observed relationships between leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, and contextual conditions. It provides a structured representation of sustainability integration, while requiring further empirical validation. The framework indicates that leadership traits shape sustainability orientation at the strategic level and influence the development of sustainability practices at the operational level, while contextual conditions influence the extent to which these dimensions align and are sustained within organizations. In emerging-market environments characterized by institutional volatility, sustainability outcomes appear to depend less on individual leadership resilience and more on the extent to which leadership values are translated into shared decision-making logic and organizational systems. The findings support analytical generalization to theory rather than statistical generalization to populations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of sustainability leadership mechanisms in emerging-market contexts.

Finally, by conceptualizing leadership traits as an organizational capability rather than solely as an individual attribute, the research offers a context-sensitive explanation of how leadership contributes to sustainability, demonstrating how sustainability commitments translate into durable organizational outcomes within contextual constraints.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY COVER LETTER

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in this academic study on female leadership and sustainability practices in Romanian organizations.

This research forms part of a doctoral study and is addressed exclusively to women holding leadership, executive, or decision-making roles within organizations operating in Romania. The aim of the study is to better understand how women's leadership practices relate to the integration of sustainability within organizational contexts.

Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. The questionnaire is anonymous, does not collect personally identifiable information, and takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. All responses will be treated confidentially, stored securely, accessible only to the researcher, analyzed exclusively in aggregated form, and used solely for academic research purposes.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact the researcher at thinkaheadadvisory@outlook.com.

Thank you for your valuable contribution.

Before proceeding, please review the informed consent information below:

Informed Consent: By proceeding with this survey, you confirm that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understood the purpose of the study, and voluntarily agree to participate. You may stop at any time without any consequence.

☐ I confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in this study

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this academic study on female leadership and sustainability practices in Romanian organizations.

This research forms part of a doctoral study and involves semi-structured interviews with women holding leadership, executive, or decision-making roles in organizations operating in Romania. The purpose of the study is to explore how women's leadership practices influence the interpretation, implementation, and embedding of sustainability within organizational contexts.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. All information shared during the interview will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. No direct personal identifiers (such as names or organizational identifiers) will be collected. Interview data will be anonymized, securely stored, accessible only to the researcher, and analyzed in aggregate or thematic form. You will not be individually identifiable in any thesis, publication, or presentation resulting from this research.

In line with the study's ethical protocol, interviews **are not audio-recorded**. Instead, contemporaneous notes are taken and later expanded into anonymized interview records.

This study complies with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and applicable Romanian data protection legislation. All data are stored securely and retained only for the duration necessary to complete the doctoral research.

Your rights: As a participant, you have the right to:

- i. Withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or consequence.

- ii. Request access to your interview data or request its deletion prior to final anonymization.
- iii. Ask questions or raise concerns regarding research or data handling.
- iv. For any questions related to this study or your data, you may contact the researcher at: thinkaheadadvisory@outlook.com

Consent: By agreeing to participate in this interview, you confirm that:

- i. You are 18 years of age or older.
- ii. You have read and understood the purpose and conditions of the study.
- iii. You voluntarily agree to participate in the interview.
- iv. You consent to the use of anonymized interview data for academic research purposes.

APPENDIX C

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Due to the conceptual complexity of the research model, the survey instrument below is not based on a single pre-existing validated scale. Furthermore, no previously validated scale is adopted verbatim, as the study combines multiple analytical dimensions that are typically examined separately in the literature. Instead, it consists of author-developed and author-adapted items grounded in established theoretical frameworks in leadership and sustainability scholarship.

To ensure conceptual clarity and minimize overlap, the survey instrument is designed to capture analytically distinct constructs, including leadership traits, sustainability orientation, organizational sustainability practices, contextual constraints, and organizational sustainability outcomes. Survey items are theoretically derived and conceptually integrated from the following primary frameworks: i) Triple Bottom Line theory (Elkington, 1994); ii) sustainable leadership practices framework (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011); iii) transformational, responsible and sustainable leadership (Brandt, 2016; Burns, 2010; Maak and Pless, 2006); iv) gendered leadership research (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001); v) Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002); and vi) Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010), alongside established emerging-market sustainability literature.

Each survey item is mapped to its primary theoretical source in the table below to ensure transparency in the operationalization of constructs and content validity. To ensure internal coherence across constructs derived from multiple frameworks, items wording are harmonized using consistent language and response scaling. Additionally, survey items are cross-checked against the construct definitions presented in Chapter III.

Questionnaire: The following questions ask you to indicate your level of agreement with a series of statements using a 5-point scale:

1 – Strongly disagree / 2 – Disagree / 3 – Neither agree nor disagree / 4 – Agree /
5 – Strongly agree

#	Likert-Scale Question	1	2	3	4	5
Section A: Values-Based Leadership (Author-developed composite scale grounded in Responsible and Sustainable Leadership models and prior gendered leadership empirical research)						
A1	I demonstrate empathy and understanding in leading my team.					
A2	I promote ethical decision-making and fairness in all organizational practices.					
A3	I encourage inclusiveness and participation in all projects.					
A4	I value collaboration and shared responsibility in leadership.					
A5	My leadership approach reflects behaviors that are recognized and valued within my organization.					
Key Sources: (Brandt, 2016; Cuadrado et al., 2012; Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Maak and Pless, 2006; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and Woehr, 2014; Pless and Maak, 2011)						
Section B: Transformational Leadership (Author-adapted composite scale informed by Transformational Leadership literature, contextualized for sustainability-oriented leadership and exploratory use in an emerging-market setting)						
B1	I articulate a clear and inspiring vision.					
B2	I motivate others to pursue long-term organizational goals that create positive change.					
B3	I encourage innovative thinking and creative problem-solving.					
B4	I actively lead change towards more sustainable business practices.					
B5	I align my leadership actions with the advancement of our sustainability strategy.					

Key Sources: (Burns, 2010; Groves and LaRocca, 2011; Hahn et al., 2015; Jackson, 2021)					
Section C: Sustainability Orientation (Author-developed composite scale grounded in the Triple Bottom Line theory and sustainability strategy integration empirical research)					
C1	I integrate environmental, social, and economic considerations into my decision-making.				
C2	I prioritize long-term organizational resilience, even when it conflicts with short-term profitability.				
C3	I prioritize incorporating sustainability objectives into strategic planning.				
C4	I consider stakeholder engagement and collaboration as a priority in sustainability-related decisions.				
C5	I place importance on developing and monitoring our sustainability goals.				
Key Sources: (Elkington, 1994; Hahn et al., 2015; Nikolaou, Tsalis and Evangelinos, 2019; Slaper and Hall, 2011)					
Section D: Organizational Sustainability Practices (Author-developed composite scale conceptually derived from the Avery and Bergsteiner framework and organizational sustainability embedding literature)					
D1	Our organization has established practices that support trust and transparency among leaders and employees.				
D2	Our organization has formal mechanisms to ensure that women leaders are directly involved in the design and implementation of sustainability strategies.				
D3	Our organization uses structured processes to balance stakeholder interests when making key decisions.				
D4	Our organizational culture is supported by practices that reinforce shared purpose and long-term success.				
D5	Our organization has formal initiatives that integrate gender-inclusive leadership principles into its strategy.				
Key Sources: (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Doh and Quigley, 2014; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016; Ionascu et al., 2018; Nosratabadi et al., 2019)					
Section E: Cultural Contextual Constraints (Author-developed contextual barriers scale, informed by Cultural Dimensions theory, Role Congruity theory, and gendered leadership literature.)					

E1	Hierarchical structures and respect for authority limit women's influence in decision-making processes.					
E2	A strong preference for structure and predictability reduces openness to sustainability-related innovation.					
E3	Traditional gender norms and emphasis on competition affect collaboration and inclusiveness in leadership.					
E4	Loyalty to close networks and group consensus sometimes limits merit-based advancement for women leaders.					
E5	A short-term focus on immediate results, coupled with a restrained cultural mindset, limits long-term sustainability practices.					
Key Sources: (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; Shen and Joseph, 2021)						
Section F: Emerging-Market Contextual Constraints (Author-developed contextual barriers scale, grounded in emerging-market governance and sustainability implementation literature.)						
F1	Regulatory instability and policy inconsistency affect sustainability efforts.					
F2	Limited access to financial and technical resources constrains the implementation of sustainability.					
F3	Weak institutional frameworks create barriers to long-term sustainability goals.					
F4	Rigid organizational structures and resistance to change hinder innovation.					
F5	There are few formal structures to support female leaders' advancement into senior roles.					
Key Sources: (Boeske, 2023; Doh, Littell and Quigley, 2015; Elango, 2019; Hall, Daneke and Lenox, 2010; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; Pastore and Massacesi, 2020)						
Section G: Organizational Sustainability Outcomes (Author-developed organizational perceptual outcomes scale, anchored in the Triple Bottom Line and sustainability performance literature)						
G1	Our organization has improved its economic performance alongside sustainability practices.					

G2	Our organization has improved its social outcomes (employee well-being, diversity, and inclusion).					
G3	Our organization has reduced its environmental impact (energy, emissions, waste).					
G4	Sustainability practices have enhanced our organization's reputation and resilience.					
G5	Our organization has increased the representation of women in leadership and governance structures.					
Key Sources: (Chen, Song and Gao, 2023; Elkington, 1994; Glass, Cook and Ingersoll, 2016; Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal, 2016)						

Background Information Section: The following questions collect general background information to help contextualize the study findings. Responses are anonymous and will be used solely for analytical purposes. No personally identifiable information is requested.

1. Please indicate your current role (e.g. general manager, board member, director, owner) or functional area (e.g., executive management, operations, sustainability, finance, governance). Please avoid mentioning your name or the name of your organization.

-
2. How many years have you held a leadership/executive position?

- ☐ Less than 5 years
- ☐ 5–10 years
- ☐ 11–20 years
- ☐ More than 20 years

3. What industry does your organization operate in?

- ☐ Manufacturing

- ☐ Agri-business
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Consumer Goods
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

4. How would you describe the level of market competition in your industry?

- ☐ Low
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ High

5. What is the approximate number of employees in your organization?

- ☐ Fewer than 50
- ☐ 50–249
- ☐ 250–999
- ☐ 1,000 or more
- ☐ Prefer not to say

6. What is the age of your organization?

- ☐ Less than 5 years
- ☐ 5–10 years
- ☐ 11–20 years
- ☐ More than 20 years
- ☐ Prefer not to say

7. What was your organization's approximate annual turnover in the most recent fiscal year (euros)?

- ☐ Less than €1 million
- ☐ €1 million – €5 million
- ☐ €5 million – €10 million

☐ More than €10 million

☐ Prefer not to say

8. What is the ownership structure of your organization?

☐ Public

☐ Private

☐ State-owned

☐ Other (please specify): _____

9. What is the ownership origin of your organization?

☐ Domestic

☐ Foreign

☐ Mixed

☐ Other (please specify): _____

Additional Reflections Section: The following optional question provides an opportunity to share any additional reflections or experiences you consider relevant to the topic of female leadership and sustainability. Responses are voluntary, anonymous, and intended to complement the structured questions by offering contextual insights.

1. Do you have any additional thoughts or experiences you would like to share regarding female leadership and sustainability in your organization?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

- i. Welcome and introduction.
- ii. Briefly introduce the research purpose.
- iii. Assure confidentiality, anonymity, and consent to take detailed contemporaneous notes and conduct follow-up clarification if needed.
- iv. Explain how the interview will be structured and the time length.
- v. Explain that the insights shared will be used in shaping a broader study on female leadership and sustainability practices in Romania.

Section 1: Background and Role

- i. *Can you describe your current role and main responsibilities?*
- ii. *How long have you been in a leadership position?*
- iii. *What industry does your organization operate in?*
- iv. *What motivated you to pursue a leadership career, particularly in your industry?*
- v. *How would you describe your organization's sustainability agenda, and your personal contribution to it?*

Section 2: Defining Leadership and Sustainability

- i. *How do you personally define leadership?*
- ii. *How would you describe your own leadership style and its influence on others?*
(Prompts: transformational, participative, ethical, inclusive, responsible)
- iii. *Which leadership traits do you consider most critical for leadership?* (Prompts: emotional intelligence, collaboration, long-term thinking, ethical decision-making)

- iv. *How do you define sustainability in your leadership context? (Prompts: economic, social, environmental balance)*
- v. *In your view, what makes leadership sustainable?*
- vi. *Can you give an example of a situation where your leadership style directly influenced a sustainability initiative or outcome?*

Section 3. Sustainable Leadership Practices and Impact

- i. *How does your leadership style advance (or sometimes limit) sustainability outcomes in your organization?*
- ii. *What specific practices or decisions reflect your sustainability values?*
- iii. *How does your organization promote trust, shared purpose, or long-term value creation?*
- iv. *How do you measure your impact on your organization's sustainability performance, and which initiative are you most proud of? (Prompts: measurable results, stakeholder feedback, innovation, resilience, profit increase, social impact, environmental impact)*
- v. *When making strategic decisions, how do you balance environmental, social, and economic priorities?*
- vi. *Can you walk me through a recent decision you made that had a significant sustainability impact? (Prompts: decision-making process, stakeholder involvement, trade-offs considered)*

Section 4. Operating in an Emerging-Market Context

- i. *How has working in an emerging economy such as Romania influenced your approach to leadership and sustainability?*
- ii. *Do you feel the business environment or regulatory framework helps or hinders sustainable leadership?*

- iii. *How do institutional or resource constraints affect your ability to implement sustainability practices?*
- iv. *Have you had to adapt your leadership approach to navigate uncertainty or limited resources?*
- v. *What opportunities does the Romanian context create for innovation, resilience, or responsible growth?*

Section 5. Cultural and Organizational Dynamics

- i. *How does your organizational culture influence sustainability and leadership behaviors?*
- ii. *How would you describe the influence of national culture on your leadership opportunities and decision-making? (Prompts: hierarchy, long-term orientation, gender expectations, collectivism)*
- iii. *How does national culture shape your organization's broader approach to leadership and sustainability? (Prompts: same as above)*
- iv. *In your experience, does organizational culture reinforce or counterbalance national cultural tendencies?*

- v. *Have you noticed any differences between formal policies and informal cultural norms when it comes to women in leadership or sustainability decisions?*

Section 6. Gender and Leadership Identity

- i. *In your view, do women bring distinctive qualities to sustainability leadership? If so, which one?*
- ii. *Have you encountered gender-specific barriers or enablers in advancing sustainability practices?*
- iii. *How do you balance assertiveness, empathy, and collaboration in your leadership role?*

- iv. *What personal values guide your decisions and leadership in sustainability-related contexts?*

Section 7. Defining Sustainable Female Leadership

- i. *Based on all we discussed, what combination of traits, practices, and contextual factors do you think defines sustainable female leadership?*
- ii. *If you had to choose three words that best describe sustainable female leadership, what would they be and why?*
- iii. *If you could design an ideal leadership model for women driving sustainability in Romania, what would it include?*
- iv. *What advice would you give to other women aspiring to create sustainable impact through leadership?*

Conclusion

- i. *Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't covered?*
- ii. *Next steps (e.g., opportunity for sharing results).*

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