



Advancing Women into Leadership Positions in South African Educational Institutions: The Role of Education and Mentorship

Thizwilondi J. Mudau ¹  & Matodzi G Sikhwari ¹ 

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of education in advancing women into leadership positions, addressing persistent gender disparities in decision-making roles. Despite global efforts to promote gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership, limiting diversity and innovation across sectors. Grounded in Feminist Theory, the article explored how education equips women with the skills, confidence, and opportunities needed for leadership success. Using a qualitative case study design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 20 female leaders, educators, and policymakers from South African institutions of higher learning, selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed that access to education and mentorship programmes significantly enhance women's leadership abilities, while societal norms and limited institutional support remain barriers. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer review, and triangulation, with ethical considerations including informed consent and confidentiality. The article recommends integrating leadership training into educational curricula and fostering partnerships between institutions and organizations to support women's professional growth. This research underscores education as a key driver of gender equality and inclusive leadership development. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how educational systems can be reformed to support gender equality in educational development.

Correspondence

Matodzi G Sikhwari
Email:
matodzi.sikhwari@univen.ac.za

Publication History

Received:
6th January, 2025
Accepted:
3rd April, 2025.
Published:
11th April, 2025.

Keywords: *Women's leadership; Gender equality; Education and leadership; Mentorship programmes; Feminism.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in leadership has gained considerable global attention due to its essential role in fostering economic growth, social development, and democratic governance.¹ Leadership roles in politics, business, and academia continue to reflect gender imbalances, with men disproportionately occupying senior positions.² This inequality stems from historical patterns of exclusion reinforced by socio-cultural norms, limited access to education, and economic disparities.

¹ UN Women, "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: Gender Snapshot 2021," *United Nations*, 2021.

² World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report," Insight Report, 2022, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf.

Education equips women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate leadership challenges and break traditional stereotypes.³ It fosters critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills, enabling women to excel in leadership positions. Mentorship and leadership training programmes in educational settings also enhance women's leadership potential, helping them succeed in competitive environments.⁴

In South Africa, historical inequalities rooted in apartheid continue to affect women's leadership opportunities. Despite legislative frameworks like the Employment Equity Act and policies promoting gender equality, women remain underrepresented in senior roles across various sectors.⁵

Socio-cultural expectations often place women in subordinate roles, limiting their leadership potential. Furthermore, the implementation of gender-sensitive policies is frequently inconsistent, weakening their intended impact.⁶

Educational institutions play a critical role in challenging these structural barriers by fostering inclusive leadership development. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and advocacy training have shown promise in promoting women's leadership in South Africa.⁷ Developing supportive environments within educational settings can equip women with the skills and confidence needed to assume leadership positions, contributing to greater gender equality in society.

This study investigates the role of education in advancing women's leadership skills within the South African context. By applying feminist principles that advocate for dismantling structural inequalities,⁸ the research explores educational strategies that promote gender equity. It examines enablers and barriers to women's leadership development and offers actionable strategies for fostering inclusive leadership practices.

The findings highlight the importance of integrating leadership training into educational programmes and fostering partnerships between educational institutions and organizations. These efforts aim to create environments where women can realize their leadership potential, contributing to diversity and inclusivity in leadership across sectors.⁹ This research provides practical insights for policymakers, educators, and advocates, emphasizing the transformative role of education in achieving gender equality in leadership.¹⁰

The study aims to explore how education contributes to women's leadership development, focusing on the South African context. Specifically, it seeks to identify the enablers and barriers within the educational system that affect women's readiness for leadership roles. Thus, the study will examine the effectiveness of leadership programmes, mentorship, and the ways in which educational systems challenge or reinforce gender norms. The research questions guiding this article include:

- How does education contribute to the development of women's leadership skills in the South African context?
- What enablers and barriers within the South African educational system influence women's readiness for leadership roles?
- How do leadership training programmes and mentorship initiatives impact women's leadership potential in South Africa?

³ M. Grogan, "Empowering Women through Education: Bridging the Gender Gap in Leadership," *Journal of Educational Leadership* 30, no. 3 (2020): 45–63.

⁴ P. Koech and N. Chepkemoi, "Mentorship and Leadership Development Programs: Empowering Women in Leadership," *Gender and Education* 34, no. 1 (2022): 1–19.

⁵ S. Molefe, "Gender Equality in South African Leadership: A Critical Analysis," *South African Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2022): 231–47.

⁶ S. Ngcobo, "Policy Implementation Gaps in Promoting Gender Equality in South Africa," *Policy Review Journal* 25, no. 1 (2023): 89–104.

⁷ M. Thorne, "South African Policies and the Promotion of Gender Equality in Leadership," *Journal of South African Politics* 29, no. 2 (2020): 67–81; C. Thorne, "Empowering Women Through Education: Leadership Development Programs in South Africa," *African Education Review* 16, no. 2 (2020): 150–65.

⁸ Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

⁹ S. Tshabalala, "Bridging the Gap: Educational Strategies for Promoting Women in Leadership," *South African Journal of Educational Development* 12, no. 3 (2023): 98–112.

¹⁰ C. Meier, "Gender Equity in South African Education: Progress, Challenges and Opportunities," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021): 1–10.

The article will proceed by discussing the review of related literature, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and recommendations, focusing on strategies to enhance women's advancement in leadership positions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conceptualization and Review of Related Literature section provides a comprehensive examination of key concepts and theoretical frameworks relevant to the study. It also explores existing research and findings that inform the current understanding of the topic.

Conceptualization

Conceptualizing is crucial for clearly defining the focus of the research, guiding the methodology, and maintaining consistency throughout the study. It helps to outline key concepts, create a framework for data collection and analysis, and ensures the validity and coherence of the research.

Empowerment through Education

Education has long been recognized as a powerful tool for societal transformation, especially in promoting gender equality and empowering women. This conceptualization views education not only as a means of acquiring knowledge but as a transformative force that can equip women with the skills, confidence, and capabilities needed to overcome gender-based obstacles and succeed in leadership roles.¹¹ In the context of South Africa, where gender inequality in leadership positions remains prevalent, education plays a crucial role in dismantling traditional gender roles and empowering women to challenge societal expectations. It offers an avenue for women to break free from the constraints of cultural and historical barriers, positioning them for greater participation in leadership across various sectors, including politics, business, and education.¹²

The empowerment of women through education is multifaceted. It includes acquiring intellectual tools such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, which are essential for leadership.¹³ Education also provides women with opportunities to interact with role models and mentors, particularly through leadership training programmes and mentorship initiatives. These programmes create an environment in which women can cultivate the skills necessary for leadership, including communication, conflict resolution, and strategic thinking.¹⁴ Leadership training fosters self-confidence by providing women with the knowledge that they are equipped to handle complex leadership tasks, thereby addressing the self-doubt that often plagues women aspiring to leadership roles.¹⁵ Educational settings, by promoting gender-inclusive curricula and gender-sensitive pedagogies, also empower women to challenge societal stereotypes and advocate for greater gender equity in leadership spaces.

By focusing on empowerment through education, this conceptualization emphasizes the role of educational institutions in breaking the glass ceiling for women in leadership. Schools, universities, and other educational platforms are ideal spaces for nurturing leadership skills and encouraging the pursuit of leadership positions. The success of women in leadership roles is not only beneficial to them individually but contributes to broader societal transformation, fostering more diverse, inclusive, and innovative leadership structures.¹⁶

¹¹ R. Sowell, "Empowering Women through Education: A Global Challenge," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21, no. 7 (2020): 204–18.

¹² M. Dube and V. Mlambo, "Gender Equality and Leadership in Education: A South African Perspective," *Journal of Gender and Development* 30, no. 4 (2021): 513–29.

¹³ S. Mnyandu, "Leadership Training and Women's Empowerment in Higher Education Institutions," *Gender and Education Studies* 18, no. 1 (2022): 38–52.

¹⁴ R. Thompson and L. Malan, "Mentorship and Women's Leadership in South Africa: Overcoming the Glass Ceiling," *Gender and Leadership Studies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 22–38.

¹⁵ Mnyandu, "Leadership Training and Women's Empowerment in Higher Education Institutions."

¹⁶ Dube and Mlambo, "Gender Equality and Leadership in Education: A South African Perspective."

Barriers and Support in the Educational System

While education has the potential to empower women, it is equally important to understand the structural barriers and enablers within the educational system that impact women's readiness for leadership. This conceptualization recognizes that the educational system itself can either perpetuate or challenge gender inequalities, shaping the trajectory of women's leadership development in significant ways. The analysis of barriers and enablers within the South African context involves examining both institutional practices and societal influences that either hinder or support women's leadership aspirations.

One major barrier is the gender bias that persists within curricula and teaching methodologies. In many educational systems, including South Africa's, women's contributions to leadership and innovation are often marginalized, and the curriculum may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles.¹⁷ For example, subjects related to leadership or management might be presented in ways that do not encourage women to take on leadership positions, or women's achievements in leadership might be underrepresented in teaching materials. Such biases can discourage women from pursuing leadership roles, as they may feel that such positions are outside of their reach or not intended for them.

There are often limited opportunities for leadership development within educational settings. Many educational institutions fail to integrate leadership training into their programmes, especially for women. Without specific training or exposure to leadership roles through internships, clubs, or mentorship programmes, women may not feel adequately prepared for leadership positions. This lack of practical leadership experience is a significant barrier, as it prevents women from developing the confidence and skills needed to lead effectively.¹⁸

Educational institutions and programmes that emphasize mentorship, provide access to role models, and actively seek to eliminate gender biases in curricula and teaching practices serve as enablers for women's leadership development.¹⁹ Supportive institutional policies, such as gender quotas for leadership positions or dedicated leadership training programmes for women, can provide the necessary foundation for women to succeed in leadership roles.²⁰ Gender-sensitive teaching practices and exposure to female leaders in various fields can also inspire students to envision themselves in leadership positions, increasing their aspirations and potential for advancement.

By identifying these barriers and enablers, this conceptualization highlights the need for systemic change within the educational system to promote gender equality in leadership. Policies and practices that foster an inclusive environment, where women can access the tools and resources needed for leadership development, are crucial. This approach also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between policymakers, educators, and organizations to create an educational ecosystem that supports women's leadership ambitions and helps them overcome existing challenges.²¹ This conceptualization underscores the importance of both recognizing and addressing the structural challenges women face within the educational system while simultaneously identifying and reinforcing the supportive elements that can enable women's leadership development. Through a thorough analysis of these factors, the study will examine how educational institutions can be transformed to better support women's leadership aspirations and contribute to the creation of a more gender-equitable society.

The literature review examines the role of education in facilitating women's advancement into leadership roles, with a specific focus on South Africa. It explores global trends in women's representation in leadership positions, the role of education in advancing women's leadership, gender disparities in South African leadership, and the barriers and enablers within the educational system that affect women's leadership development.

¹⁷ T. Nkosi, "Gender Bias in South African Educational Curricula: Implications for Women in Leadership Roles," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 3 (2020): 101–15.

¹⁸ S. Khan and L. Jacobs, "Breaking Barriers: Mentorship and Leadership Programs for Women in South Africa," *African Journal of Education and Development* 12, no. 2 (2021): 94–106.

¹⁹ Thompson and Malan, "Mentorship and Women's Leadership in South Africa: Overcoming the Glass Ceiling."

²⁰ Mnyandu, "Leadership Training and Women's Empowerment in Higher Education Institutions."

²¹ Nkosi, "Gender Bias in South African Educational Curricula: Implications for Women in Leadership Roles."

Global Trends in Women's Representation in Leadership Roles

Gender inequality in leadership roles persists globally despite notable progress in other areas of gender equality. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across sectors such as business, politics, and education. According to the World Economic Forum, women occupy only 25% of leadership roles worldwide, highlighting the persistent leadership gap.²²

This disparity is particularly pronounced at senior executive levels in corporate and political spheres, where male dominance remains entrenched. Efforts to address this imbalance have led to various policy interventions, including affirmative action, gender quotas, and leadership development programs. Norway's introduction of gender quotas for corporate boards has been particularly impactful, resulting in a substantial increase in female representation.²³ Similar policies have been adopted in several countries, emphasizing the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks in promoting gender equality in leadership.

However, cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder progress in many regions. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and socio-economic inequalities often restrict women's leadership prospects. In developing countries, gender-based discrimination and societal expectations regarding women's roles further exacerbate the leadership gap.²⁴ Moreover, even in countries with progressive policies, women frequently encounter obstacles such as gender bias, unequal pay, and limited professional networks.

Research underscores the importance of fostering inclusive leadership environments through targeted training and mentorship programs. Organizations that prioritize diversity and gender-inclusive policies tend to experience improved decision-making, innovation, and overall performance.²⁵ Thus, addressing global gender disparities in leadership requires a multi-faceted approach involving policy reforms, cultural shifts, and institutional support.

The Role of Education in Advancing Women's Leadership

Education plays a crucial role in reducing the gender gap in leadership by providing women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to challenge traditional gender norms. Access to quality education empowers women to take on leadership roles and participate actively in decision-making processes. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report, education is one of the most effective strategies for promoting gender equality by fostering leadership skills such as critical thinking, decision-making, and communication.²⁶

Leadership-focused educational programs, including mentorship initiatives and specialized training, are essential in preparing women for leadership roles. These programs provide practical skills, career development strategies, and access to professional networks, enhancing women's ability to succeed in competitive environments.²⁷ Mentorship by successful female leaders can also inspire and guide aspiring women, helping bridge the gap between potential and achievement.

The presence of female role models within educational institutions can significantly influence young women's leadership aspirations. Research shows that seeing women in leadership positions promotes positive self-concepts among female students and motivates them to pursue similar career paths.²⁸ Additionally, educational policies that support gender equity, such as scholarships for women in leadership programs, encourage women's participation in leadership development.

²² World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2020," *World Economic Forum*, 2020.

²³ T. Sørensen, "Gender Quotas and Corporate Board Diversity: Lessons from Norway," *European Journal of Policy Analysis* 17, no. 3 (2021): 198–215.

²⁴ R. Kumar and M. Patel, "Breaking Barriers: Women's Leadership and Education in Developing Countries," *Journal of Global Gender Studies* 14, no. 2 (2022): 105–20.

²⁵ L. Smith and P. Johnson, "Education and Women's Leadership: A Global Perspective," *International Journal of Gender Studies* 15, no. 4 (2021): 300–320.

²⁶ UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report. Advancing Gender Equality Through Education: A Global Perspective," 2020.

²⁷ A. Alhassan, R. Ahmed, and S. Ali, "Women's Leadership Development Programs: A Pathway to Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa," *International Journal of Gender Studies* 12, no. 4 (2021): 56–73.

²⁸ M. M. Duffy and K. Nier, "Women's Mentorship and Leadership Development: Overcoming Barriers and Creating Pathways," *Journal of Women's Leadership* 8, no. 2 (2020): 112–30.

Educational institutions can also address societal biases by incorporating gender-sensitive curricula that promote equal opportunities. Institutions that prioritize gender equity in leadership development contribute to a more inclusive society where women can assume leadership roles across various sectors.

Gender Disparities in South African Leadership

Despite South Africa's legislative framework supporting gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across various sectors. The country has made notable progress, particularly in political representation, where women occupy approximately 46% of parliamentary seats.²⁹ However, significant disparities persist in leadership roles within business, academia, and executive management positions.

Historical factors linked to apartheid continue to shape gender inequalities. The legacy of socio-economic exclusion, combined with cultural norms that reinforce patriarchal values, limits women's access to leadership positions. Traditional gender expectations often confine women to caregiving roles, restricting their professional growth.³⁰ These deeply rooted societal attitudes present a significant barrier to achieving leadership equity.

Structural challenges within South Africa's education and professional sectors contribute to the leadership gender gap. Limited access to mentorship, professional networks, and leadership training programmes disproportionately affects women. Mnguni highlights that many educational institutions in South Africa do not prioritize leadership development programmes targeting women, leaving female graduates less prepared for leadership roles in competitive environments.³¹

Addressing these disparities requires multi-faceted interventions, including gender-sensitive policy implementation, mentorship schemes, and targeted training programmes. Promoting women's leadership in South Africa involves not only enacting supportive policies but also transforming societal attitudes toward gender roles.

Barriers and Enablers within the Educational System in South Africa

South African educational institutions both facilitate and hinder the development of women's leadership. On the one hand, education equips women with essential knowledge and skills that are critical to leadership development. On the other hand, structural and cultural barriers within the educational system limit the opportunities for women to develop leadership skills.

Gender biases within curricula are a significant barrier. Ntuli points out that many South African educational institutions do not integrate leadership training for women, and the absence of female role models in academic leadership positions further limits the aspirations of young women.³² Gender stereotypes that permeate educational materials can reinforce traditional gender roles and discourage women from pursuing leadership roles.

However, there are also enablers within the system. Some institutions have implemented leadership development programmes that target women. For instance, the University of Cape Town's Women's Leadership Development Program has provided women with the necessary skills and networks to advance into leadership roles.³³ Such programmes, along with mentorship opportunities, help women overcome the challenges they face and position them for success in leadership positions.

²⁹ C. De la Rey and M. Oswald, "Gendered Leadership in South Africa: How Women Leaders Negotiate Systemic Challenges," *African Journal of Leadership* 10, no. 2 (2020): 44–60.

³⁰ L. Wight and L. Booysen, "Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Women's Leadership in South Africa," *Gender and Education Review* 34, no. 1 (2022): 99–117.

³¹ D. Mnguni, "Gender Disparity in South African Education: Challenges to Women's Leadership Development," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2021): 70–85.

³² T. Ntuli, "Curriculum Reform and Gender Equality: Addressing Leadership Gaps in South African Schools," *African Journal of Gender and Education* 7, no. 1 (2020): 98–115.

³³ H. Nel, "Empowering Women Leaders through Education: A Case Study of the Women's Leadership Development Program," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 35, no. 4 (2021): 120–35.

The Impact of Societal Norms and Cultural Expectations on Women's Leadership Aspirations

Societal norms and cultural expectations significantly influence women's leadership aspirations by shaping perceptions of appropriate roles for men and women. In many cultures, including South Africa, traditional gender roles position women primarily as caregivers and homemakers, limiting their opportunities to pursue leadership positions. This dual expectation of managing both domestic and professional responsibilities creates a substantial burden, often discouraging women from aspiring to leadership roles.³⁴

The expectation for women to excel simultaneously in both spheres contributes to what researchers call the "double burden" effect. Booyesen and Nkomo argue that this dual role constrains women's career development, limiting their availability for leadership training and professional development.³⁵ In patriarchal societies, leadership is frequently associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, further reinforcing stereotypes that women are less suited for leadership roles.³⁶

Cultural norms also influence organizational cultures, often resulting in discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. A study by Dlamini and Khumalo (2020) found that women in South Africa face significant barriers due to biased recruitment processes and limited access to mentorship. The absence of female role models in leadership positions perpetuates the notion that leadership is reserved for men, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of gender inequality.

Education has the potential to challenge these deeply ingrained norms by promoting gender equality and fostering leadership development among women. Programmes that integrate gender-sensitive curricula, leadership training, and mentorship initiatives can play a transformative role in reshaping societal attitudes.³⁷ When educational institutions prioritize gender equity, they create opportunities for women to develop critical leadership skills and expand their professional networks.

Mentorship programmes have proven effective in counteracting the negative effects of cultural expectations. According to Nel, mentoring helps women gain confidence and career advancement skills, enabling them to break free from societal constraints.³⁸ Similarly, initiatives such as the Women's Leadership Development Program at the University of Cape Town provide women with tools for leadership success while fostering supportive professional communities.

Addressing the cultural and societal barriers that hinder women's leadership aspirations requires a multi-faceted approach. Educational institutions, policymakers, and communities must collaborate to dismantle discriminatory practices, challenge traditional gender roles, and promote inclusive leadership cultures. Only by reshaping societal expectations can women's leadership aspirations be fully realized.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study focuses on gender equality and leadership development, specifically examining how education empowers women to take on leadership roles. To explore the role of education in supporting women's leadership, two main theories were used: *Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)* and *Feminist Theory*.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), created by Albert Bandura, highlights the importance of learning through observation, self-belief, and social factors in shaping behaviour and aspirations. SCT suggests that people, including women, learn by watching others, especially role models, and this observation influences their behaviours and goals. In this study, the theory helps explain how women in educational settings, particularly those with female role models in leadership, develop the skills and confidence needed to pursue leadership positions. It also emphasizes the role of self-efficacy, which

³⁴ L. A. E. Booyesen and S. M. Nkomo, "Women's Leadership in South Africa: The Paradoxes of Progress," *Journal of African Business* 22, no. 3 (2021): 345–65.

³⁵ L. Booyesen and S. Nkomo, "Gender and Leadership in South Africa: Cultural Norms and Workplace Realities," *Journal of African Leadership Studies* 8, no. 2 (2021): 120–35.

³⁶ P. Mnguni, "Leadership and Gender: Societal Norms Shaping Women's Leadership Aspirations in Africa," *African Leadership Review* 11, no. 1 (2022): 90–110.

³⁷ Ntuli, "Curriculum Reform and Gender Equality: Addressing Leadership Gaps in South African Schools."

³⁸ Nel, "Empowering Women Leaders through Education: A Case Study of the Women's Leadership Development Program."

refers to the belief in one's ability to succeed. When women believe in their leadership abilities, these beliefs can be strengthened through education, mentorship, and leadership training, thus increasing their chances of taking on leadership roles.³⁹

Feminist Theory offers another perspective by examining the barriers and opportunities within education systems that affect women's leadership development. Feminist Theory critiques the social, cultural, and institutional structures that maintain gender inequality, calling for changes that promote gender justice. This theory helps in understanding how educational systems, policies, and social norms often reinforce gender stereotypes, limiting women's access to leadership roles. It also stresses the need for empowerment, viewing education as a key tool to challenge traditional gender roles and support women's leadership. By exploring the intersection of gender, race, and class in South African schools, this study aims to highlight how educational systems can better support women's leadership development by addressing both direct and subtle gender biases in education.⁴⁰

Together, *Social Cognitive Theory* and *Feminist Theory* provide a strong framework for understanding how education influences women's leadership aspirations and the barriers that prevent them from reaching leadership positions. These perspectives guide the study in exploring how education can empower women while also challenging societal structures that maintain gender inequality in leadership.

METHODOLOGY

The study was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding human experiences and social phenomena from the perspective of participants. This paradigm is particularly focused on the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences, exploring how these meanings shape their views on leadership and gender equality. This approach was deemed suitable for examining the complex nature of women's leadership development within educational contexts. By using interpretivism, the study was able to gain a deeper understanding of how women in education perceived their leadership roles, challenges, and aspirations, thus offering richer insights into the barriers and enablers they encountered in their leadership journey.

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of women in education and their leadership aspirations. Qualitative research is well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena, as it enables the exploration of personal narratives, perceptions, and experiences in depth. The design was both exploratory and descriptive, seeking to uncover the factors that shape women's leadership trajectories, including challenges and opportunities, and the social, cultural, and institutional influences on their aspirations for leadership. By focusing on individuals' lived experiences, the study sought to provide a holistic view of women's leadership development within education.

Data collection was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviews with female leaders, educators, and policymakers. The semi-structured interview and focus group discussion methods provided flexibility, allowing participants to share their experiences while ensuring the researcher could explore key themes relevant to the research questions. This approach facilitated in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, contributing to a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding women's leadership roles. Document analysis of educational policies and gender-related leadership initiatives within the institutions under study offered important contextual insights into the formal structures influencing women's leadership development.

The study population consisted of women working in educational institutions in Limpopo Province, South Africa, specifically in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, with a focus on those holding or aspiring to hold leadership positions. This group was chosen because they were

³⁹ A. Dube and M. Dube, "The Role of Educational Systems in Fostering Women's Leadership in Africa," *International Journal of Education and Leadership*, 18(2), 143-156. 18, no. 2 (2020): 143-56; P. Wright, M. Kelly, and H. Watson, "Social Cognitive Theory in Leadership Education: Enhancing Women's Self-Efficacy," *Journal of Leadership and Education* 15, no. 3 (2023): 210-25.

⁴⁰ J. Smith and M. Mnyandu, "Gender, Education, and Leadership in South Africa: An Intersectional Approach," *Journal of Educational Development* 23, no. 4 (2021): 88-102; S. Lee, "Feminist Perspectives on Educational Empowerment and Leadership," *Gender and Education* 36, no. 1 (2024): 56-73.

directly impacted by the educational system and could provide valuable perspectives on the intersection of gender and leadership within education. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience in leadership and gender-related issues, ensuring that the data would be relevant to the research questions. The sample included 20 women from diverse educational backgrounds and settings, such as urban and rural institutions, ensuring a broad representation of experiences.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The thematic analysis involved a six-step process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final report. The use of NVivo software facilitated the management and organization of the data. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the various factors influencing women's leadership development, including societal norms, educational practices, and personal experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, four criteria were applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba.⁴¹ These criteria helped ensure that the findings were accurate, applicable to other settings, reliable over time, and not influenced by researcher bias. Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional review boards, and data were securely stored to protect participants' privacy.

The study focused specifically on the experiences of women in education, delimited to female educators, administrators, and students within South African institutions. While the findings may not be widely generalizable due to the small sample size, the study provided valuable insights into the barriers and enablers of women's leadership development in educational contexts. The study's findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of how educational systems can foster women's leadership and inform policies and programmes aimed at promoting gender equality in leadership roles within education.

PRESENTATIONS OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 women from various educational settings in South Africa. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which resulted in several key themes that emerged from the participants' responses. These themes are discussed in the following sections: *Barriers to Women's Leadership in Education*, *Support Systems for Women Leaders*, *Gender Norms and Expectations*, and *Aspirations and Motivation for Leadership Roles*. The findings provide valuable insights into the challenges, enablers, and aspirations related to women's leadership in education.

1. Barriers to Women's Leadership in Education

A key theme that emerged from the data was the significant barriers that women face in their leadership development within the educational sector. Many participants (70%) shared experiences of gender-based discrimination, structural inequalities, and lack of professional support, which hindered their career progression.

Participant 4: *"I have always felt that being a woman is seen as a disadvantage when applying for higher positions. There is this idea that women are less capable of managing a school or making tough decisions. Even when I have applied, I have been overlooked for promotions in favour of male colleagues who were less qualified but had the right connections."*

This response reflects the deeply entrenched gender biases that exist within educational institutions. The perception that women are less capable of leadership roles is rooted in historical and societal norms that associate leadership with masculine traits such as decisiveness and authority. This

⁴¹ Yvonna Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985).

type of bias has been widely documented in literature on gender equality in education and leadership, where women often have to work harder to prove themselves in leadership roles.⁴²

Structural barriers such as the lack of equal opportunities for leadership training and mentorship for women were highlighted. Several participants mentioned that leadership training programmes were often tailored more toward male leadership styles, which tended to undermine the leadership development of female educators.

Participant 12: *“There is a lack of mentoring programmes specifically for women in leadership. Women need more training that acknowledges our unique experiences as women, especially in balancing work and family responsibilities.”*

This statement emphasizes the need for tailored leadership development programmes that take into account the particular challenges women face, such as the dual role of balancing professional responsibilities and family life. A gender-sensitive approach to leadership training would help mitigate the structural disadvantages women face in their careers.

2. Support Systems for Women Leaders

Another prominent theme was the role of support systems in women’s advancement into leadership roles. Many participants discussed the importance of mentorship, both formal and informal, and the role of supportive colleagues in enabling women to take on leadership positions.

Participant 7: *“I would not have made it this far without the mentorship I received from a female principal early in my career. She taught me how to navigate the political aspects of school leadership and gave me the confidence to apply for leadership roles.”*

Mentorship is a crucial enabler of women’s leadership development, as highlighted in the response. Women often face isolation in leadership roles, and having access to mentorship from other women who have navigated similar challenges provides valuable guidance and support. The importance of mentorship in women’s leadership development has been well-documented in leadership literature, where mentorship is shown to positively impact career advancement, particularly for women.⁴³

On the other hand, some participants mentioned the lack of institutional support for women leaders, especially in terms of fostering a collaborative and inclusive work environment.

Participant 15: *“There is often a sense of competition among women in the workplace. It’s difficult to find other women to support you because we are all fighting for the same limited opportunities.”*

This response highlights the competitive dynamics that can emerge in environments where leadership roles are scarce. The scarcity of women in leadership positions creates a situation where women may see each other as rivals rather than allies. This lack of solidarity can undermine the collective advancement of women in leadership roles. It also points to the need for more inclusive and supportive organizational cultures that encourage collaboration over competition.

3. Gender Norms and Expectations

Gender norms and societal expectations around leadership were a recurring theme in the interviews. Many participants spoke about how traditional views on gender roles shaped their experiences and aspirations for leadership positions.

Participant 19: *“There’s always the pressure to prove yourself. As a woman, you’re expected to be nurturing, and if you show assertiveness or authority, you’re labelled as bossy or too aggressive.”*

This comment reflects the double bind that many women in leadership roles face—where they are judged by different standards than their male counterparts. While assertiveness is often seen as a desirable leadership trait in men, it is frequently criticized in women. This is known as the “likability versus competence” dilemma, where women have to strike a delicate balance between being liked and

⁴² Alice H Eagly and Linda L Carli, “The Female Leadership Advantage: An Evaluation of the Evidence,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 14, no. 6 (December 2003): 807–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.09.004>.

⁴³ Belle Rose Ragins, “Gender and Mentoring Relationships: A Review and Research Agenda for the next Decade,” *Handbook of Gender & Work*, 1999, 347–70.

being seen as competent leaders.⁴⁴ This societal expectation of women to be nurturing, while also requiring them to be authoritative in leadership, creates an environment of contradictory pressures that can limit their leadership opportunities.

Several participants also spoke about the influence of cultural norms in South Africa, where traditional gender roles are still deeply ingrained, especially in rural areas.

Participant 9: *“In rural areas, there’s still a mindset that women should be in the home, and their roles in education are seen as secondary. I’ve had to fight very hard to prove that I am capable of leading.”*

This response highlights the intersectionality of gender and geography, where rural women face additional barriers due to traditional cultural practices. In rural areas, the gendered expectations around women’s roles in society may further limit their access to leadership opportunities, making their path to leadership more challenging.

4. Aspirations and Motivation for Leadership Roles

Despite the challenges, many participants expressed strong aspirations for leadership roles and emphasized the personal motivation that drove them to pursue leadership positions.

Participant 14: *“My biggest motivation for wanting to be a leader is to show young girls that they can do anything. I want to be a role model for them, to show them that leadership is not just for men.”*

This response underscores the importance of role models in shaping the aspirations of younger generations. Women in leadership positions often feel a sense of responsibility to inspire and empower other women and girls to break through societal barriers. The desire to be a role model is a powerful motivating factor that propels women to seek leadership roles despite the obstacles they face. This aligns with social cognitive career theory, which suggests that role models can significantly influence an individual’s career aspirations and success.⁴⁵

Some participants also spoke about the personal fulfillment and sense of purpose they gained from their leadership roles, highlighting the intrinsic rewards of leadership.

Participant 5: *“Being a leader allows me to make real changes in my school and community. It gives me a sense of purpose, and I know I am making a difference.”*

This response reflects the intrinsic satisfaction that comes from leadership. Many women in leadership positions view their roles as more than just a career path; they see it as a means of effecting meaningful change in their communities. This sense of purpose and the desire to make a positive impact are key drivers for women who aspire to leadership roles, and they highlight the transformative potential of women’s leadership in educational settings.

The findings reveal a complex interplay of barriers and enablers that shape women’s leadership development in South Africa’s educational sector. While participants identified significant challenges, such as gender bias, lack of mentorship, and societal expectations, they also emphasized the importance of support systems, personal motivations, and aspirations for overcoming these obstacles. These findings suggest that educational institutions must create more inclusive and supportive environments for women leaders, focusing on mentorship, gender-sensitive leadership development programmes, and policies that challenge traditional gender norms. Fostering a culture of solidarity among women in education could also help to mitigate the competitive dynamics that hinder collective advancement. Empowering women in educational leadership is not only about addressing structural barriers but also about changing the societal narratives around gender and leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article recommends several actions to enhance women’s leadership opportunities in South African educational institutions. First, it suggests the implementation of gender-sensitive leadership development programmes that address the unique challenges women face, such as balancing work and

⁴⁴ Madeline E. Heilman, “Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Bias,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 32 (January 2012): 113–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2012.11.003>.

⁴⁵ Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett, “Toward a Unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 45, no. 1 (August 1994): 79–122, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>.

family responsibilities. These programmes should offer flexible schedules, mentorship from experienced female leaders, and focus on empowering women to navigate institutional politics and systemic barriers.

The importance of mentorship is emphasized, with the recommendation that schools establish formal mentorship programmes and peer support networks for women. These networks can foster solidarity and provide a platform for sharing experiences and advocating for institutional change.

The article highlights the need to address gender bias and societal norms that limit women's access to leadership roles. Educational institutions should implement policies promoting gender equality in hiring and leadership selection, alongside training to address unconscious biases. There is also a call for societal shifts to challenge stereotypes about women's roles in leadership through public campaigns and outreach.

To create more supportive environments, the study recommends fostering inclusive and collaborative work settings where women can support one another in leadership roles. Schools should promote diversity in leadership selection and decision-making processes to ensure that women's perspectives are included in educational policies and practices.

The article stresses the importance of policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours, paid parental leave, and childcare support. These policies are crucial in helping women thrive both professionally and personally, thereby encouraging them to pursue leadership positions.

By addressing these areas, South African educational institutions can contribute to the advancement of women leaders, creating a more equitable and inclusive education system.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted the urgent need for systemic changes to improve women's leadership opportunities in South African education. While women make up a significant portion of the teaching workforce, at around 72.5%, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly as principals. This gender disparity is influenced by structural, cultural, and societal factors that continue to hinder women's advancement in educational leadership roles. To address these barriers, gender-sensitive leadership programmes are essential. These programmes should not only focus on enhancing leadership skills but also offer support for women in balancing work and family responsibilities, overcoming gender biases, and navigating systemic barriers. Mentorship and peer networks can play a vital role in empowering women to pursue leadership positions. Formal mentorship structures and supportive networks among women leaders can create an environment that fosters leadership development. Tackling societal norms and gender biases is crucial. Educational institutions should implement policies that promote gender equality in hiring, promotions, and leadership selection. Training programmes to raise awareness about unconscious biases and gender equality are necessary for reshaping organizational cultures. Policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours, paid parental leave, and childcare support, are also vital for enabling women to thrive in leadership roles. The transformation of the educational sector through these recommendations will create a more inclusive leadership culture, benefiting both women and the wider educational community. By addressing the structural and cultural barriers to women's leadership, South African educational institutions can foster leadership that reflects diverse perspectives, enhancing the quality of education for all students.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Dr. Thizwilondi Josephine Mudau is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Youth Studies, School of Human and Social Sciences, University of Venda, South Africa.

Dr. Matodzi G. Sikhwari is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Venda in Thohoyandou, South Africa. He is a qualified Foundation Phase teacher and holds an M.A., M.Ed., and PhD from Stellenbosch University. His research interests include Educational Linguistics, Gender and Sexuality, and Home Language Teaching. Dr. Sikhwari specializes in Linguistics and Education Policy Studies.