



# Relationship Between Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Gender and Female Student Leadership: An Evaluative Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between undergraduate students' perceptions of gender and female student leadership in higher education (HE) at a university in South Africa. It forms part of a study investigating gender in educational management and leadership. It employed mixed methods research to collect data from 328 respondents using a five-point Likert Scale. Data was analysed using Kruskal-Wallis and Spearman's correlation tests through SPSS. Six interviews were conducted with students in leadership positions, and the data were thematically analysed. The study revealed that perceptions of gender among various gender identities did not differ significantly. Similarly, gender identities had an inconsequential effect on perceptions of female leadership. Nevertheless, it recorded a significant moderate relationship between students' perceptions of gender and female student leadership ( $r=0.175^{**}$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). While the study implied that embracing female students' leadership could be influenced by one's perception of gender, deconstruction of systematic gender is suggested to promote female students' representation. It revealed that the aura of a gender-sensitive environment and women as role models in higher education leadership might motivate female representation in student leadership. It conclusively stressed the need to advance female representation in higher education student leadership. Although progress has been made, female students often face challenges that hinder their representation in student leadership. Higher education institutions should commit to research on the perception of gender and leadership dynamics in student leadership. This study might provide policymakers with insights into improving female student leadership. Extending this study to include more universities could provide a broader perspective.

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender is an essential aspect of society. It signifies one's personal life, including social relations and culture.<sup>1</sup> Gender represents power, power relations, and privilege. It plays a key role in leadership discourses, as evidenced by the inequality between women's representation and their representation in leading higher education institutions (HEIs).<sup>2</sup> Gender inequality is not just a global phenomenon; it

<sup>1</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Rethinking Gender from the South," *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 518–39.

<sup>2</sup> Mónica del Carmen Meza-Mejía, Mónica Adriana Villarreal-García, and Claudia Fabiola Ortega-Barba, "Women and Leadership in Higher Education: A Systematic Review," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 10 (October 4, 2023): 555, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100555>.

constitutes a significant discourse in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>3</sup> Gender inequality is among the issues in higher education leadership, including student leadership. Central to gender inequality theory is how gender equality can be accelerated.

Although discourses on gender equality have increased, female underrepresentation in higher education leadership continues.<sup>4</sup> However, gender discussion is integral in student leadership.<sup>5</sup> Understanding gender from students' perspectives is significant in ensuring gender equality. Gender equality in student leadership is significant as it might enhance female participation, help rectify power imbalances, and grant autonomy. According to Cáceres-Reche et al., societies must solve the challenge of leadership to attain sustainable and human development.<sup>6</sup>

Student leadership is integral to any HEIs in SA and globally. Student leadership is a university leadership and management arm and forms part of the public higher education (HE) legislative body. The legislative body includes the Student Representative Council (SRC).<sup>7</sup> While female students are well-represented in university enrolment, they are still underrepresented in student leadership.<sup>8</sup> The representation of female students in higher education leadership should be based on equal opportunities.<sup>9</sup> This study seeks to understand the importance of gender from students' perspectives and relate it to their perceptions of female student leadership in South African universities. The study, therefore, presents students' perceptions of gender and analyses the impact of gender conceptualisation on higher education student leadership. The metaphor of gender schema is used to understand and make sense of gender and its effects on female representation in student leadership.

This study further explores the relationship between gender, gender conceptualisation, and student leadership in higher education. The following questions and hypotheses underlie the study:

*How do undergraduate students perceive gender and educational leadership in higher education?*

*How does gender conceptualisation moderate the relationship between gender and female students' representation in higher education institutions?*

*H0: There is no relationship between the perception of gender and female representation in student leadership.*

*H1: There is a relationship between the perception of gender and female representation in student leadership.*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Understanding Gender

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, following the work of Butler, viewed gender as what people do and perform based on social interactions.<sup>10</sup> As a result of constant interactions, one can identify as female or male.

<sup>3</sup> Beatrice Akala and J J Divala, "Gender Equity Tensions in South Africa's Post-Apartheid Higher Education: In Defence of Differentiation," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (2016): 1–16; Sudershan Kumar Pathania, "Sustainable Development Goal: Gender Equality for Women's Empowerment and Human Rights," *International Journal of Research* 5, no. 4 (2017): 1–15.

<sup>4</sup> Connie Zulu, "Gender Equity and Equality in Higher Education Leadership: 'What's Social Justice and Substantive Equality Got to Do with It?'/Zulu, Connie, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Leal Filho et al., "Impacts of COVID-19 and Social Isolation on Academic Staff and Students at Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study," *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021): 1213.

<sup>6</sup> María Pilar Cáceres-Reche et al., "Student Leadership at the University: An Explanatory Model," *Education Sciences* 11, no. 11 (2021): 703; Leal Filho et al., "Impacts of COVID-19 and Social Isolation on Academic Staff and Students at Universities: A Cross-Sectional Study."

<sup>7</sup> Neo T Pule and Michelle May, "Insights on Student Leadership Using Social Dream Drawing: Six Propositions for the Transformation Role of South African Student Leaders," *Transformation in Higher Education* 6 (2021): 138.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Bowen, "Women in Leadership Positions in Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Success," 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Meza-Mejia, Villarreal-García, and Ortega-Barba, "Women and Leadership in Higher Education: A Systematic Review."

<sup>10</sup> Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Judith Butler and Gender Trouble, "Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," *Gender Trouble* 3, no. 1 (1990): 3–17.

Starr and Zurbriggen, in a tie with Bem, used the gender schema theory to understand gender.<sup>11</sup> Gender schema provides an understanding of gender through the concept of sex-typing. Although critics may argue that the gender schema perpetuates stereotypes, it describes how individuals process information connected to gender. Perceptions of sex and the attributes associated with it are shaped by gender schema, which is a developmental stage engrained in information processing and meaning-making resulting from social interactions.<sup>12</sup> Information processing and meaning-making are context-specific, as children associate what they learn with their sex and self-concept. Gender schema suggests the importance of social interactions as embedded in cultural contexts. Social interactions form the basis for social practices, beliefs, and perceptions about gender.<sup>13</sup>

However, the view of gender has shifted from a traditional understanding as a result of gender fluidity.<sup>14</sup> Gender fluidity has made it impossible to view gender as a dichotomous variable of female/male.<sup>15</sup> Gender fluidity transcends the sex binary discourses by describing the awareness and uniqueness of individuals while considering different gender identities and expressions based on different sexual orientations. As such, gender identity is an inner sense of self, while gender expression is an outer representation of individual gender as influenced by varied social contexts supported by cultural values and norms.<sup>16</sup> It is crucial to understand the term 'sex' as understanding of gender is often associated with it. Sex is a biological term that denotes biological attributes and physical traits often used to categorise individuals. Although gender is the focus of this study, it is thought that sex has the potential to illuminate an understanding of gender as it forms the ontological basis for performing gender-related functions. George and de Wet understand sex from a biological determinism perspective.<sup>17</sup> Sex from this stance is explicated as the inclination to seek a biological explanation for human social phenomena, which tends to proliferate into patriarchal beliefs and dictate appropriate roles. Sex has historically played a significant role in constructing gender. While sex denotes biological attributes and traits often used to differentiate between women and men, gender particularises the behaviours and roles ascribed to people based on sex categorisation as determined by biological determinism.

Gender itself is a socially constructed phenomenon that is context-specific. It can change depending on time and place.<sup>18</sup> Gender indicates that women and men have social roles determined by society and culture, which impact society's expectations of them.<sup>19</sup> Society's expectations of women and men can be described as gender-based roles and encapsulate what they should and should not do as members of society.<sup>20</sup> Although Woodhill and Samuels analysed gender from a biological perspective and related it to differences between female and male behaviour, they emphasised the role of social interactions.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, beliefs about gender have evolved. Traditionally, gender norms suggest a distinction between women's and men's roles and responsibilities, sometimes limiting women's

<sup>11</sup> Christine R Starr and Eileen L Zurbriggen, "Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory after 34 Years: A Review of Its Reach and Impact," *Sex Roles* 76 (2017): 566–78; Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing," *Psychological Review* 88, no. 4 (1981): 354.

<sup>12</sup> Starr and Zurbriggen, "Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory after 34 Years: A Review of Its Reach and Impact"; Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing."

<sup>13</sup> Nor Jijidiana Azmi et al., "Gender Stereotype in Toy Advertisements on Social Networking Sites," *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies* 11, no. 4 (September 8, 2021): e202122, <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/11212>.

<sup>14</sup> Thekla Morgenroth and Michelle K Ryan, "The Effects of Gender Trouble: An Integrative Theoretical Framework of the Perpetuation and Disruption of the Gender/Sex Binary," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2021): 1113–42.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Lindqvist, Marie Gustafsson Sendén, and Emma A Renström, "What Is Gender, Anyway: A Review of the Options for Operationalising Gender," *Psychology & Sexuality* 12, no. 4 (2021): 332–44.

<sup>16</sup> Gretchen Kerr, *Gender-Based Violence in Children's Sport* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> George T. Ellison and Thea De Wet, "Biological Determinism," *The International Encyclopedia of Biological Anthropology*, 2018, 1–4.

<sup>18</sup> Irene Göttgens and Sabine Oertelt-Prigione, "Moving beyond Gender Identity: The Need for Contextualization in Gender-Sensitive Medical Research," *The Lancet Regional Health–Europe* 24 (2023); Daniel Odoom et al., "Promoting Gender Equality as a Strategy for Community Development in Ghana: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, September 9, 2022, 393–412, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022393>.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Bullough et al., "Women's Entrepreneurship and Culture: Gender Role Expectations and Identities, Societal Culture, and the Entrepreneurial Environment," *Small Business Economics* 58, no. 2 (2022): 985–96.

<sup>20</sup> Madeline E Heilman, Suzette Caleo, and Francesca Manzi, "Women at Work: Pathways from Gender Stereotypes to Gender Bias and Discrimination," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 11, no. 1 (2024): 165–92.

<sup>21</sup> Bobbi Woodhill and Curtis Samuels, "Sex vs Gender: A Biological Location for Gender, Not Sex.," April 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.33774/coe-2020-k7gt1-v4>.

involvement in the public and economic sectors.<sup>22</sup> While gender-based roles have been transformed in society, women are still the most subjugated when inequality is present. Women's experiences of gender vary as they are culture and context-specific. Women's experiences of gender are habitually enshrined in social ideologies and beliefs used to justify social arrangements that subjugate them, thus maintaining the status quo and perpetuating gender inequality. In maintaining the status quo, historical constructions of social roles suggest that the expected roles of women and men are based on biological traits and attributes.<sup>23</sup> Role expectations are strengthened by culture, social norms, and belief systems that create gender role attitudes and perceived attributes aligned to people, thus suggesting gender inequality or disparity. Pathania believes that gender inequality occurs when different behaviours attributed to people are not "considered, valued or favoured equally."<sup>24</sup> Gender role attitudes, however, suggest the allocation of roles to females and males depending on societal expectations.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, gender has become an issue in leadership.<sup>26</sup>

### Understanding Leadership: Context of Student Leadership

Leadership has been historically focused on great men and trait theories. However, it has evolved over the years, focusing on a more democratic perspective.<sup>27</sup> According to Benmira and Agboola, while leadership in the traditional era was often based on masculine traits, there has been a recent shift towards "complex and continuous interactions between the leaders, the followers, and the situation."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, women continue to face gender inequality due to essentialist interpretations that position men in advantaged positions and women in disadvantaged positions.<sup>29</sup> Although the essentialist interpretation of gender continues to manifest in our society, gender as a social construct has been instrumental in understanding gender and the gendered nature of society, including leadership and higher education leadership, which are the foci of this study.<sup>30</sup>

Research on women's leadership in higher education has focused on the absence of women in leadership positions; nevertheless, student leadership is essential in mediating between students and university leadership and management.<sup>31</sup> Student leadership is integral to South African HEIs' transformation agenda.<sup>32</sup> The transformation agenda in South Africa is ingrained in the democratic imperative, which aims to ensure fairness and inclusivity in higher education institutions. Female students remain disproportionately represented in student leadership. According to Sebola, male students dominate South African universities' student leadership.<sup>33</sup> While female students outnumber the male student population in South Africa, only 3 out of 26 universities have female student presidents in the SRC.<sup>34</sup> In the context of this study, however, female students comprised 61.8% and male students comprised 32.2%. Not only does this university encourage female leadership, but it also believes in gender parity in student leadership, as it is one of six out of 26 universities in South Africa with a female Vice-Chancellor. Striving to promote gender equality, it was one of three universities in South Africa to appoint a female SRC president in 2021. Despite this, gender inequality in student leadership

<sup>22</sup> A. Tamunomiegbam and D. Arinze, "From Tradition to Transformation: Evolving Gender Norms in Contemporary Africa," *American Journal of Public Policy and Administration* 9, no. 3 (2024): 1–36, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Joaquín Ungaretti and Edgardo Daniel Etchezahar, "Gender Role Ideology According to Sex, Acceptance of Women's Rights and Gay Marriage," 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Pathania, "Sustainable Development Goal: Gender Equality for Women's Empowerment and Human Rights," 24.

<sup>25</sup> Paige Haber-Curran and Daniel Tillapaugh, "Gender and Student Leadership: A Critical Examination," *New Directions for Student Leadership* 2017, no. 154 (2017): 11–22.

<sup>26</sup> Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh, "Gender and Student Leadership: A Critical Examination."

<sup>27</sup> Sihame Benmira and Moyosolu Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory," *BMJ Leader*, 2021, leader-2020, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Benmira and Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory."

<sup>29</sup> Michael Flood, "Men and Gender Equality," *Engaging Men in Building Gender Equality*, 2015, 1–31.

<sup>30</sup> Gladys Merma-Molina et al., "The Satisfactions, Contributions, and Opportunities of Women Academics in the Framework of Sustainable Leadership: A Case Study," *Sustainability* 14, no. 14 (2022): 8937.

<sup>31</sup> Merma-Molina et al., "The Satisfactions, Contributions, and Opportunities of Women Academics in the Framework of Sustainable Leadership: A Case Study."

<sup>32</sup> Zulu, "Gender Equity and Equality in Higher Education Leadership: 'what's Social Justice and Substantive Equality Got to Do with It?'/Zulu, Connie."

<sup>33</sup> Mokoko Sebola, "Achieving Gender Equity in Leadership of South African Institutions of Higher Learning: Is Women's Empowerment Mission Impossible in Universities?," *International Journal of Higher Education Management* 2, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>34</sup> Anrusha Bhana, "Challenges Impeding Women into Leadership Roles in a Student-Led Organization at a South African Higher Education Institution," *LLC "Consulting Publishing Company" Business Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (2021): 508–17.

in South Africa is a reality and is still an issue requiring academic attention, as female representation in student leadership is still skewed.<sup>35</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed mixed research methodology and methods underpinned by the post-positivist paradigm. The post-positivist paradigm bridges the gap between quantitative and qualitative research. The core of the post-positivist paradigm is to investigate a phenomenon from subjective and objective perspectives.<sup>36</sup> The study was conducted at a South African university. Following research ethics principles, 377 stratified samples were drawn from 6803 undergraduate students using the Taro Yamane sampling technique with a 95% confidence level. Of the 377 sampled respondents, 328 (80%) responded to the distributed survey questionnaires. The study data were concurrently collected quantitatively and qualitatively. Next, respondents' demographic information is presented.

**Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Information**

Variable	Category	Frequency/Percentage(n=328)
Gender distribution	Female	196 (59.8)
	Male	125 (38.1)
	Non-Binary	7(2.1)
	Total	328 (100.0)
Age Distribution (Years)	18-22	249 (75.9)
	23-27	70 (21.3)
	28-32	9 (2.7)
	Total	328 (100.0)

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the respondents. They identified as female, male, and non-binary individuals (Groups 1-3), the demography shows the expansion of gender beyond the dichotomy of female and male,<sup>16</sup> it shows the representation of female students and the representation of young adults in university enrolment in democratic South Africa (Groups 1-3). Six out of the respondents participated in face-to-face interviews. The six participants, who consisted of three females and three males, respectively, were purposively selected from fourteen students in leadership positions. The participants were described as P1F-P3F and P4M-P6M.

## Data Collection

The study used self-designed questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaires comprised two domains: demographic information and five likert questionnaires comprising 11 items. The items measured students' perceptions of gender, i.e., Gender Perceptions (GPER) and female representation in student leadership, i.e., Leadership Perceptions (LPER), with 6 and 5 items each measuring the two constructs. The items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The face-to-face interviews used semi-structured questions, such as *How would you describe gender? How would you define female leadership? How would you relate gender to student leadership?* These questions were used to capture the lived experiences of the participants.

## Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while the qualitative data were analysed manually following the prior themes identified based on the study's focus, which aligned with the two constructs that were measured quantitatively: GPER and LPER. Normality tests were conducted using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk statistical tests to determine whether the scores of GPER and LPER were normally distributed. The results of the tests leaned towards non-parametric tests as the data distribution

<sup>35</sup> Sebola, "Achieving Gender Equity in Leadership of South African Institutions of Higher Learning: Is Women's Empowerment Mission Impossible in Universities?"

<sup>36</sup> Abdul Hameed Panhwar, Sanaullah Ansari, and Asif Ali Shah, "Post-Positivism: An Effective Paradigm for Social and Educational Research," *International Research Journal of Arts and Humanities* 45, no. 45 (2017): 253–59.

within the dataset violated the assumption of normality, as indicated by a p-value less than 0.05; thus, Kruskal-Wallis was used, and Spearman's Correlation Coefficient was chosen to explore the data further.

### Ethical Considerations

As highlighted in the previous work, the ethical considerations for this study started with a proposal submitted to the faculty research committee for a critical review.<sup>37</sup> The proposal was submitted to the university's research ethics committee for review and consideration of ethical implications. Upon obtaining ethical approval, permission to conduct the study at the selected university was granted by the university authorities. Consequently, informed consent was sought from the participants. The ethical principles of anonymity, respect, and no psychological or social harm were considered when implementing the study.<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the study was highlighted in the informed consent, including how the data would be collected and used. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the study at any time.

### PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exploration aimed to understand how students perceive gender and the implications of gender perceptions on female representation in student leadership. Only six of the 328 respondents participated in qualitative interviews. Participants provided an in-depth understanding of gender and leadership in student leadership. Participants' insights supported the quantitative results. The qualitative themes and categories were developed from the survey questions.

### Perceptions of Gender

Respondents' perceptions of gender were analysed based on their understanding of gender. Next, a summary of responses regarding the perceptions of gender is presented.

**Table 2: Summary of Respondents' Scores: Perceptions of Gender (GPER)**

Statement	Disagree	S Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S Agree	Mean	Median	Std Deviation
Gender is not limited to being female or male	84 (25.6%)	57 (17.4%)	33 (10.1%)	63 (19.2%)	91 (27.7%)	3.06	3.00	1.582
Gender is an identity; people conform to it based on cultural norms	21 (6.4%)	20 (6.1%)	62 (18.9%)	115 (35.1%)	110 (33.5%)	3.83	4.00	1.149
Gender categorisation is based on social roles and power relations	52 (15.9%)	46 (14%)	50 (15.2%)	87 (26.5%)	93 (28.4%)	3.38	4.00	1.428
People can identify themselves as female or male, but they can also identify as different	18 (5.5%)	10 (3%)	25 (7.6%)	81 (24.7%)	194 (59.1%)	4.29	5.00	1.097
Gender is created and influenced by society	50 (15.2%)	37 (11.3%)	46 (14%)	68 (20.7%)	127 (38.7%)	3.56	4.00	1.472
We should not describe people based on their biological attributes	28 (8.5%)	25 (7.6%)	33 (10.1%)	77 (23.5%)	165 (50.3%)	3.99	5.00	1.297

<sup>37</sup> M. Olajumoke Kutu and Thoko Mayekiso, "Investigating the Relationship between Gender Perception and Women's Representation in Higher Education Management and Leadership Positions," in *Conference Proceedings. The International Academic Forum* (University of London, UCL, 2021), 497–511.

<sup>38</sup> Shaké Ketefian, "Ethical Considerations in Research. Focus on Vulnerable Groups," *Investigación y Educación En Enfermería* 33, no. 1 (2015): 164–72.

Table 2 illustrates the perceptions of gender. In examining the selected students' perceptions of gender, a descriptive analysis was conducted by measuring students' perceptions of gender. The mean, median, and standard deviation presented insights into the respondents' perceptions. Forty-seven per cent (47%) agreed that *gender is not limited to being female or male*. The median score at the midpoint (3.00) demonstrated that half of the respondents disagreed with the statement, while half agreed. The scores, however, showed the complexity of gender interpretation among the respondents; they demonstrated that while some individuals may view gender as a binary notion, others could view it as a non-binary notion. The standard deviation of 1.582 further indicated that there is variability in how people perceive gender, probably as a result of different cultural norms and backgrounds. Subsequently, the result strongly agreed with the view that gender is created and influenced by society, with a moderate difference in respondents' views (Mean = 3.56; Median = 4.00; STD = 1.472).

While the mean score of 3.83 and the median score of 4.00 aligned and suggested an agreement with the view that *gender is an identity*, the standard deviation of 1.149 presented a low variability in respondents' opinions. The results agreed that *gender categorisation is based on social roles* with a moderate difference in opinions (Mean = 3.38; Median = 4.00; STD = 1.428). The results showed an extremely high consensus about the view that *people can identify themselves as female or male, but they can also identify as different* (Mean = 4.29; Median = 5.00; STD = 1.097), the standard deviation of 1.097 demonstrated an exceptionally low divergence in respondents' opinions. Respondents overwhelmingly believed that people should not be described based on their biological attributes; this was supported by low variability in their views (Mean = 3.99; Median = 5.00; STD = 1.297). These results demonstrated that many respondents agreed that gender is an identity with the view that gender is a social construct; they also believed that people should not be described based on their biological attributes. By asking the following question, the qualitative aspect of this study further revealed the complexity of gender interpretation: *How would you describe gender?*

Participants affirmed:

*"We know that nowadays there are gender-fluid people. There are people born male, and they do not classify themselves as male. So, gender is what sets you apart from others, whether it is in body parts or whether it is in your sexuality or your sexual orientation."* P4M shared: *"When it comes to gender, I can describe gender as how someone portrays him or herself in the community. I might be made a male, but I behave like a male, or a female and behave like a male with the identity you are comfortable with."*

*"Another participant said: "Remember gender doesn't talk more about the biological makeup of a person because sometimes you confuse it with sex, with I think we should reach, we should reach a point as a society in a generation to say let's have a different perspective that is a much more - let's say egalitarian - to say let's not judge people based on how we view them as to what they are but what is it that they bring into the table."* (P6M)

The above demonstrates the fluidity of gender. Accordingly, it shows the evolution in our understanding of gender and a shift from traditional beliefs about gender. This study accentuated that gender fluidity transcends the sex binary discourses and describes the awareness and uniqueness of individuals considering different gender identities and expressions based on different sexual orientations. Gender facets have made it impossible to view gender as a dichotomous variable of female/male.<sup>39</sup> The above views corroborate the respondents' scores (Mean = 3.99; Median = 5.00; STD = 1.297) on statements such as *we should not describe people based on their biological attributes* and *society creates and influences gender* (Mean = 3.56; Median = 4.00; STD = 1.472).

### Perceptions of Student Leadership

Students' perception of leadership positions in HE is analysed based on their views about accepting leadership positions, female acceptance, the distinction between female and male leadership, and gender sensitivity in student leadership in HE. The following table depicts the respondents' views.

<sup>39</sup> Lindqvist, Sendén, and Renström, "What Is Gender, Anyway: A Review of the Options for Operationalising Gender."

**Table 3: Mean scores: Perceptions of students' leadership representation (LPER)**

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Median	Std Deviation
Leadership Construct								
Female students are enthusiastic about being in leadership	14 (4.3%)	25 (7.6%)	57 (17,4%)	99 (30.2%)	133 (40.5%)	3.95	4.00	1.127
Female students are more accepted in student leadership	45 (13.7%)	84 (25.6%)	93 (28.4%)	58 (17.7)	48 (14,6%)	2.94	3.00	1.252
Female students in leadership are more likely to achieve better than their male counterparts	29 (8.8%)	50 (15.2%)	124 (37.8%)	61 (18.6%)	64 (19.5%)	3.25	3.00	1.190
Both female and male students tend to have inherent biases against female student leadership	43 (13.7%)	75 (22.9%)	93 (28.4%)	65 (19.8%)	52 (15.9%)	3.02	3.00	1.261
My institution is doing exceptionally well regarding female representation in student leadership	4 (1.2%)	29 (8.8%)	64 (19.5%)	100 (30.5%)	131 (39.9%)	3.99	4.00	1.030

The respondents' perceptions of female leadership, as shown in Table 3, tied in with the qualitative interviews. The interviews revealed the perceptions of female acceptance in leadership positions, the distinction between female and male leadership, and sensitivity to gender and leadership. More than 70% of the respondents agreed that female students are enthusiastic about being in leadership, which was further reflected by the higher mean, median, and lower levels of variability in respondents' opinions (Mean = 3.95; Median = 4.00; STD = 1.127). Responses on female students' acceptance in student leadership suggested a diverse perception as the median is right at the midpoint, meaning half of

the respondents leaned towards agreement and disagreement respectively (Mean = 2.94, Median = 3.00; STD = 1.252). The result also demonstrated a mixed opinion regarding the statement that *female students in leadership are more likely to achieve better than their male counterparts* (Mean = 3.25; Median = 3.00; STD = 1.190). Likewise, the respondents' view on the statement that *both female and male students tend to have inherent biases against female student leadership* is above neutral, indicating a moderate agreement with a slight variance in respondents' opinions. Interestingly, respondents overwhelmingly believed that their institution *is doing exceptionally well regarding female representation in student leadership* (Mean = 3.99; Median = 4.00; STD = 1.030). Whereas respondents have divergent opinions regarding female acceptance in student leadership, inherent biases against female leadership, and comparative leadership effectiveness, they believed that female students are enthusiastic about taking up leadership positions. They believed that their institution was sensitive to female representation in student leadership.

In the qualitative interviews, participants stated the following when asked: *How would you describe gender and female leadership?*

*"... especially towards the SRC elections, women are not that considered when it comes to elections because they always thought to be less powerful and maybe less vocal than men, but then again, at the same time, our university creates opportunities, meaning that they try to give opportunities to every female student."* (P2F)

*"I would not be stereotyping and say it is only males, there are certain ladies who are still struggling with that as well. And so, women in leadership, it takes a bit more effort to put in than when a male is in leadership because it is more like you need to prove yourself that you can lead as a woman."* (P1F)

*".... but the only challenge that we have is with female leaders and female voters. Sometimes we find that many voters, more especially female voters, do not vote for their female leaders."* (P5M)

*"I think for me, I do not see gender as much more of a hindrance for one to say they must be getting this opportunity or not, if you are having the capabilities, then why not be given the chance..."* (P6M)

*"... you know our institution is a very good example of gender because we have the Chancellor, who is a female, and we also have the Vice Chancellor, who is a female. We have the DVC, who is also a female. So, it is a good example to the female students who are here on campus that, you know, if you put the hard work in, we can do this."* (P3F)

According to the above responses, although female students were enthusiastic about leadership positions (70.7%) and given the opportunities to do so, they still faced difficulty being accepted. The study revealed that non-acceptance of female leadership is not often peculiar to a particular gender; both females and males often disapprove of female leadership. The study corroborated the findings of Bhatti and Ali, who found that while female leaders did not find gender an obstacle to assume leadership roles, the masculine academic culture did not accommodate their feminine style.<sup>40</sup>

However, the study illustrated that leadership is more about capability than gender. It aligned with Hlatshwayo, Mashaba, and Mathuloe, who argued that being a woman does not impede successful leadership.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the study revealed the essence of a gender-sensitive environment, with 83.3% of respondents believing that their institution is doing exceptionally well regarding female representation in student leadership. Moreover, it captured the voices and experiences of participants who believed that female students could be motivated to become leaders if there were women in leadership positions to

<sup>40</sup> Aisha Bhatti and Rabia Ali, "Women Constructing Leadership Identities in Academia: Intersection of Gender and Culture," *Issues in Educational Research* 31, no. 1 (2021): 1–18.

<sup>41</sup> Lindokuhle Precious Hlatshwayo et al., "Being a Woman Is Not a Barrier to Achieving Successful Leadership in South African Higher Education," *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development* 11, no. 4 (2022).

look up to. Lawson, Martin, Huda, and Matz found that appointing female leaders lessens discrimination against female leadership and, consequently, changes the understanding of female leadership.<sup>42</sup> This position reinvigorates the views of Tadjimatova, who claimed that human behaviours are influenced by innate and environmental factors determined by social and cultural pressures.<sup>43</sup>

### Relationship Between the Perceptions of Gender and Female Student Leadership

This study sought to show students' perceptions of gender and leadership to determine their relationship. To this end, a non-parametric test through Kruskal-Wallis was performed. This study hypothesised no difference between female and male students' perceptions of gender in higher education institutions. To determine the existence of any differences, the study measured the influence of the demographic characteristics of respondents on students' perceptions of gender using the Kruskal-Wallis test, as presented in Tables 4-5. The statistical tests showed differences between the median scores of respondents regarding perceptions of gender and leadership, based on their gender identity and age. Consequently, the relationship between the median scores of respondents' perceptions of gender and their perceptions of female leadership positions was statistically analysed using Spearman's correlation, as shown in Table 6. The correlation coefficient in this study determines the nature of the relationship between and within the median scores of respondents' views based on gender identity and age.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 4: Comparison of Group Medians: Hypothesis Test Summary**

Gender				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. <sup>a,b</sup>	Decision
1	The distribution of GPER is the same across categories of gender	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	0.022	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of LPER is the same across categories of gender	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	0.186	Retain the null hypothesis.
Df = 2      Sig(2-sided test) = 0.022				
Age Group				
1	The distribution of GPER is the same across categories of age groups.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	0.818	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of LPER is the same across categories of age groups.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	0.078	Retain the null hypothesis.
a. The significance level is 0.05.				
b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.				

The hypothesis summary from the independent Wallis test provided insights into the study. It revealed a significant difference between the distribution of gender perceptions (GPER) of female and male respondents (Sig p-value = 0.022). Thus, the rejection of the null hypothesis is due to the p-value of 0.022 being lower than the Sig p-value = 0.05 threshold. Nevertheless, the p-value = 0.186 showed no significant difference between leadership perception (LPER) and gender, as it is higher than the significance level of 0.05. Likewise, the p-values 0.818 and 0.078 are higher than the Sig p-value 0.05; this indicates no significant difference exists between LPER across age groups, hence the decision to retain the null hypothesis. Pairwise Comparisons were conducted (Table 5) to determine whether the distributions of GPER and LPER vary within groups.

<sup>42</sup> M. Asher, Lawson et al., "Hiring Women into Senior Leadership Positions Is Associated with a Reduction in Gender Stereotypes in Organizational Language," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 9 (2022): e2026443119, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Gulnorakhon Tadjimatova, "Gender Can Vary Across Related Languages," *Евразийский Журнал Академических Исследований* 3, no. 3 (2023): 75–77.

<sup>44</sup> Connell, "Rethinking Gender from the South."

**Table 5: Pairwise Comparisons**

<b>Identity and GPER</b>					
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
2-1	16.647	10.826	1.538	0.124	0.372
2-3	-93.369	36.735	-2.542	0.011	0.033
1-3	-76.722	36.381	-2.109	0.035	0.105
<b>Identity and LPER</b>					
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
3-1	7.737	36.340	0.213	0.831	1.000
3-2	27.041	36.694	0.737	0.461	1.000
1-2	-19.303	10.814	-1.785	0.074	0.223
<b>Age group and GPER</b>					
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
2-1	3.810	12.795	0.298	0.766	1.000
2-3	-20.853	33.492	-0.623	0.534	1.000
1-3	-17.044	32.091	-0.531	0.595	1.000
<b>Age Group and LPER</b>					
Sample 1-Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig. <sup>a</sup>
1-2	-14.459	12.781	-1.131	0.258	0.774
1-3	-65.665	32.066	-1.048	0.041	0.122
2-3	-51.206	33.455	-1.531	0.126	0.376
Each row tests the null hypothesis that the Sample 1 and 2 distributions are identical. Asymptotic significances (2-sided tests) are displayed. The significance level is 0.05.					
a. Significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.					

The pairwise comparison in Table 5 revealed that no significant difference exists between groups 1 and 2 (Female & Male) of gender perception (GPER) and gender identity (GID) because the p-value of 0.124 is a higher p-value than 0.05. The results revealed a significant difference between groups 2 and 3 (Male & Non-binary) of GPER and GID (p-value = 0.011). A significant difference also exists between groups 1 and 3 (Female & Non-binary) of GPER and GID (p-value = 0.035). With the LPER and GID groups, the results showed no significant difference between groups 3 and 1 (Sig p-value = 0.831); groups 3 and 2 (p-value = 0.461) and groups 1 and 2 (p-value = 0.074), as they all indicated a higher value than the threshold Sig p-value = 0.05.

The results showed no significant difference across GPER and age group, as p-values of groups 2 and 1 (p-value = 0.766); 2 and 3 (p-value = 0.534); and 1 and 3 (p-value = 0.595) are all higher than the threshold of p-value = 0.05. The LPER and age group also showed no significant difference between LPER across age groups 1 and 2, and 2 and 3, with p-values of 0.258 and 0.126, respectively, except for groups 1 and 3, with a p-value of 0.041. Notably, the pairwise comparison showed the variance between groups' opinions in the study. Based on these results, it is deduced that demographic characteristics such as gender and age do not significantly influence groups 1 and 2's perceptions of gender, with a significant difference between groups 1 and 3, and groups 2 and 3's perceptions. Furthermore, the study showed that the perceptions of leadership positions are not significantly different among the various gender identities and age groups. Nevertheless, Spearman's Correlation Coefficient was performed to determine the group differences (Table 6).

**Table 6: Direction of the Relationship between Group Mean Scores**

Correlations						
			GID	AGGR	GPER	LPER
Spearman's rho	Gender Identity	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.065	-0.044	0.088
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.240	0.427	0.114
		N	328	328	328	328
	Age Group	Correlation Coefficient	0.065	1.000	-0.003	0.099
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.240	.	0.950	0.073
		N	328	328	328	328
	GPER	Correlation Coefficient	-0.044	-0.003	1.000	0.175**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.427	0.950	.	0.001
		N	328	328	328	328
	LPER	Correlation Coefficient	0.088	0.099	0.175**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.114	0.073	0.001	.
		N	328	328	328	328

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

The direction of the relationship between students' perceptions of gender (GPER) and their perceptions of leadership representation (LPER) was determined by statistically analysing the distribution of scores of both concepts, using Spearman's Correlation. The results depicted in Table 6 showed a negative and non-significant correlation between GID and GPER ( $r = -0.044$ ,  $p = 0.427$ ). It further revealed a weak and non-significant relationship between GID and LPER ( $r = 0.088$ ,  $p = 0.114$ ). The study showed a weak and non-significant relationship between GID and AGR ( $r=0.065$ ). A weak relationship was observed between age range and leadership perception ( $r=0.099$ ;  $p = 0.073$ ). Thus, gender identity does not influence female and male leadership perception; the result agrees with the lived experiences of the selected participants and with Cáceres-Reche et al.<sup>45</sup> However, the study established a significant and moderate positive relationship between the perceptions of gender and female leadership ( $r=0.175^{**}$ ; with a highly significant p-value level of 0.001. While the correlation level of  $r=0.175^{**}$  is minimal, it appears positive and significant, which suggests that when gender perception increases, the perception of leadership also increases slightly. It revealed that individual perceptions of gender significantly influence their perceptions of leadership representation, independent of demographic attributes such as gender and age. The p-level of 0.001 means there is less than a 1 per cent possibility that the relationship between GPER and LPER is based on a random chance. Since the study aimed to determine the relationship between gender perception and perception of leadership representation in higher education, the null hypothesis was rejected.

The qualitative aspect of this study was not to determine the relationship between students' perceptions of gender and leadership but to establish their perceptions of the two concepts. This allowed for a rich exploration of individual insights and lived experiences, which quantitative methods alone cannot capture by standardised questions, which form the nature of quantitative studies.

### Discussion Summary

By improving our understanding of gender dynamics, one can effectively raise awareness of gender inequality and foster a culture of equality. The p-level of 0.001 means there is less than a 1 per cent possibility that the relationship between GPER and LPER is based on a random chance. Since the study aimed to determine the relationship between gender perceptions and perceptions of leadership representation in higher education, the null hypothesis was rejected. The study, therefore, concluded that

<sup>45</sup> Cáceres-Reche et al., "Student Leadership at the University: An Explanatory Model."

a significant positive relationship exists between students' perceptions of gender and leadership representation in higher education. Notably, a positive and significant correlation was identified between students' perceptions of gender and leadership perceptions ( $r=0.175^{**}$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). This indicates that perceptions of gender can influence the acceptance of female leadership in academic settings, independent of demographic variables like gender identity and age.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study suggested the deconstruction of systematic gender conceptualisation to promote female students' representation in higher education leadership. It is recommended that higher institutions encourage and promote student representation in leadership positions through mentorship programmes involving established female leaders who would serve as mentors. These mentors can guide, motivate, and inspire female students to pursue leadership positions. Also, it is recommended that higher institutions develop and implement gender-sensitive programmes. Such programmes can raise awareness among female and male students about the barriers faced by female students who hold leadership positions or desire to do so. Higher institutions should commit to ongoing research on gender to examine gender perceptions and leadership dynamics in student leadership. This can be done by conducting regular surveys, focus group interviews, or even establishing forums where students can provide constant feedback based on their perceptions about gender and student leadership. This study could provide policymakers with insights to enhance female student leadership in higher education. This research could be extended to include more universities for a broader perspective.

## CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that demographic attributes do not significantly influence students' perceptions of gender. It viewed gender as an identity shaped by culture, norms, and belief systems, rather than only biological attributes. Notably, the study highlighted no significant difference between gender perceptions and identity. It indicated no significant difference between gender perceptions across various age ranges. The study showed evolution in our understanding of gender. It showed that gender has transcended traditional beliefs and sex binary discourses. When examining leadership perceptions, the study revealed that demographic attributes do not significantly influence how respondents view leadership representation. There were no significant differences in perceptions of leadership representation among varying gender identities and age groups. However, the research highlighted a compelling need for a gender-sensitive environment, with respondents presenting the importance of a gender-sensitive environment, as female students are enthusiastic about assuming leadership positions.

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