



Exploring the cultural dynamics of gendered leadership in Eswatini's tertiary institutions

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the cultural dynamics that impact gendered leadership in three Eswatini higher education institutions. The main objective was to explore how cultural norms impact the leadership experiences and approaches of both male and female leaders. Through focus groups and in-depth one-on-one interviews, the study involved 24 leaders (12 men and 12 women) who were purposively selected. The study used a qualitative research approach and a narrative inquiry design. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results show that cultural norms and long-standing gender stereotypes have a big influence on leadership styles. While men are expected to be assertive and decisive, women are frequently under pressure to take a collaborative approach. Implementing educational reforms and mentorship programs aimed at challenging cultural norms and establishing an inclusive atmosphere that supports gender parity in leadership are among the recommendations made. This study adds to the broader discourse of women's leadership in traditionally patriarchal settings.

Keywords: Gendered Leadership, cultural dynamics, mentorship, stereotypes, leadership styles, support networks.

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Eswatini, a small landlocked nation in Southern Africa, possesses a deeply rooted cultural environment that significantly influences societal roles, organisational practices, and leadership within its higher education sector. Traditional norms, social expectations, and patriarchal values continue to shape perceptions of gender, competence, and authority, often leading to persistent gender disparities in leadership positions. Despite numerous regional and global initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, women remain under-represented in senior management roles such as deans, registrars, and bursars, highlighting systemic barriers that are deeply embedded in cultural norms.¹ Recent scholarship indicates that while attitudes toward women's leadership are gradually shifting, these changes are often superficial and uneven, with deeply ingrained cultural narratives still exerting a strong influence. Nkambule and Perumal identified that entrenched gender stereotypes and norms uphold male

¹ Happy Nkambule and Juliet Perumal, "An Interaction of Patriarchy and Female Leadership: A Synthesis of Literature on Women Leadership in Eswatini," *Review of Education* 12, no. 1 (2024): e3450; Bakil Ghundol and Abdulghani Muthanna, "Perceptions and Experiences of Female Academics on Barriers in Obtaining and Continuing Leadership Roles at Higher Education," *International Journal of Educational Research* 130 (2025): 102534, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2025.102534>.

dominance in leadership, often preventing equitable participation despite policy efforts.² Ghundol and Muthanna further argue that traditional gender roles significantly restrict women's access to leadership, emphasising that cultural narratives shape perceptions of competence and authority.³ Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these norms specifically influence leadership styles, perceptions, and career trajectories of both male and female leaders within Eswatini's higher education institutions.

While previous research highlights the importance of addressing cultural norms and stereotypes to reduce gender disparities, there is limited in-depth, context-specific understanding of how these norms are embedded in organisational routines and influence leadership behaviours among both men and women. Little is known about how cultural narratives are reinforced or challenged within institutional settings and what strategies are most effective in fostering inclusive, gender-equitable leadership in a culturally sensitive manner.⁴ This gap hampers efforts to design interventions that are truly aligned with local social and cultural realities. The justification for employing a qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology stems from its capacity to uncover rich, contextualised insights that are often missed by quantitative approaches. As Braun and Clarke emphasise, qualitative methods are essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural variables—such as cultural narratives, social norms, and gender roles—that shape leadership styles and perceptions.⁵ Social construction theory (SCT) underpins this approach, positing that gender roles and leadership behaviours are socially constructed and maintained through ongoing cultural and social processes rather than being innate or biologically fixed.⁶ This theoretical lens enables the exploration of how cultural narratives influence perceptions of competence, authority, and leadership traits among both men and women, providing deeper insights into the social dynamics involved.⁷

Building on this foundation, this study aims to examine how cultural norms influence the leadership experiences and approaches of male and female leaders. It also investigates how gender stereotypes impact perceptions of competence and authority and analyses support networks—including mentorship and organisational frameworks—that facilitate or hinder gender parity.

Overall, this research contributes important insights to the broader discourse on gender and leadership within traditional societies. It underscores the importance of understanding local norms and narratives when designing effective, culturally sensitive interventions that promote gender equality and inclusive leadership. Recognising that gender roles and leadership behaviours are socially constructed and maintained through ongoing narratives and practices, this study advocates for strategies—including mentorship programmes, awareness campaigns, and policy reforms—that challenge stereotypes and support the development of transformative, inclusive leadership practices.⁸

² Nkambule and Perumal, "An Interaction of Patriarchy and Female Leadership: A Synthesis of Literature on Women Leadership in Eswatini."

³ Ghundol and Muthanna, "Perceptions and Experiences of Female Academics on Barriers in Obtaining and Continuing Leadership Roles at Higher Education."

⁴ Hussein Kamaldeen Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them," *Noman, M., Kaur, A., Mullick, J., & Wang, H. (2025). Navigating Dual Narratives: The Life Stories of Successful Women Leaders in Higher Education. Higher Education Research & Development*, 2025; Ella J. Lombard and Sapna Cheryan, "Does My Work Matter? Reduced Sense of Mattering as a Source of Gender Disparities," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 18, no. 1 (January 18, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12907>.

⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reporting Guidelines for Qualitative Research: A Values-Based Approach," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 22, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 399–438, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2024.2382244>.

⁶ Paula Nitschke, "Berger & Luckmann (1966): The Social Construction of Reality," in *Schlüsselwerke Für Die Strategische Kommunikationsforschung* (Springer, 2024), 331–40.

⁷ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them"; Mohammad Noman et al., "Navigating Dual Narratives: The Lifestories of Successful Women Leaders in Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 44, no. 5 (July 4, 2025): 1176–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2476537>.

⁸ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them"; Christie Moreno, "Barriers to Female Advancement in Health Sciences Education: A Qualitative Study Examining the Effect of Culture and Values on Leader Selection," 2025.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles in African Contexts

Research across various African countries indicates that cultural norms uphold male dominance and prescribe gender-specific roles, often restricting women's access to leadership positions.⁹ These norms are reinforced through socialisation processes, community rituals, and media portrayals that depict leadership as inherently masculine.¹⁰ Studies show that these cultural narratives are deeply embedded in societal institutions, making change difficult without targeted interventions.¹¹ In many communities, leadership qualities are associated with strength, assertiveness, and decisiveness, traits traditionally linked with masculinity.¹² The persistence of these norms contributes to a hierarchy where men are seen as natural leaders, and women are relegated to supportive or domestic roles, thus limiting their leadership opportunities and reinforcing gender inequality.¹³ These cultural expectations influence not only individual perceptions but also institutional policies and practices, which often mirror societal norms rather than challenge them.

Gender Stereotypes and Leadership Perceptions

Empirical evidence demonstrates that gender stereotypes significantly influence perceptions of competence and authority.¹⁴ Women are often viewed as less capable of leading assertively, and their ideas may be dismissed or undervalued, especially in male-dominated environments. These stereotypes create double binds for women, who are expected to be nurturing yet assertive; if they are too assertive, they risk being labelled as "aggressive", a criticism that is rarely applied to male colleagues.¹⁵ Such biases influence hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes, perpetuating a cycle where women's leadership potential is systematically undervalued.¹⁶ The internalisation of these stereotypes affects women's self-efficacy, often leading to self-doubt and reluctance to pursue leadership roles.¹⁷ Consequently, gender stereotypes serve as formidable barriers to achieving genuine gender parity in leadership.

Leadership Styles and Cultural Expectations

Research suggests that cultural norms shape distinct leadership styles among men and women.¹⁸ Men in patriarchal societies tend to adopt authoritative, decisive approaches aligned with hegemonic masculinity, whereas women often employ collaborative, relational styles.¹⁹ LF3's narrative exemplifies how cultural expectations necessitate a balancing act—assertiveness intertwined with relational skills—highlighting the influence of cultural scripts on leadership behaviour.²⁰ These styles are not innate but are learned and reinforced through social practices, community expectations, and organisational routines.²¹ Leaders often adapt their styles based on perceived gender roles, which influences their

⁹ Ghundol and Muthanna, "Perceptions and Experiences of Female Academics on Barriers in Obtaining and Continuing Leadership Roles at Higher Education"; Moreno, "Barriers to Female Advancement in Health Sciences Education: A Qualitative Study Examining the Effect of Culture and Values on Leader Selection."

¹⁰ D. Nguyen, "Asian American Women's Success [Stories] in STEM Fields in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Narrative Research" (University of Pittsburgh, 2023).

¹¹ Lombard and Cheryan, "Does My Work Matter? Reduced Sense of Mattering as a Source of Gender Disparities."

¹² Samantha Janvier, "Cultural Awareness: Aspects of the Eswatini Culture and the Impact of Humanitarian Outreach," 2023.

¹³ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them."

¹⁴ Sarah Jane Aiston and Chee Kent Fo, "The Silence/Ing of Academic Women," *Gender and Education* 33, no. 2 (February 17, 2021): 138–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1716955>.

¹⁵ Mahnaz Sepehri and Seyedeh Tina Jazbi, "Exploring the Influence of Leaders' Gender on Communication Styles and Work Environment Dynamics: A Study in the Swedish Companies," 2024.

¹⁶ Lombard and Cheryan, "Does My Work Matter? Reduced Sense of Mattering as a Source of Gender Disparities."

¹⁷ Kate Fitzgibbon and Kevin Daniel Murphy, "Coping Strategies of Healthcare Professional Students for Stress Incurred during Their Studies: A Literature Review," *Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 2 (March 4, 2023): 492–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.2022616>.

¹⁸ Janvier, "Cultural Awareness: Aspects of the Eswatini Culture and the Impact of Humanitarian Outreach."

¹⁹ Jerker Edström, Alan Greig, and Chloe Skinner, "Patriarchal (Dis)Orders: Backlash as Crisis Management," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 49, no. 2 (January 1, 2024): 277–309, <https://doi.org/10.1086/726744>.

²⁰ Yasmeen Hussain and Kellyanne Findlay, "Understanding the Power Dynamics Affecting Black and Minority Ethnic Females in Leadership Roles," *Women's Studies International Forum* 109 (March 2025): 103066, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103066>.

²¹ A R A Roshan, "Gender and Governance: A Global Perspective," *ESAR Journal* 5, no. 2 (2024): 131–41.

authority, decision-making, and team dynamics.²² Such cultural shaping of leadership practices impacts organisational outcomes, often constraining women to less authoritative roles.²³ Recognising these influences is critical for designing inclusive leadership development programmes that challenge traditional norms.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Impact

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as articulated by Connell, offers a critical lens through which to understand persistent gender disparities.²⁴ Hegemonic masculinity constructs leadership as masculine, emphasising traits like dominance, strength, and control, which marginalise alternative leadership styles associated with femininity. This form of masculinity is upheld through social sanctions, cultural rituals, and institutional reinforcement, making it resistant to change. In Eswatini, these norms are reinforced through traditional rituals, community expectations, and institutional routines, sustaining a system where male leadership is the default.²⁵ The influence of hegemonic masculinity extends beyond individual attitudes to organisational culture, often marginalising women and alternative masculinities that challenge the status quo.²⁶ Studies also suggest that hegemonic masculinity intersects with other social identities, such as age and ethnicity, further complicating efforts to foster gender equality.²⁷ Addressing hegemonic masculinity requires comprehensive strategies that include policy change, cultural re-education, and the promotion of diverse male role models.

Support Networks and Mentorship in Gender Equity

Recent studies underscore the importance of support networks, mentorship, and role models in challenging gender stereotypes and facilitating leadership development.²⁸ Mentorship programmes that promote emotional intelligence and resilience have been shown to empower women and foster inclusive leadership environments.²⁹ In contexts like Eswatini, where cultural norms are resilient, support structures are crucial for fostering confidence and creating pathways for women to ascend to leadership roles.³⁰ Evidence indicates that cross-gender mentorship can be particularly effective in dismantling stereotypes, as it provides diverse perspectives and promotes mutual understanding.³¹ Moreover, mentorship facilitates knowledge transfer, skill development, and social capital building, which are essential for career advancement.³² The presence of visible role models and supportive networks not only encourages women to pursue leadership but also influences organisational culture by normalising diverse leadership identities.³³ These findings suggest that institutional investment in mentorship and support systems is vital for sustainable gender equity.

²² Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them."

²³ Nguyen, "Asian American Women's Success [Stories] in STEM Fields in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Narrative Research."

²⁴ Kathleen R Connell, "Investigating Performance Career Making and Career Transition through the Lens of Australia's Elite Classical Singers," 2020.

²⁵ Nkambule and Perumal, "An Interaction of Patriarchy and Female Leadership: A Synthesis of Literature on Women Leadership in Eswatini."

²⁶ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them."

²⁷ Noman et al., "Navigating Dual Narratives: The Lifestories of Successful Women Leaders in Higher Education."

²⁸ Kelly R. Maguire, Amy M. Anderson, and Tara E. Chavez, "Women in Academia: Mentorship from a Gendered Perspective," *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 14, no. 1 (January 29, 2025): 103–19, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-10-2023-0094>; Else Marie Lysfjord and Siv Skarstein, "Empowering Leadership: A Journey of Growth and Insight Through a Mentoring Program for Nurses in Leadership Positions," *Journal of Healthcare Leadership* Volume 16 (November 2024): 443–54, <https://doi.org/10.2147/JHL.S482087>.

²⁹ Sepehri and Jazbi, "Exploring the Influence of Leaders' Gender on Communication Styles and Work Environment Dynamics: A Study in the Swedish Companies."

³⁰ Nguyen, "Asian American Women's Success [Stories] in STEM Fields in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Narrative Research."

³¹ Cathleen Clerkin, Diane M. Bergeron, and Meena S. Wilson, "Gender Differences in Developmental Experiences," in *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 392–409, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035306893.00037>.

³² Lysfjord and Skarstein, "Empowering Leadership: A Journey of Growth and Insight Through a Mentoring Program for Nurses in Leadership Positions."

³³ Maguire, Anderson, and Chavez, "Women in Academia: Mentorship from a Gendered Perspective."

Gaps and Future Directions

While existing literature highlights the profound influence of cultural norms and stereotypes, there remains a paucity of research specifically examining how these norms influence leadership styles and perceptions in Eswatini's higher education sector. Most studies focus on either broad societal narratives or individual experiences, with limited focus on organisational routines and institutional practices that perpetuate gender disparities.³⁴ Furthermore, little is known about how cultural change initiatives, such as mentorship programmes and policy reforms, can effectively modify entrenched norms in this context.³⁵ There is also a need for more intersectional analyses that consider how age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status intersect with gender to influence leadership opportunities.³⁶ Addressing these gaps requires contextually grounded, qualitative research that captures the lived realities of leaders and organisational cultures, which this study aims to contribute to. Such insights are essential for developing tailored interventions and policies that resonate with local cultural dynamics.³⁷ Overall, advancing the scholarship in this area will support more effective strategies for fostering gender-equitable leadership in traditional societies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the social construction theory (SCT), language, cultural practices, and relationships all contribute to the social production of reality. The theory, which was largely developed in the seminal work "The Social Construction of Reality", written by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann and published in 1966, examines how cultural norms and values influence how we perceive a variety of phenomena, such as gender roles and leadership.³⁸ SCT emphasises that our understandings and connotations of gender are products of ongoing social processes and cultural circumstances rather than being innate. This theoretical framework offers insights into how institutional practices and cultural beliefs affect women's acceptance and access to leadership positions, making it especially pertinent for studying the dynamics of gendered leadership at Eswatini's higher institutions. In Eswatini, where traditional institutions and patriarchal norms are frequently dominant, exploring gendered leadership through the lens of social construction theory provides for a more in-depth understanding of how these factors influence women's participation in academic leadership positions. For example, research literature demonstrates an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of cultural narratives and institutional frameworks in shaping women's leadership trajectories.³⁹ These studies underline how prevailing societal expectations and prejudices regarding gender roles can either impede or facilitate women's advancement in leadership, which is consistent with SCT's claims about the influence of social context in shaping individual experiences and opportunities.

Geographical and Socio-Economic Context

Eswatini, a landlocked kingdom in Southern Africa, is distinguished by its rich cultural legacy and distinct socioeconomic terrain. Despite recent progress toward gender equality, conventional gender roles that are strongly embedded in social norms continue to define the country's leadership dynamics. The educational sector is crucial to national development, and understanding gender dynamics in this context is critical for improving leadership practices. The high unemployment rate, combined with cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity, affects leadership representation in tertiary institutions.

³⁴ Nkambule and Perumal, "An Interaction of Patriarchy and Female Leadership: A Synthesis of Literature on Women Leadership in Eswatini."

³⁵ Ghundol and Muthanna, "Perceptions and Experiences of Female Academics on Barriers in Obtaining and Continuing Leadership Roles at Higher Education."

³⁶ Noman et al., "Navigating Dual Narratives: The Lifestories of Successful Women Leaders in Higher Education."

³⁷ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them."

³⁸ Nitschke, "Berger & Luckmann (1966): The Social Construction of Reality."

³⁹ Smith, "Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women's Leadership and Strategies to Overcome Them"; Noman et al., "Navigating Dual Narratives: The Lifestories of Successful Women Leaders in Higher Education."

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The methodological framework of the study was qualitative in nature. Researchers using qualitative methods can capture the rich insights of leaders that quantitative methods may overlook. Braun and Clarke posit that qualitative research provides rich, contextual data that can show the sociocultural influences on leadership styles as well as the leadership styles employed by male and female leaders.⁴⁰ A research sample of twenty-four participants (12 women and 12 men) was adequate because, according to Lim, qualitative research often examines a small, distinct group of participants to obtain a thorough grasp of the topic.⁴¹ Organisational culture, gender norms, and leadership expectations can all be evaluated using qualitative approaches in the study of higher education in a particular setting, like Eswatini. According to Usman et al., qualitative narratives are essential for a thorough understanding since the cultural context significantly affects how leadership is seen and applied.⁴²

Research Design

The research adopted a narrative inquiry design, focusing on gathering in-depth personal stories from participants to understand their lived experiences as leaders in higher education. This qualitative approach allowed for a rich exploration of the complexities surrounding gender and leadership.⁴³ Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which encouraged open dialogue and provided an environment conducive to narratives. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. The narrative inquiry allowed for flexibility and depth, enabling researchers to uncover the subtleties of gendered experiences and leadership approaches in the context of Eswatini.⁴⁴ A narrative design enables the incorporation of personal experiences into the larger socio-political and cultural contexts in which these leaders function. This integration is critical for understanding how systemic issues influence individual leadership styles, as illustrated in the writings of Abukalusa and Oosthuizen.⁴⁵

Data Generation Methods

The study included 12 female leaders and 12 male leaders from three tertiary institutions, all of whom were between the ages of 34 and 53. Focus group discussions and face-to-face individual interviews were the data generation methods employed in this study. The focus groups allowed the researcher to corroborate the comments offered by participants during individual interviews, which aided in data triangulation.⁴⁶ The researchers urged the participants to have spontaneous, unstructured, natural, and open talks. As a result, the participants directed their enquiries at one another and responded to each other's comments. Considering group dynamics, each member was provided the opportunity to respond to the questions and issues addressed. The researchers employed individual interviews to gather data from the study's selected sample. The researchers used three focus groups, coded A, B, and C, and interviewed two individual participants per research site. An affirmation is given by Barnwell that interviewing individuals allows them to speak about what is on their minds and to give themselves to a profound investigation, especially when it comes to personal accounts of their feelings together with experiences.⁴⁷ The researchers made sure their study was authentic by recording voices and taking brief

⁴⁰ Braun and Clarke, "Reporting Guidelines for Qualitative Research: A Values-Based Approach."

⁴¹ Weng Marc Lim, "What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines," *Australasian Marketing Journal* 33, no. 2 (May 25, 2025): 199–229, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>.

⁴² Ali Cissey Usman, Maha Al-Hendawi, and Sefa Bulut, "Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Narrative Literature Review," *Advances in Medicine, Psychology, and Public Health* 2, no. 2 (2025): 81–95.

⁴³ John W. Creswell and Machiko Inoue, "A Process for Conducting Mixed Methods Data Analysis," *Journal of General and Family Medicine* 26, no. 1 (January 3, 2025): 4–11, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jgf2.736>.

⁴⁴ Usman, Al-Hendawi, and Bulut, "Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Narrative Literature Review."

⁴⁵ Khalid Abukalusa and Rudolph Oosthuizen, "An Adaptive Organisational Leadership Framework through Systems Thinking," *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* 33, no. 8 (October 29, 2025): 2673–2703, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-07-2024-4635>.

⁴⁶ Cem Harun Meydan and Handan Akkaş, "The Role of Triangulation in Qualitative Research," 2024, 101–32, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-3306-8.ch006>.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Barnwell, *Leadership Skills Needed to Propel Sustainability in Coachella Valley: A Qualitative Exploratory Study* (Colorado Technical University, 2023).

notes as they were gathering data. Participants were able to express themselves in both SiSwati and English.

Data Analysis Procedure

This study employed thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke posit that thematic analysis is a method that is systematic and utilised to classify, analyse and report data in a detailed manner with minimal organisation.⁴⁸ The researcher was actively involved in collecting the data using semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews as primary instruments in data generation. To comprehend the concerns and thoughts that were surfacing, the researcher listened to the voice recordings several times and read the documents. He transcribed the interviews while listening to the voice recordings over and over. This interaction with the data aided the researcher in absorbing the information and making sense of the meanings and patterns that emerged. Reading through these written categories formed themes, organised them, and connected them to the research.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted with ethical issues at its core. The researcher strictly adhered to a number of ethical standards in addition to securing the Director of Education's letter of permission. All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and possible effects on their personal and professional lives to give their informed consent. Before taking part, participants must provide their informed consent, guaranteeing that they can leave at any moment without incurring any costs.⁴⁹ Confidentiality and Anonymity: Participants' identities were anonymised to protect their privacy. Data was securely stored, and access was limited to the researchers. The study findings will not share any identifying information.⁵⁰ The research design included mechanisms to prevent psychological or emotional distress, ensuring participants could narrate their experiences comfortably. If discussing their experiences proved distressing, the researcher provided participants with resources for counselling.⁵¹

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comprehending the complexities of gendered leadership in Eswatini's universities requires a thorough analysis of the cultural contexts that influence the experiences of both male and female leaders. Participants describe how cultural norms influence their relationships in academic settings as well as how they inform their leadership styles, as evidenced by the narratives collected for the study. The main themes found in the data analysis are summarised in this section, which also provides a forum for discussions about the systemic changes that are required and insights into the dominant cultural dynamics influencing leadership practices. The recurrent themes of cultural norms and leadership styles, gender stereotypes and support systems highlight how urgent it is to challenge deeply rooted social biases and promote leadership development designed to promote gender parity in higher education. LW1–LW12 represent female leaders, whereas LM13–LM24 represent male leaders.

Cultural Norms and Leadership Styles

Participants acknowledged that Eswatini cultural traditions had a significant impact on their leadership approaches, which balance empathy with assertiveness. The influence of cultural norms was also acknowledged by male leaders, who emphasized the importance of creating a friendly environment that values different viewpoints (LM17, focus group A). These observations describe the difficulties female leaders encounter in establishing their authority while also highlighting how cultural norms shape the leadership styles of both genders.

⁴⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Being a Knowing Researcher," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 24, no. 1 (2023): 1–6.

⁴⁹ Bibek Dahal, "Participants' Right to Withdraw from Research: Researchers' Lived Experiences on Ethics of Withdrawal," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 2024): 191–209, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09513-y>.

⁵⁰ Braun and Clarke, "Reporting Guidelines for Qualitative Research: A Values-Based Approach."

⁵¹ Edward J. Alessi and Sarilee Kahn, "Toward a Trauma-Informed Qualitative Research Approach: Guidelines for Ensuring the Safety and Promoting the Resilience of Research Participants," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 121–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2022.2107967>.

LF3 (focus group A) commented that:

My leadership style has been significantly influenced by Eswatini cultural traditions. I've learnt to strike a balance between assertiveness and empathy because I grew up in a culture that usually sees men as the major leaders. My approach frequently combines teamwork and reaching consensus, which are principles I was taught through my cultural upbringing on harmony and community. But in order to get past the prejudices connected to female power, I also find that I need to be more decisive.

Participant LF3 emphasised the contrast between traditional conceptions of leadership and the necessity for adaptability in her leadership approach. According to LF3, "My leadership style has been significantly influenced by Eswatini cultural traditions," emphasising the importance of combining assertiveness and empathy—a duality recognised in contemporary leadership literature. For example, Janvier believes that in collectivist societies like Eswatini, leaders who use an empathetic approach generally form stronger bonds with their teams.⁵² This is especially important for female leaders like LF3, who must manage cultural assumptions that indicate decisiveness is more typically connected with male leadership.⁵³ Furthermore, Hussain and Findlay observe that women in positions of leadership may use their grasp of cultural norms to form coalitions, supporting LF3's claim about her team's collaborative efforts.⁵⁴

LM17(Individual interview) commended that:

My leadership style has undoubtedly been impacted by cultural norms as well. Being raised in a patriarchal culture taught me to be confident and assertive in my decision-making process. In contrast to traditional viewpoints that frequently place a higher priority on power structures, I want to promote a welcoming atmosphere where everyone's opinion is respected, since I think this strengthens our collective decision-making.

Participant LM17 expresses a distinct viewpoint in his individual interview, marked by a conscious effort to incorporate empowerment within a historically patriarchal context. He says, "Being raised in a patriarchal culture taught me to be confident and assertive," implying that, while cultural norms influence his leadership style, he seeks to redefine what it means to lead in such a setting. This is consistent with the findings of Roshan, who claims that male leaders in patriarchal countries must often balance assertiveness with inclusion in order to promote shared governance.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Edström et al. argue that male leaders may be crucial allies in fighting primitive power systems if they intentionally establish settings that promote diversity.⁵⁶ LM17's recognition of the need to create a welcoming environment is consistent with the literature, which shows that inclusive practices help reduce the inherent prejudices that have long been embedded in patriarchal authority structures.

LF12 (focus C) opined that:

I think that the cultural expectations for women to be cooperative and nurturing are the reason behind my supportive leadership style. I place a high value on collaboration and concentrate on creating positive relationships within the university family.

Participant LF12 discusses the influence of culturally established expectations on her leadership style. Her views align with "feminine" attributes, notably cooperation and nurture. LF12 claims, "I place a high value on collaboration and concentrate on creating positive relationships within the university family," indicating a tendency toward relational leadership that is consistent with current research findings. According to Marie et al., women leaders are frequently under pressure to conform to collaborative leadership styles that stress relationships over assertiveness, resulting in what is known as

⁵² Janvier, "Cultural Awareness: Aspects of the Eswatini Culture and the Impact of Humanitarian Outreach."

⁵³ Nguyen, "Asian American Women's Success [Stories] in STEM Fields in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Narrative Research."

⁵⁴ Hussain and Findlay, "Understanding the Power Dynamics Affecting Black and Minority Ethnic Females in Leadership Roles."

⁵⁵ Roshan, "Gender and Governance: A Global Perspective."

⁵⁶ Edström, Greig, and Skinner, "Patriarchal (Dis)Orders: Backlash as Crisis Management."

a supportive leadership paradigm.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Allen et al. stress the value of collaborative environments since they promote a sense of respect and belonging among all participants, particularly in hierarchical societies.⁵⁸ Thus, LF12's experience highlights the difficulties women encounter when attempting to balance their genuine leadership styles with cultural expectations.

Gender stereotypes

The research on cultural dynamics of gendered leadership in Eswatini's higher education institutions reveals that gender stereotypes have a substantial impact on professional interactions, as described by numerous study participants. This theme, which focuses on gender stereotypes, illustrates ingrained cultural beliefs that frequently prejudice skills based on gender, influencing the dynamics of leadership and recognition in academic contexts. This emphasises the structural problem of gender prejudices having a detrimental effect on the assessment of leadership skills.

LW8 (focus B) testified that:

When I brought up a new idea at a departmental meeting, I encountered one difficulty. Despite its advantages, several of my male colleagues flatly rejected my suggestions, claiming that a "more practical" strategy was preferable. It served as a painful reminder of how views of skill may frequently be overshadowed by gender.

LW11 (focus group C) observed that:

I think that my gender has a huge influence on how others perceive my leadership ability. Male colleagues frequently assume I am less capable, which causes my contributions to be underestimated. Conversely, when I express myself, I risk being characterised as "too aggressive," a word that appears to be unfairly applied to women.

LM19 (Individual interview) expressed that:

I feel that because I'm a man, people think I'm a more capable leader. This leads to an unintentional imbalance and increases the pressure on my female coworkers to achieve above expectations in order to receive recognition.

LM 13 (focus group A) commented that:

It seems to me that there is sometimes an expectation of competence when a man is in a leadership position. Despite its benefits, this encourages me to actively assist my female coworkers and make sure their abilities are appreciated.

LW8 describes a deep experience with gender bias when her creative concepts were rejected during departmental meetings. She writes, "When I proposed a fresh proposal at a departmental meeting, I discovered one obstacle. Despite the benefits, several of my male colleagues outright rejected my proposals, stating that a 'more realistic' approach was preferred." This experience highlights the widespread existence of gender stereotypes in decision-making settings, which is consistent with findings from [4], who found that women's contributions are frequently underestimated, resulting in decreased confidence and engagement. Furthermore, LW8's claim is a reminder that gender biases can obfuscate the perception of competence, which is consistent with research by Aiston and Fo, who contend that gendered assumptions about women's abilities often silence their voices in leadership roles.⁵⁹ Undermining women's ideas becomes a systemic problem that inhibits equality and creativity in a culture where gender roles are determined by established norms.

LW11 described the double-edged sword that women confront in leadership: they are underestimated while simultaneously being stigmatised negatively for forceful behaviour. Her

⁵⁷ Aidan Marie et al., "Leadership Styles: Are Male and Female Leaders Really That Different," *Dostupno Na: Https://Www. Researchgate. Net*, 2024.

⁵⁸ Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "What Facilitates a Sense of Belonging amongst Australian Teachers?," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 77, no. 1 (December 31, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2025.2459190>.

⁵⁹ Aiston and Fo, "The Silence/Ing of Academic Women."

observations regarding male colleagues considering her as less capable are consistent with the findings of Moreno, who claims that women in leadership are frequently exposed to more scrutiny than their male counterparts. The epithet "too aggressive" is commonly attributed to assertive women, reinforcing the perception that leadership is more closely associated with masculine attributes.⁶⁰ This duality not only stifles women's advancement but also fosters a toxic environment in which contributions are disregarded due to gendered expectations.

LM19 admits the unintended strain placed on women in academic environments, noting, "I believe that because I am a man, people think I am a more capable leader. This creates an inadvertent imbalance and increases the pressure on my female coworkers to exceed expectations in order to be recognised." This perspective emphasises a critical awareness of privilege and the resulting imbalance in leadership dynamics, which is consistent with Bapuji et al.'s findings on how male privilege can perpetuate imbalances in recognition and opportunities.⁶¹

In contrast, LM13's acknowledgement of the implicit expectations for male leaders to be competent, combined with a willingness to encourage female colleagues, demonstrates a positive attitude that counters the prevalent gender biases. This perspective is critical for overcoming prejudices and establishing a more inclusive society. The concept of collaboration, as explained by Thelma and Ngulube, is critical in removing gender prejudices from leadership roles.⁶² The proactive position of LM13 represents a movement toward a collaborative strategy in which men actively try to enhance women's status in leadership, thereby creating a climate conducive to equality.

Support networks

Exploring the cultural dynamics of gendered leadership at Eswatini's higher education institutions reveals the importance of support networks in resolving the issues faced by both male and female leaders. The findings show that mentorship, emotional intelligence, and supportive relationships can help individuals overcome institutional constraints.

LM24 focus group C stated that:

Men and women have both served as my mentors, and they have emphasized various approaches to leadership. I came to understand the value of emotional intelligence in leadership from a female mentor, and I now give it top priority when it comes to team interactions.

LF6 (focus group B) claimed that:

I was able to negotiate the challenges of female leadership in our institution of higher learning with the help of an exceptionally encouraging mentor. Her advice on self-advocacy and resilience helped me to fill up knowledge gaps and inspired me to take on leadership responsibilities without fear.

LF1 (individual interview) observed that:

My development was greatly facilitated by a senior female lecturer who served as my mentor. She set an example for effective leadership that encompassed compassion and strength, and she offered support and direction during trying times. Her confidence in my abilities enabled me to go past institutional obstacles.

LM24's claim, "Men and women have both served as my mentors, and they have emphasised various approaches to leadership," emphasises the need for diversity in mentoring. His revelation of the "value of emotional intelligence in leadership" from a female mentor reflects a rising awareness of the benefits that varied viewpoints may offer to leadership practices. This is consistent with recent research indicating that mixed-gender mentorship leads to a comprehensive grasp of leadership attributes.⁶³

⁶⁰ Moreno, "Barriers to Female Advancement in Health Sciences Education: A Qualitative Study Examining the Effect of Culture and Values on Leader Selection."

⁶¹ Hari Bapuji et al., "Invisible Inequalities: Barriers, Challenges, and Opportunities," *Journal of Management* 50, no. 3 (March 17, 2024): 835–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063231205294>.

⁶² Chanda Chansa Thelma and Loveness Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions," *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports* 18, no. 6 (2024): 273–90.

⁶³ Clerkin, Bergeron, and Wilson, "Gender Differences in Developmental Experiences."

According to Sepehri and Jazbi, cross-gender mentoring relationships can improve leaders' emotional intelligence, which is important for effective decision-making and team dynamics.⁶⁴ LM24's female mentor's focus on emotional intelligence highlights the importance of cultivating empathy and interpersonal skills within leadership frameworks. By cultivating these attributes, leaders may more easily overcome obstacles and establish a positive organisational culture and team cohesion.⁶⁵

The transformational potential of mentoring is demonstrated by the female leader's comment, "Her confidence in my abilities enabled me to go past institutional obstacles." A senior female lecturer's assistance helped LF1 develop and become more resilient in the face of institutional obstacles that are commonly faced by women in leadership positions. Recent research highlights the important role that female mentors play in helping women in fields that are male-dominated progress in their careers.⁶⁶ They support the idea that mentoring involves developing the self-belief required to overcome systemic obstacles in addition to skill acquisition. Additionally, the experience of LF1 emphasises the necessity of institutional frameworks that acknowledge and encourage mentorship opportunities. According to Lysfjord and Skarstein, structured mentorship programmes can foster a supportive environment that empowers aspiring leaders by giving them self-confidence and a sense of agency.⁶⁷

LF6 demonstrates the dual function of mentoring in skill development and empowerment by explaining, "Her advice on self-advocacy and resilience helped me to fill up knowledge gaps and inspired me to take on leadership responsibilities without fear." A key component of leadership is the idea of self-advocacy, which encourages people to assert their worth and abilities in situations that are frequently difficult. Mentoring that prioritises self-advocacy not only boosts confidence but also equips future leaders to successfully negotiate intricate institutional dynamics, as noted by Bankole-Alale.⁶⁸ Furthermore, LF6's statement shows that mentorship provides a means of information transfer that can bridge gender gaps in leadership positions. According to Fitzgibbon and Murphy, programmes concentrating on resilience training can considerably benefit women in the education sector by assisting them in developing important coping techniques required for long-term success.⁶⁹

The participants' narratives highlight the critical significance of support networks in tackling the demands of cultural dynamics on gendered leadership at Eswatini's higher education institutions. The emphasis on mentorship, emotional intelligence, self-advocacy, and resilience suggests that a strong network of support can help build good leaders, regardless of gender. Moving forward, universities must codify these enabling frameworks, ensuring that mentorship programmes are not just available but also promoted and integrated into the broader educational contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote gender equity and challenge entrenched cultural norms within Eswatini's higher education institutions, it is essential to implement targeted and practical interventions. Institutions should establish mentorship programmes that connect emerging women leaders with experienced mentors—both male and female—to foster resilience, build confidence, and facilitate knowledge transfer. These programmes should be complemented by regular cultural awareness and gender sensitivity workshops aimed at challenging traditional stereotypes and promoting inclusive leadership paradigms that value diverse leadership styles. Additionally, clear accountability frameworks must be developed to ensure the consistent enforcement of policies promoting gender equality, supported by regular monitoring and

⁶⁴ Sepehri and Jazbi, "Exploring the Influence of Leaders' Gender on Communication Styles and Work Environment Dynamics: A Study in the Swedish Companies."

⁶⁵ Maribel Paredes-Saavedra et al., "Work Team Effectiveness: Importance of Organizational Culture, Work Climate, Leadership, Creative Synergy, and Emotional Intelligence in University Employees," *Administrative Sciences* 14, no. 11 (November 1, 2024): 280, <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14110280>.

⁶⁶ Nguyen, "Asian American Women's Success [Stories] in STEM Fields in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Narrative Research"; Maguire, Anderson, and Chavez, "Women in Academia: Mentorship from a Gendered Perspective."

⁶⁷ Lysfjord and Skarstein, "Empowering Leadership: A Journey of Growth and Insight Through a Mentoring Program for Nurses in Leadership Positions."

⁶⁸ O. Bankole Alale, "Perceptions of Mentorship Program Value for Women Aspiring to Senior Leadership Positions in the US Banking Industry" (Wilmington University, 2025).

⁶⁹ Fitzgibbon and Murphy, "Coping Strategies of Healthcare Professional Students for Stress Incurred during Their Studies: A Literature Review."

evaluation mechanisms to track progress and address gaps. Promoting the visibility of women leaders through awards, media campaigns, and institutional recognition can serve as powerful role models, thereby challenging hegemonic narratives that associate leadership primarily with masculinity. Moreover, engaging men as active allies through training and awareness campaigns is critical to redefining masculinity and fostering shared leadership responsibilities, which can help dismantle societal expectations that uphold male dominance. Collectively, these strategies can contribute to creating an inclusive organisational culture that values diversity, promotes gender parity, and ensures sustainable progress in women's leadership in Eswatini's higher education sector.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how cultural norms influence gendered leadership in Eswatini's higher education institutions. The findings reveal that deeply rooted cultural beliefs and stereotypes significantly shape leadership behaviours and perceptions for both men and women. Men are expected to be assertive and decisive, while women face pressures to adopt nurturing, collaborative roles. These contrasting norms reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and create systemic barriers for women's advancement. Despite some progress, cultural norms embedded in institutional routines and social sanctions continue to sustain gender disparities. Support networks like mentorship and emotional intelligence development are vital for empowering leaders of all genders. The study advocates for targeted reforms, including mentorship programmes and cultural change initiatives, to challenge stereotypes. It emphasises that addressing these issues requires culturally informed, sustained efforts. Although limited to the specific context of Eswatini, the insights contribute to broader discussions on women's leadership in patriarchal societies. Ultimately, fostering inclusive leadership depends on transforming entrenched norms to promote equity and shared responsibility. This research highlights that meaningful progress is possible through continuous, culturally sensitive interventions.

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