Navigating Gendered Leadership: Challenges For Female Deans in One South African University

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges faced by female deans at a South African university, focusing on the gender dynamics within academic leadership. Utilising a qualitative research approach, the study involved in-depth interviews with female deans to understand their experiences and perspectives. The findings revealed that female deans face significant challenges, including gender stereotypes, an unsupportive organisational culture, limited access to mentorship and support, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. The study recommends that universities cultivate inclusive cultures that value diverse leadership styles, including those typically associated with female leaders, such as collaboration and empathy. This can be achieved by appreciating and rewarding a variety of leadership qualities beyond traditional assertiveness and competitiveness. Additionally, this study contributes to the global discourse on gendered leadership by illustrating that these challenges are not unique to South Africa but resonate with broader patterns observed in various regions. The research aligns with Agenda 2063's goals of promoting social inclusion and ensuring equitable access to opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Gendered leadership; female deans; challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Despite significant progress towards gender equality in higher education, female deans in South African universities continue to face unique challenges that their male counterparts do not encounter. These challenges are often rooted in deeply entrenched gender biases and institutional structures that favour male leadership styles and norms. Female deans must navigate a complex landscape of gendered expectations, balancing professional demands with societal expectations of women's roles. Thus, this paper seeks to explore and elucidate the specific challenges experienced by female deans at one South African university, aiming to understand the impact of gendered leadership dynamics on their professional experiences and career trajectories. The issue of women's under-representation in senior management roles persists in South African higher education. This disparity reflects on-going obstacles that limit women from attaining leadership positions compared to their male counterparts (Eustachio et al., 2020). Despite some gains, such as increased female deanships, broader changes in higher management remain elusive (Person et al., 2014). For instance, among South Africa's 26 universities, only five have female vice chancellors, highlighting significant gender inequity in leadership (Naidu, 2018). Thus, exploring the challenges faced by women leaders in these institutions can offer valuable insights and strategies to enhance gender equity in South African higher education.

Leadership is influenced by specific contexts and situations (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). The trend towards academic meritocracy can hinder the advancement of aspiring female leaders in higher education institutions. Studies by Alsubaie and Jones (2017), Alghofaily (2019), Shava and Chasokela (2020), and Eustachio et al. (2020) highlight that women possess unique leadership qualities, particularly in educational settings, yet they encounter significant barriers that limit their effectiveness as leaders. Shava and Chasokela (2020) argue that more research is necessary to understand the factors that facilitate or impede women's access to leadership roles. The selection process within institutions of higher learning often presents a significant barrier to career advancement. Despite qualifications, organisations tend to favour candidates with masculine traits, which inherently disadvantages women (DeFrank-Cole et al., 2016). This bias persists in South African universities, where government efforts to promote fair recruitment have not substantially increased women's representation in top management roles (Kele & Pietersen, 2015). It is argued that although there are qualified women eligible for executive positions, they are frequently overlooked (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Even though women constitute most university students in South Africa (52%), this demographic characteristic does not translate into higher female representation in leadership roles. Moreover, existing male-dominated leadership tends to perpetuate itself by favouring male successors (Hannum et al., 2015). This preference can lead to a cycle where men are more likely to be chosen for leadership roles, thereby reinforcing the male-dominated nature of the leadership structure. Male leaders might unconsciously view male candidates as more competent or suitable for leadership roles, even when female candidates have equivalent or

superior qualifications. According to Smith McKoy et al. (2018), the reluctance of men, who dominate top management, to mentor women, highlights the need for mentorship programmes that prepare women for leadership positions. This hesitation limits women's access to critical guidance, networks, and sponsorship opportunities that are essential for career progression. As a result, there is a pressing need for dedicated mentorship programmes designed to equip women with the skills, knowledge, and support required to succeed in leadership positions. Such programmes can bridge the gap by fostering a more inclusive environment where women receive the mentorship necessary to navigate the challenges of leadership and advance their careers. Furthermore, Reeves (2015) observes that women's under-representation in top management is influenced by their attitudes, psychological attributes, and various organisational and socio-cultural issues. These factors collectively diminish women's ambitions and aspirations. To counteract these influences, adequate support from experienced individuals is essential. Such support can significantly boost women's self-determination, self-efficacy, and aspirations, thereby motivating them to pursue top management positions (Smith McKoy et al., 2018). When women receive mentorship and guidance from those who have already navigated the challenges of leadership, they gain valuable insights, confidence, and encouragement. This support helps them believe in their own potential and equips them with the tools needed to overcome obstacles. Consequently, such empowerment motivates women to aim for, and pursue, top management positions, breaking through barriers that have traditionally hindered their advancement.

Mankayi and Cheteni (2021) highlight that work-life conflicts pose significant barriers to women advancing to top management positions within South African universities. These conflicts often compel women to opt for roles that allow them to balance their professional duties with family responsibilities. Balancing these roles is seen as a critical challenge that can diminish prospects for promotion. For instance, women noted difficulties in achieving work-life balance due to expectations of working beyond standard hours to demonstrate commitment, conflicting with their roles as wives and mothers adhering to traditional domestic expectations. Moreover, their findings resonate with previous research indicating that work-life conflicts, particularly prevalent among women in leadership roles in the African context, impede their career aspirations (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). These conflicts arise from the dual pressures of professional responsibilities and personal or family obligations, which can be particularly challenging to balance. In the African context, socio-cultural expectations often place a significant burden on women to fulfil traditional family roles, further exacerbating these conflicts. As a result, these work-life challenges can limit women's abilities to fully commit to, and pursue, leadership positions, thereby impeding their career growth and aspirations.

Moorosi (2019) argues that challenges encountered by women leaders often stem from organisational cultures that reflect male perspectives on effective management. These cultures often prioritise traits and behaviours traditionally associated with male leadership, such as assertiveness and competitiveness, while undervaluing or disregarding qualities typically

attributed to female leaders, such as collaboration and empathy. This male-centric view creates environments where women feel marginalised, unsupported, or pressured to conform to management styles that do not align with their own strengths and values. Eddy et al. (2017) observes that universities, predominantly influenced by male power and influence, tend to foster cultures that advantage men. These cultural norms create structural barriers within universities that hinder women from accessing top management positions. In many African countries, social and work dynamics are shaped by traditional patriarchal frameworks (Person et al., 2016), compounding these barriers. Another obstacle preventing women from reaching top university management roles is workplace relationships, including interactions with supervisors, mentors, and female colleagues (Person et al., 2016). These relationships are crucial for career advancement, as they often provide opportunities for mentorship, sponsorship, and professional development. However, challenges arise when women face biases or unequal treatment in these interactions.

Pereira (2014) notes that employees typically form bonds based on shared interests, yet the scarcity of female executives in universities means fewer opportunities for women to find female mentors who can prepare them for senior leadership. Women often seek mentors of the same gender due to shared understanding of gender-specific challenges (Searby et al., 2015), whereas male mentors may hesitate due to perceived differences in problem-solving abilities and concerns about workplace dynamics, including potential for sexual harassment (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Mentorship and guidance from those who have navigated similar paths can provide valuable insights, strategies, and encouragement. This support can come from senior colleagues, mentors, or networks specifically designed for professional development. Gender stereotypes pose the most significant challenge for women aspiring to hold top management positions. These stereotypes originate from societal beliefs about the roles traditionally assigned to men and women (Katuna, 2014), which can be traced back to historical divisions of labour based on gender (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Gender stereotypes typically characterise women as weaker in various aspects (Glass & Cook, 2016). Discrimination based on gender in the workplace often stems from entrenched patriarchal values that have historically shaped societies. Contemporary industrial and societal changes continue to influence social roles, impacting individuals in diverse ways (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

Despite the implementation of various laws and regulations, women continue to be under-represented in positions of power and influence. Researchers and authorities have been exploring strategies to address the challenges women face in achieving these roles (Sahoo & Lenka, 2016). This suggests that legislation alone is insufficient to resolve the existing disparities between men and women in positions of authority. Capacity-building, as a leadership development programme, is crucial in preparing and supporting women at the early stages of their academic careers and advancing them to top management positions (Redmond et al., 2016). There are numerous examples in the literature, of countries where capacity-building programmes designed to promote the development of female academics have been

successfully implemented. For instance, the University Grants Commission in India undertakes initiatives to equip women with leadership skills in higher education. In the United States, the Office of Women in Higher Education's Inclusive Excellence Group and Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) offer leadership development opportunities for female faculty members and administrators (Katuna, 2014). In Norway, the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Building in Higher Education and Research for Development focuses on enhancing leadership attributes and effectively using them. In South Africa, the New Generation of Academics Programme supports universities in recruiting new academics into permanent positions and aids them in achieving high-level performance (Naidu, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 1986, the term "Glass Ceiling" emerged to describe the perceived and experienced barriers women faced in advancing up the corporate hierarchy. Despite qualifications, women found their upward mobility hindered by an invisible but very real barrier. The metaphor of a glass ceiling symbolises the disappointment of aspiring individuals who encounter unexpected obstacles in their career progression. The term gained widespread attention because it effectively captured the inequality women encountered in workplaces, prompting government investigations that shed light on the issue, although without fully resolving it. Researchers have approached the concept of the Glass Ceiling in two main ways. The systemic approach views it as a problem rooted in organisational and cultural biases that systematically favour men. This perspective highlights phenomena such as the "old boys club" and the division of labour that tends to assign men to roles perceived as more prestigious or suitable for leadership. Conversely, the motivational approach places responsibility for career advancement on the individual, suggesting that perceptions of the Glass Ceiling can become self-fulfilling prophecies. According to this view, women who have already attained senior positions may attribute their success to personal determination and effort. Research indicates that married, non-primary breadwinner, white women with advanced degrees are more inclined to attribute career challenges to motivational factors rather than structural barriers (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2009). In the context of this paper, applying the Glass Ceiling theoretical framework to the challenges for female deans in a South African university, the research seeks to uncover the systemic, structural, and motivational barriers these women face. This framework highlights a need for implementing policies that promote gender equity, such as transparent recruitment and promotion processes, which can help mitigate organisational biases. Structural reforms that value and recognise the contributions of female deans equally with their male counterparts are essential.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

This section outlines the methods used to conduct this study, including the adoption of an interpretive paradigm, a qualitative research approach, a case study research design, the

selection of participants, data collection and analysis methods, and considerations of ethical issues.

Research Paradigm

This study employs the interpretive paradigm to investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by female deans at a South African university. The researcher considers this paradigm relevant as it facilitates the exploration and understanding of the issue from diverse social and cultural perspectives (Günbayi & Sorm, 2018; Wilson, 2017). Additionally, this paradigm enables the collection of data from various sources, such as interviews (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017), observations, document analysis and focus groups Through this approach, the researcher gained deeper insights into the issue and its impact on higher education leadership and management in South Africa.

Research Approach

To achieve the aim of the study, a qualitative research approach was deemed relevant as it provides insights into the various aspects to be considered when designing the study. This approach includes understanding the research problem from the participants' perspectives and generating new ideas about the issue (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Qualitative methods were also utilised to gather data on potential solutions and their implementation within the study. The benefits of using a qualitative approach include developing a more comprehensive understanding of the problem and the ability to generate innovative ideas for solutions (Grant & Kara, 2021). While qualitative methods often involve small-scale studies, which can limit their generalisability (Carminati, 2018), this approach was considered advantageous for this specific study because it offers an opportunity to understand a phenomenon in depth.

Research Design

This study adopted a case study research design to provide an in-depth examination of the challenges and opportunities for female deans in a South African university. This approach facilitated an exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions related to the research question (Houghton et al., 2015; Pacho, 2015). A case study is particularly suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, as was necessary for this research. Additionally, the use of a case study allowed for an exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, resulting in a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the issue (Lindgreen et al., 2021). Although the case study design has limitations, such as potential bias and limited generalisability, its strengths make it an ideal choice for this type of research.

Participants and Participants Selection

Participants for this study were purposively selected to obtain a diverse range of opinions from those directly affected by the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). Four female deans from a South African university were selected to participate in the study. This decision was crucial for capturing their perspectives because they are directly experiencing the challenges and opportunities in their roles. The sample size in qualitative case studies is often determined by the richness of information each participant can provide to address the study's

objectives (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Malterud et al. (2016) advocate this approach, stating that "the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower number of participants is needed" (p. 1753). Given that the selected participants possessed the necessary information, this number was deemed appropriate for the study. By incorporating a range of perspectives, the researcher aimed to create a comprehensive picture of the challenges and opportunities experienced/encountered by the female deans in their roles in a South African university.

Table 1.

Biographical information of participants

Participant Name	Gender	Age	Qualifications	Years of Experience
Dean 1	Female	64	Master of Education	42
Dean 2	Female	60	Doctor of Philosophy	31
Dean 3	Female	53	Doctor of Philosophy	25
Dean 4	Female	50	Master of Education	28

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are a widely utilised research method in the social sciences due to their flexibility and ability to collect detailed data on a variety of topics while ensuring key issues are addressed (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenike, 2021). In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from participants by asking questions to elicit their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities encountered by female deans in their roles in one South African university. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. This process allowed for a thorough data analysis, which was then used to answer the research question. The use of semi-structured interviews proved to be an effective data collection method for this study.

Data Analysis

The data underwent content analysis, which involved confirming a set of codes to identify, connect, and label the data. These codes were then subdivided into larger categories observed within the data. Themes (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020; Kuckartz, 2019) were created by grouping the data into relevant categories, which were used as subtitles to organise the findings. Themes are essential in content analysis as they enable researchers to structure and interpret the data (Lindgren et al., 2020). By grouping codes related to similar topics or ideas, themes help to uncover patterns and relationships that might otherwise be overlooked. During data analysis, participants were coded as **DN1, DN2, DN3** and **DN4** to protect their identities in accordance with research ethics.

Ethical Considerations

Maree (2019) stresses that researchers have an ethical obligation to adhere to legal guidelines during data collection and ensure that data disclosure respects the rights and well-being of participants. This study received ethical approval under protocol number **FEDREC15-06-23-3**. Addressing ethical issues is crucial as it safeguards the participants' rights and well-being throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent before their involvement, having been informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. They were assured of their right to participate voluntarily in the study or withdraw at any time without any negative repercussions. By respecting the participants' rights and autonomy, the study upheld the trust and integrity of the research process. The ethical considerations highlight the researchers' commitment to conducting respectful, responsible, and beneficial research for all involved. Importantly, the researchers protected the participants' anonymity by using pseudonyms in the reports, ensuring their statements and contributions could not be traced back to them.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the study key findings:

Balancing Work and Family Life

It emerged from semi-structured interviews that balancing work and family life is a significant obstacle for female deans in the institutions of higher learning:

> "As a female dean, one of the most significant challenges I face is balancing my professional responsibilities with family obligations. The expectations for women to excel both at work and at home can be overwhelming. I often find myself working late hours to meet university deadlines while also ensuring that my family's needs are met. This dual burden can be exhausting and often leads to burnout'' (**Dean 1**).

> ''Balancing work and family life as a female dean is a significant challenge. The demands of my role are intense and often require long hours, including evenings and weekends. This can make it difficult to spend quality time with my family and fulfil my responsibilities at home. For instance, there are times when important meetings or university events coincide with my children's school functions or family gatherings. I often had to make difficult choices between attending a crucial meeting or being present for my family. The societal expectation that women should be the primary caregivers adds another layer of complexity'' (**Dean 2**)

The findings underscore a pervasive challenge faced by female deans: balancing their professional responsibilities with personal obligations. They highlighted the rigorous demands of their academic roles, which often require long hours extending into evenings and weekends. This dedication to their profession frequently conflicts with familial duties, forcing them to navigate tough decisions between fulfilling job commitments and attending to family needs. Adding to this complexity is the societal expectation for women to excel in their careers while

also shouldering primary caregiving responsibilities, intensifying the strain and leading to feelings of exhaustion and burnout. The dual burden of maintaining high performance at work while meeting family obligations represents a significant and ongoing struggle for these female deans. This struggle reflects broader issues related to gendered expectations and work-life balance within academia. These findings are in support of the study findings by Mankayi and Cheteni (2021), who emphasise that these work-life conflicts serve as formidable barriers hindering women from advancing to top management positions within South African universities. Such conflicts often compel women to seek roles that afford them greater flexibility to manage both their professional duties and family responsibilities. Achieving this balance is seen as crucial but challenging, as women reported difficulties in meeting expectations of extended work hours to demonstrate commitment, conflicting with their roles as wives and mothers adhering to traditional domestic norms. These findings echo earlier research indicating that work-life conflicts are particularly acute among women in leadership roles in African contexts, undercutting their opportunities for career advancement (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). This underscores the need for organisational policies and societal attitudes that support gender equality and facilitate a more equitable distribution of work and family responsibilities.

Gender Stereotypes

It was found that female deans encountered gender stereotypes in their leadership roles:

> "Gender bias remains a pervasive issue. Despite my qualifications and experience, I often encounter situations where my competence is questioned, or my decisions are second-guessed more than my male counterparts. There is a persistent stereotype that women are less capable of handling leadership roles, which undermines my authority and confidence" (**Dean 2**).

> ''As a female dean, I have witnessed firsthand the pervasive impact of gender bias and stereotypes in the academic and professional spheres. These biases manifest in subtle yet powerful ways, influencing perceptions and decisions at every level. It's intimidating to see that despite the strides we've made, women still face significant obstacles simply due to stereotypes'' (**Dean 4**)

These findings offer profound insights into the pervasive challenges of gender bias faced by female leaders. They underscore how qualifications and experience often fail to shield women from scrutiny and doubt, experiences less frequently encountered by their male counterparts. The persistent questioning of competence not only undermines their authority but also erodes confidence in their leadership capabilities. Moreover, the study expands on these personal challenges by highlighting the systemic impact of gender bias across academic and professional domains. It emphasises how deeply entrenched stereotypes subtly shape perceptions and decisions, creating significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. Despite advancements in gender equality, these female deans lament the enduring nature of these stereotypes, which continue to hinder women's advancement. These findings align with Katuna's (2014) study, which identifies gender stereotypes as a major obstacle for women

aspiring to top management positions. These stereotypes stem from societal beliefs about traditional gender roles, rooted in historical divisions of labour. This perspective is further shared by Yousaf and Schmiede (2016), who note that gender stereotypes often portray women as weaker in various aspects, perpetuating biases that women in leadership continually confront. These stereotypes not only undermine women's confidence and authority but also contribute to a systemic disadvantage that women in leadership continually navigate, impacting their career trajectories and opportunities for advancement.

Limited Mentorship and Support

This theme reveals that female deans have limited and support from their colleagues in their leadership roles:

> "Mentorship opportunities for women in academia are still limited. Male colleagues have more access to informal networks and mentorship, which are crucial for career advancement. I have had to actively seek out mentors and allies who understand the unique challenges faced by women in leadership positions" **(Dean 3).**

> "As a female dean, the issue of limited mentorship and support is a significant challenge that I have personally encountered and observed among my peers. The absence of adequate mentorship opportunities for women in leadership roles perpetuates a cycle where aspiring female leaders lack crucial guidance and sponsorship needed to navigate complex organizational landscapes. This deficit not only hinders professional development but also contributes to the underrepresentation of women in higher leadership positions'' (**Dean 1**).

The study findings highlight a critical issue: the limited mentorship and support available to women in academia and leadership roles. It emphasises a noticeable disparity where male colleagues often have more access to informal networks and mentorship opportunities crucial for advancing their careers. Women, on the other hand, must actively seek out mentors who understand the specific challenges they face in leadership positions. This lack of mentorship not only stunts their professional growth but also contributes to the on-going under-representation of women in higher leadership roles within academic settings. These findings are in support of the study findings by Pereira (2014), who points out that the scarcity of female executives in universities limits opportunities for women to find female mentors who can effectively prepare them for senior leadership. Research by Searby et al. (2015) suggests that women often prefer female mentors due to shared understanding of gender-specific challenges. In contrast, male mentors may hesitate due to concerns about perceived differences in problem-solving abilities or fears of workplace dynamics, including potential for sexual harassment (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Mentorship from experienced individuals who have navigated similar paths is crucial, offering valuable insights, strategies, and encouragement necessary for professional development. Instituting mentorship programs tailored to women's needs could help mitigate these challenges and foster greater gender equity in academia's leadership ranks.

Organisational Culture

It was found that female deans encountered challenges related to organisational culture in their leadership roles:

''In our university, the organisational culture heavily favours assertiveness and competitiveness, traits that are traditionally associated with male leadership. As a female dean, I often find myself navigating a culture that values these qualities over collaborative and empathetic approaches. This can create a sense of being undervalued or overlooked, especially in decision-making processes where more assertive voices tend to dominate. It sometimes feels like I must constantly prove my leadership capabilities in ways that my male counterparts may not have to'' (**Dean 2**)

''The organisational culture here tends to perpetuate a 'boys' club' atmosphere, where informal networks and relationships play a significant role in career advancement. As a female dean, breaking into these networks can be challenging'' (**Dean 3**).

These findings highlight the significant challenges that female deans face when navigating the organisational cultures of universities. They highlight a fundamental tension between traditional expectations of assertiveness and competitiveness in leadership, qualities typically associated with male leaders, and the collaborative and empathetic approaches that some female leaders prefer. This disparity can lead to feelings of being undervalued and the constant need to prove one's leadership capabilities within a culture that may not fully appreciate or reward these attributes in women leaders. Additionally, the identification of a 'boys' club' atmosphere reveals how informal networks and relationships, often dominated by male colleagues, serve as pivotal avenues for career advancement. For female deans, the difficulty in penetrating these networks restricts access to crucial opportunities and support necessary for professional growth within the university hierarchy. These insights highlight both structural and cultural barriers that hinder the advancement of female leaders and underscore the urgent need for inclusive practices and policies that promote gender equity and recognise diverse leadership styles. These findings align with Moorosi's (2019) study, which argues that challenges for women leaders often originate from organizational cultures that reflect male perspectives on effective management. These findings resonate strongly with the concept of the glass ceiling theory that underpinned this study, the theory describes invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing into upper echelons of leadership despite their qualifications and achievements. The tension between traditional expectations of assertiveness and competitiveness, more commonly associated with male leadership, versus collaborative and empathetic approaches preferred by some female leaders, exemplifies how gendered stereotypes can reinforce these barriers. The 'boys' club' atmosphere, characterized by informal networks dominated by male colleagues, serves as a tangible manifestation of these barriers, limiting opportunities for female deans to access the mentorship, visibility, and career advancement pathways needed to break through the glass ceiling.

CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by female deans at the selected South African university highlight the pervasive impact of gendered leadership dynamics in academic settings. Gender stereotypes, an unsupportive organizational culture, limited mentorship and support, and the struggle to balance work and family responsibilities collectively hinder the career progression and effectiveness of female leaders. To address these issues, universities must actively promote inclusive cultures that value diverse leadership styles, foster environments that reward a range of leadership qualities, and implement flexible work policies to support work-life balance. Establishing formal mentorship programs tailored to women in leadership roles can provide the necessary guidance, support, and networking opportunities for career advancement. Combating gender bias and stereotypes is essential and requires comprehensive strategies, including bias-awareness training, clear protocols for addressing discrimination, and promoting gender-sensitive leadership practices. By empowering and funding women's leadership initiatives, universities can create supportive platforms for female leaders, facilitating the sharing of experiences and advocacy for policy changes that promote gender equity. Ultimately, a concerted effort to address these challenges can pave the way for more equitable and effective leadership within academic institutions, benefiting not only female deans but the broader university community.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, universities should actively promote inclusive cultures that value diverse leadership styles, including collaborative and empathetic approaches typically associated with female leaders. This can be achieved by fostering a culture that appreciates and rewards a wide range of leadership qualities beyond traditional assertiveness and competitiveness. To address the work-life balance challenges highlighted by female deans, universities should implement flexible work policies that accommodate familial responsibilities. Providing options such as telecommuting, flexible hours, and parental leave can help mitigate the conflict between professional duties and personal obligations. Recognising the limited access to informal networks and mentorship faced by female deans, universities should establish formal mentorship programmes tailored to women in leadership roles. These programmes should provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities essential for career advancement. Universities should actively combat gender bias and stereotypes that undermine the authority and confidence of female leaders. This includes implementing bias-awareness training for faculty and staff, establishing clear protocols for addressing discrimination, and promoting gender-sensitive leadership practices at all levels. Empowering and funding women's leadership initiatives within universities can create platforms for sharing experiences, building solidarity, and advocating for policy changes that promote gender equity.

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