

# The role of emotional intelligence in women's leadership



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## Dates:

Received: 17 Aug. 2025

Accepted: 22 Jan. 2026

Published: 24 Apr. 2026

## How to cite this article:

Makhubele, V.M. &  
Msimango-Galawe, J., 2026,  
'The role of emotional  
intelligence in women's  
leadership', *Acta Commercii*  
26(1), a1490. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/ac.v26i1.1490](https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v26i1.1490)

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**Orientation:** Despite a progressive constitutional and legislative framework promoting gender equality, South Africa continues to face structural, cultural, and organisational barriers that limit women's advancement into leadership roles, particularly in the public sector.

**Research purpose:** This study examines how emotional intelligence (EI) is perceived to influence women's leadership practices, focusing on its role in shaping influence, decision-making and interpersonal engagement.

**Motivation for the study:** Although EI is widely regarded as a key leadership capability, research on its role in women's leadership within South African municipalities remains limited. Examining how women apply EI can guide development initiatives that address gender biases and improve organisational effectiveness, without assuming EI is deterministically empowering.

**Research design, approach and method:** The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach, using semi-structured interviews with women leaders in the CoJMM. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns in EI and leadership practices.

**Main findings:** EI was linked to self-awareness, emotional regulation and relational sensitivity, which influenced decision-making, adaptability and interpersonal engagement. EI supports reflective decision-making and relationship management; however, its impact was shaped by organisational culture, power dynamics and resource constraints. Findings indicate that EI does not consistently produce positive outcomes or inherently empower leaders, with participants highlighting the emotional labour involved and the risk of EI being constrained or misinterpreted in bureaucratic contexts.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Organisations should embed EI development in leadership training, ensuring context-sensitive support that addresses structural and cultural barriers to gender-equitable leadership.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study offers context-specific insights into EI and gendered leadership in a South African municipal setting, presenting EI as a relational, situational capability with both benefits and limitations for supporting women leaders.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence; decision making; women leaders; women empowerment; leadership skills; gender bias; organisational culture; leader member exchange theory.

## Introduction

Gender-based stereotypes continue to disadvantage women in leadership, particularly when they display agentic behaviours such as assertiveness and decisiveness, which are often evaluated more harshly in women than in men. Despite formal progress towards gender equality, women leaders remain less likely to be appointed to senior leadership roles and continue to experience biased perceptions, implicit exclusion and heightened scrutiny, especially in male-dominated environments (Nater et al. 2024; Rajha & Ruiters 2025). These dynamics persist even when women meet or exceed leadership performance expectations, limiting their access to decision-making positions and affecting the perceived legitimacy of their leadership (Mulawarman & Komariyah 2021; Mwangi, Ngugi & Kihonge 2024).

Within the South African context, these challenges are further shaped by socio-cultural norms, organisational hierarchies and public-sector governance structures that influence how leadership authority and emotional expression are interpreted. While increasing women's representation in leadership remains a key objective of empowerment initiatives, representation alone does not address the relational and emotional demands placed on women leaders operating in complex

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institutional environments (Seale, Fish & Schreiber 2021). As such, attention has increasingly turned to emotional intelligence (EI) as a potential leadership capability that may assist women leaders in navigating interpersonal dynamics, managing emotional labour and responding to gendered expectations, without assuming that EI uniformly produces positive outcomes (Manning 2021).

Emotional intelligence is broadly understood in this study as a set of emotional awareness and regulation capabilities that influence how individuals interpret and respond to emotional information in organisational contexts. Prior research suggests that EI may support leaders in managing stress, conflict and relational challenges; however, these effects are shaped by contextual factors such as organisational culture, power relations and individual leadership roles (Nkomo & Ngambi 2017; Pillay, Viviers & Mayer 2018). Consequently, there remains a need for context-specific, qualitative research that examines how women leaders themselves perceive, experience and apply EI within their leadership practice, particularly in South African public-sector settings.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how women leaders within the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality (CoJMM) perceive the role of EI in shaping their leadership practices. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the study seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of EI as a relational and situational leadership capability, rather than as an inherently empowering or universally effective attribute.

## Literature review

### Conceptualising leadership and emotional intelligence

Leadership remains one of the most extensively debated concepts in organisational scholarship, largely because of its influence on organisational effectiveness, employee engagement and strategic direction (Gómez-Leal et al. 2022; Jooste & Coetzee 2022). Contemporary leadership theory increasingly conceptualises leadership as a relational and influence-based process rather than a positional role. Northouse (2021) defines leadership as the ability to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute meaningfully to organisational goals. This perspective foregrounds interpersonal dynamics, sense-making and emotional processes as central to leadership effectiveness.

From this standpoint, leadership effectiveness is not solely dependent on technical competence or authority but also on how leaders interpret, regulate and respond to emotional cues within social interactions. Krén and Séllei (2021) argue that leadership influence operates through ongoing interactions that shape employee motivation and engagement. Consequently, leaders' emotional conduct plays a role in shaping organisational climate, trust and performance, highlighting the relevance of EI as a leadership-related capability rather than a standalone personal trait.

The concept of EI was introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who defined it as the ability to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions to facilitate thinking and problem-solving. This foundational model positioned EI as a form of intelligence that integrates emotional and cognitive processes. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced the distinction between emotions – automatic affective responses to stimuli – and EI as a set of learnable capabilities related to emotional awareness and regulation (Faltas 2017).

Competency-based models of EI, most notably advanced by Goleman and Boyatzis (2017), conceptualise EI as comprising self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. These competencies align closely with leadership processes, particularly those involving influence, communication and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Importantly, EI is not viewed as a fixed personality characteristic but as a developmental capability that may be shaped by experience, context and organisational expectations (Raghubir 2018).

### Emotional intelligence and leadership theory

The relevance of EI to leadership is most clearly articulated within transformational and relational leadership frameworks. Transformational leadership theory emphasises behaviours such as individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, idealised influence and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Riggio 2006). Empirical studies suggest that EI may support these behaviours by enhancing leaders' capacity to recognise followers' needs, regulate emotional responses and communicate vision with empathy and authenticity (Gardner et al. 2009; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2013).

Manning (2021) argues that women leaders with higher levels of EI are more likely to engage in transformational leadership behaviours. Specifically, EI may strengthen individualised consideration through heightened emotional awareness, support inspirational motivation by enabling emotionally resonant communication and reinforce idealised influence through emotional self-regulation and ethical conduct. However, these associations are not deterministic and may vary depending on organisational culture, power relations and leadership expectations.

### Emotional intelligence, women and gendered leadership expectations

Women's leadership continues to be shaped by gendered norms and expectations regarding emotional expression, authority and competence. Nkomo and Ngambi (2017) contend that cultural expectations influence how women leaders' emotional behaviours are interpreted, often placing greater emotional demands on women than on men. In such contexts, EI may function as both a resource and a constraint. On the one hand, EI competencies such as empathy and interpersonal sensitivity may support relationship building and conflict management. On the other hand, they may reinforce expectations that women perform disproportionate emotional labour.

Critical scholars caution against assuming EI is universally beneficial. Grant (2014) suggests that high empathy, a core EI component, may lead to emotional exhaustion, reduced assertiveness and decision paralysis if not balanced with boundary setting. Similarly, Lindebaum and Jordan (2014) argue that excessive emotional sensitivity may undermine leadership authority in high-pressure or masculine-coded environments. These critiques are particularly salient for women leaders, who are often penalised for deviating from gender norms while simultaneously expected to display emotional competence (Eagly & Carli 2007; Heilman 2012).

### Emotional intelligence, empowerment and self-efficacy

Empowerment in leadership contexts is frequently linked to self-efficacy, defined as individuals' beliefs in their capacity to organise and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes (Ran et al. 2022). Emotional intelligence may contribute to self-efficacy by shaping emotionally supportive environments in which individuals receive constructive feedback, psychological safety and encouragement during periods of challenge. Leaders who demonstrate emotional awareness and regulation can influence how employees interpret setbacks and demands, potentially strengthening confidence and resilience (Majeed & Jamshed 2021).

For women leaders, EI-related relational competencies – such as active listening, empathy and collaborative engagement – may support empowerment by fostering trust and credibility within teams (Olawoyin 2018). However, the effectiveness of these competencies depends on contextual factors, including organisational culture, role expectations and access to resources. Emotional intelligence does not operate independently of these conditions and may not uniformly translate into empowerment or leadership effectiveness.

### Gender, leadership style and emotional intelligence

Research on gender and leadership style suggests that many women leaders adopt flexible and adaptive leadership approaches, adjusting their behaviours to situational demands and follower readiness (Mulawarman & Komariyah 2021). This flexibility aligns with situational and transformational leadership theories, which emphasise responsiveness to context rather than fixed leadership styles. Emotional intelligence may support such adaptability by enhancing leaders' capacity to read emotional and relational cues.

However, caution is warranted in attributing leadership effectiveness to gendered emotional traits. Eagly and Carli (2007) warn that framing women's leadership primarily around relational or emotional strengths risks marginalising their strategic and technical competencies. Moreover, Heilman (2012) demonstrates that gender stereotypes can lead to persistent doubts about women's leadership ability, regardless of actual performance. In this regard, EI may assist women leaders in navigating bias, but it does not eliminate structural or cultural barriers.

This study is primarily informed by transformational leadership theory, complemented by relational leadership perspectives, to examine how EI is perceived and enacted by women leaders.

## Research gap and questions

While existing literature highlights associations between EI, leadership behaviours and women's empowerment, much of this research adopts a predominantly positive or prescriptive stance. There remains limited qualitative, context-specific research examining how women leaders themselves experience, interpret and apply EI within public sector organisations in South Africa. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to the potential limitations, emotional costs and contextual constraints of EI in gendered leadership environments.

In response to these gaps, this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

- What role does EI play in empowering women in leadership positions?
- How do women leaders perceive the influence of EI on their leadership practices?

## Research methods and design

### Research paradigm and design

This study adopts an interpretivist worldview, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals may experience and interpret the same phenomenon differently. Ontologically, the study aligns with relativism, acknowledging multiple, context-dependent truths, while epistemologically, it adopts a subjectivist stance, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants. This paradigm is appropriate for exploring the nuanced role of EI in women's leadership experiences within complex organisational environments. To address the study's objective, a qualitative approach was employed with an exploratory cross-sectional design, enabling an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives at a single point in time. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews over a 20-day period, allowing for flexibility to probe participants' experiences while maintaining comparability across interviews.

### Population and sampling

The target population comprised women leaders within the CoJMM, aged between 35 and 52, holding positions that require decision-making, strategic management and interpersonal engagement. Participants represented professional domains such as development planning, legal administration, human resource management, economic development and housing. Their roles were considered particularly relevant because they frequently involve contexts in which EI may influence leadership practice and outcomes. A convenience sampling strategy was employed (Emerson 2021), resulting

in a sample of 15 women leaders. Table 1 summarises key participant characteristics, including age, role, tenure, professional background and years in leadership, to provide a detailed contextual understanding of the sample.

## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to capture participants' perceptions and experiences of EI in their leadership practice. The interview guide was informed by EI and leadership theory and included open-ended questions exploring self-awareness, emotion regulation, relational management and perceived impact on leadership behaviours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate capture of participants' responses.

## Data analysis

The data were analysed using Souza's (2019) thematic analysis process, which provided a systematic framework for identifying patterns and insights within the interviews. Initially, the recorded audio files were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher familiarised herself with the data by carefully reviewing the transcripts and noting emerging meanings and patterns. These observations formed the basis for generating a collection of codes, each representing a distinct idea, perception or behaviour related to EI and leadership. The codes were then grouped into categories that captured related concepts, which were subsequently organised into potential themes and sub-themes. This iterative process involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure they were coherent, distinct and supported by sufficient data. Themes that lacked adequate evidence were either merged with related themes or removed entirely, ensuring the final thematic structure accurately reflected participants' experiences. Throughout the analysis, coding was employed to minimise interpretive bias by grounding conclusions in multiple perspectives within the data.

To enhance validity, participants reviewed summaries of the interpreted data, confirming that the identified themes resonated with their experiences and accurately captured their perspectives. This approach ensured that the findings were both credible and reflective of the participants' lived realities.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is WBS/BA2496185/196. The research participants also signed informed consent forms before data collections resumed.

## Results

This was an exploratory study seeking to answer the research questions: What role does EI play in empowering women in leadership positions? How do women leaders perceive the influence of EI on their leadership practices? Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, from which the categories and themes emerged.

### Research question 1: What role does emotional intelligence play in empowering women in leadership positions?

Figure 1 presents an overview of the thematic patterns that emerged from participants' discussions on the role of EI in empowering women in leadership. Figure 1 is followed by a detailed analysis of the corresponding codes and categories, which collectively demonstrate that emotional regulation is perceived as central to women's effectiveness and credibility as leaders.

### Emotional regulation as a basis for credibility

Employees with higher levels of EI are more likely to display increased work performance and feel more empowered in the workplace. Across all interviews, participants emphasised

**TABLE 1:** Participants' profile.

| Participant identifier | Position               | Professional background                          | Years in leadership | Race            | Age (years) |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 1                      | 3x Manager             | Development planning: town and regional planning | 13                  | Black people    | 42          |
|                        |                        | Technical coordination: civil engineering        | 7                   | White people    | 52          |
|                        |                        |                                                  | 10                  | Black people    | 36          |
| 2                      | Operations Manager     | Registrations                                    | 15                  | Coloured people | 48          |
|                        | 3x Assistant Directors | Registrations: quantity surveying                | 9                   | Black people    | 37          |
|                        |                        | Technical coordination: civil engineering        | 11                  | Black people    | 44          |
|                        |                        | Spatial planning: urban and regional planning    | 18                  | White people    | 49          |
| 3                      | Director               | Development planning: town and regional planning | 17                  | Black people    | 49          |
| 4                      | Acting Director: IRED  | Economic development: town and regional planning | 9                   | Black people    | 36          |
| 5                      | Manager                | Pikitung: legal advise                           | 13                  | Black people    | 48          |
| 6                      | Manager                | Legal administration: planning and legal         | 17                  | White people    | 55          |
| 7                      | Deputy Director        | Housing department: property development         | 4                   | Black people    | 35          |
| 8                      | Manager                | Law enforcement and building control             | 5                   | Black people    | 42          |
|                        |                        | Human resources                                  | 9                   | Coloured people | 47          |
| 9                      | Deputy Director        | Human resources                                  | 8                   | Black people    | 51          |
|                        |                        | Finance                                          | 11                  | Black people    | 49          |

IRED, Integrated Regional Economic Development.



that women leaders who can regulate their emotions tend to be viewed as more credible and trustworthy in their organisations. One participant articulated this point as follows:

‘Another benefit of being able to control your emotions as a leader is that people respect you and your decisions and trust your decisions because they know your decision-making is not shadowed by emotions.’ (Participant 10, Interview 13 October 2023)

The participant emphasised the importance of women leaders in regulating their emotions, as this creates trust with co-workers in the leaders’ decision-making capabilities.

This view was echoed by Participant 6 (Interview 05 October 2023), who regarded emotional control as essential for women in leadership positions.

Stronger interpersonal connections, more effective communication and enhanced problem-solving abilities are all associated with high EI.

### Emotional intelligence and enhanced decision-making

Ten of the fifteen women leaders interviewed noted that a woman in a management position who controls her emotions can make a sound decision as her decision-making is not shadowed by emotions or by how she feels about the situation at hand:

‘Being a woman in a leadership position you are responsible for making many decisions and are required to make those decisions without being influenced by any other thing including your emotions. This is why it is very important to ensure that before making any decision one must think very carefully ... a good leader must be able to control her emotions.’ (Participant 9, Interview 12 October 2023)

In practice, being shadowed by emotions may manifest in a way where a leader may respond impulsively to conflict or make decisions based on frustration, stress or personalised interpretations of events rather than on organisational priorities. Such emotionally driven responses can lead to inconsistent decision-making, unprofessionalism and strained working relationships. Emotional intelligence allows leaders to pause, assess the situation and objectively choose a response aligned with organisational goals. Through self-awareness, a

leader identifies emotional triggers; through self-regulation, they manage these emotions in a controlled manner and through social awareness and relational management, they communicate decisions in ways that maintain trust and respect.

### Creating a positive and supportive work environment

This has been a dominant theme across the interview with a belief that emotionally intelligent women leaders are better positioned at fostering a positive work environment in which staff members are comfortable working. Participants stated that leaders who display self-awareness and emotional regulation create a climate where employees feel respected and motivated. For example:

‘Women in leadership positions who are self-aware are capable of creating a conducive and friendly working environment.’ (Participant 8, Interview 09 October 2023)

Self-aware leaders are typically more attuned to how their emotions, communication style and behavioural cues affect others. For instance, such leaders are more likely to monitor their tone and approach during difficult interactions, which helps prevent escalation during conflict:

‘As a leader, you can only create a positive and comfortable working environment if you are capable of controlling your emotions.’ (Participant 14, Interview 17 October 2023)

Participants noted that the ability to remain calm during conflict or high-pressure situations enhances organisational stability, strengthens interpersonal relationships and contributes to overall team cohesion.

### Research question 2: How do women leaders perceive the influence of emotional intelligence on their leadership practices?

Figure 2 presents the categories and themes generated from the thematic analysis for this research question. Overall, the findings highlight that EI significantly shapes how women leaders manage tasks, relationships and operational challenges.

#### Careful thinking and deliberate responses as a strategy

Women leaders can overcome gender-specific obstacles, improve their effectiveness as leaders and create empowering

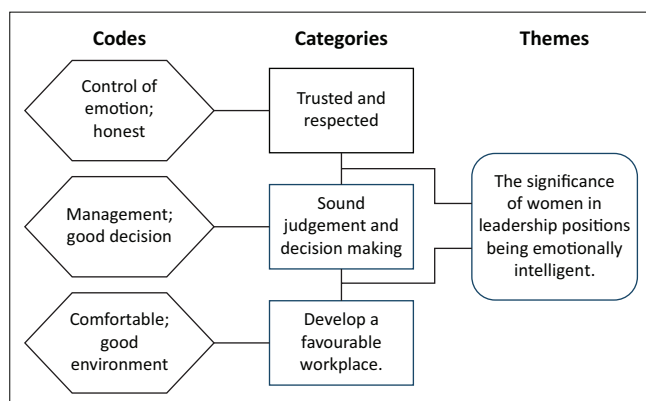


FIGURE 1: Research question 1 – Thematic analysis.

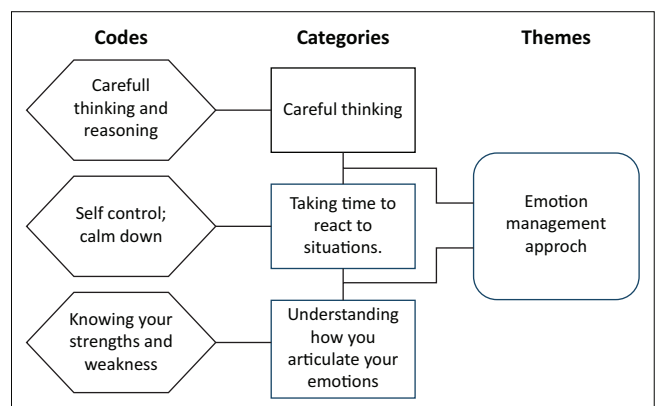


FIGURE 2: Research question 2 – Thematic analysis.

work cultures by comprehending and managing their emotions. The empowerment of women in leadership positions can be aided by the integration of their EI competencies into organisational procedures and culture. Participants consistently described the use of deliberate thinking and delayed responses as crucial EI-driven management behaviours. For instance:

'You know as a leader; it is not easy to control your emotions ... But I have trained myself to think before making any decision and it is working for me as the manager in this department.'  
(Participant 4, Interview 03 October 2023)

Similarly, another participant reported that taking time to process situations assists in handling matters more constructively:

'Reasoning and applying your mind is very important ... I think before jumping into answering and responding to the situations.'  
(Participant 14, Interview 19 October 2023)

Participants viewed these practices as essential in managing daily operational pressures.

### **Emotional intelligence as a tool for managing confrontation**

A further theme related to the use of EI is managing confrontation and emotionally charged situations. Participants described strategies such as requesting a pause before responding, taking a brief walk or distancing themselves momentarily as effective ways of regulating emotions in managerial contexts. One participant explained:

'As a woman leading a group of people, I always encounter confrontation and what I do is I avoid responding immediately on the matter. Sometimes I even go outside the building to take a short walk, and helps me not to be emotional, calms me down and be able to handle situations professionally.'  
(Participant 3, Interview 03 October 2023)

Participants agreed that a leader must train herself to think carefully about any situation that may arise in the workplace and that this is the best approach for a leader to handle matters without being emotional and maintain composure while upholding professional standards.

### **Self-awareness as a basis of effective management**

Emotion management assists women leaders in dealing with prejudices and biases that frequently depict women as overly emotional. Women can defy preconceptions by properly regulating their emotions. Emotion management allows women to pause before responding, think through what they want to say and present their decisions in a clear and balanced way. When a leader consistently shows composure and thoughtful behaviour, it becomes harder for others to rely on stereotypes about emotionality. This does not entirely remove prejudice, but it does help to demonstrate confidence and professionalism in leader's role. Participants emphasised that self-awareness allows leaders to anticipate responses and adopt appropriate management strategies. A participant clearly articulated this:

'One needs to be self-aware of their challenges and strengths on acting on their emotions because when you know your challenges or weaknesses you learn how to deal with them. When you know what you're good at, you use that to your advantage.'  
(Participant 5, Interview 05 October 2023)

Participants viewed self-awareness as essential for ensuring that workplace interactions remain constructive.

Most women are naturally flexible to adapt to any environment. Because of their flexibility, women tend to exhibit a flexible management style, and their leadership style is influenced by the demands of their workplace. Most of the participants have supplemented that it is critical to know things that normally stress you and things that make you lose control, and this has been identified as a significant step in knowing how to articulate yourself.

While most participants viewed EI positively, a few noted challenges such as the emotional effort required to remain composed in high-pressure environments, the perception that emotionally regulated behaviour can sometimes be overlooked or undervalued and instances where EI alone did not resolve organisational conflict. These insights suggest that EI, while beneficial, is not a universal solution and operates within broader structural and interpersonal constraints.

Emotional intelligence is widely regarded as a key trait in effective leadership, with particular emphasis on the ability to understand and consider others' emotions as vital for building strong professional relationships (Goleman 1995; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso 2004). Emotional control is seen as equally important for both men and women, with no link between gender and the need for EI development (Mayer & Salovey 1997). While leadership styles are viewed as independent of gender, it is acknowledged that women often face initial scepticism and must prove their capabilities to gain trust (Eagly & Carli 2007). Additionally, women are described as generally more adaptable, adjusting their leadership approach based on the demands of their work environment (Mulawarman & Komariyah 2021).

## **Discussion**

It was interesting to note the impact and the role that EI plays and how it empowers women who are in leadership positions to accomplish their work accurately. The research questions explored the role of EI in empowering women leaders and the perceived impact of EI on their leadership styles. The insights gathered highlight that EI equips women leaders with the capacity to manage emotions effectively, make informed decisions and navigate the complex interpersonal dynamics of the workplace.

Consistent with literature, the study shows that women leaders experience a variety of emotions when interacting with different people in the workplace, and it is important for these leaders to be able to manage and control their personal

emotions and other people's emotions. In some situations, emotionally attuned behaviour may be misinterpreted as weakness, indecisiveness or lack of authority particularly in environments with rigid hierarchical structures. The literature shows that the leader who possesses EI abilities is a leader who understands how to engage in effective prediction and can anticipate future emotional reactions of other people (Barreiro & Treglown 2020; Lubbadah 2020; Majeed & Jamshed 2021). This aligns with Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which suggests that high-quality relationships between leaders and followers based on trust, communication and mutual respect are strengthened by emotionally intelligent behaviours.

The findings also illustrate the significance of EI in enabling women leaders to perform their duties effectively. Participants reiterated that controlling personal emotions contributes to better decision-making, stronger interpersonal relationships and more supportive working environments. These observations mirror the principles of transformational leadership, where emotionally grounded leaders inspire followers, demonstrate individualised consideration and create positive organisational climates.

The findings also show EI as one dimension of leadership and not as the sole determinant. It recognises a balance with other competencies such as technical expertise, strategic thinking, policy knowledge, organisational awareness and decision-making abilities. Both the literature and findings have shown that it is important to self-regulate as this enhances an individual's efficacy as a leader and promotes professional and personal development. (Cherkowski et al. 2021; Matjie 2018). The literature has indicated that the leadership requirements will be inadequate if EI is not included and further mentioned that EI is a necessary skill for women who hold positions of leadership (Gilar-Corbi et al. 2019).

From both the literature and the findings, EI is a significant skill that assists leaders in creating a positive working environment that benefits both the leaders and subordinates. The literature has shown that a positive working environment created by the leader of an organisation has a positive influence on the productivity of an organisation (Papoutsis et al. 2022).

The study also found that emotionally intelligent women leaders actively cultivate positive relationships with subordinates, welcome constructive feedback and value open communication. This supports LMX theory but also aligns with Situational Leadership, where leaders adapt their style depending on the needs and emotional readiness of team members. Women leaders reported using EI to gauge the emotional climate of their teams and adjust their leadership behaviours to address challenges more effectively.

The findings reveal that women in leadership positions avoid responding to situations immediately as a strategy for managing their emotions, and this helps them to address

issues in a strategic manner. The literature has shown that EI means being able to build positive relationships with co-workers and welcome constructive feedback and criticism. Literature similarly emphasises the importance of self-awareness as a component of effective leadership, noting that it is a significant part of leadership. Baesu (2018) argues that EI is mostly analysed in relation to interactive relations, which include organisation leaders and employee relationships. This means emotional influence is important, and as the leaders play a key role in managing the emotions and mood in an organisation.

In relation to the study's intention, it is evident that being an emotionally intelligent leader, one needs to be aware of things that are challenging to them. Furthermore, the study found that women leaders often display flexible leadership styles, adapting to workplace demands, a behaviour strongly aligned with situational leadership theory. This adaptability, supported by EI, enables women to navigate complex organisational environments despite persistent gender biases (Jooste & Coetzee 2022; Raghubir 2018).

The study has found that even though we are living in a world of gender inequality, women's leadership skills are still being questioned. Participants have highlighted that the EI of male leaders is not superior to that of their female counterparts. Literature has also shown that both males and females have equal EI, even though they are emotionally intelligent in different ways.

In line with literature showing that a good leader can think about other people's feelings, the findings show that this is an important aspect as it is a significant step in building good working relationships. It is crucial for leaders to put themselves in the shoes of their juniors to understand their situation. If leaders understand how others are feeling, they will be able to communicate effectively and assist their co-workers. Emotionally intelligent woman leaders can navigate complex social dynamics through their improved communication and interpersonal skills.

Women show a flexible style of management, and this makes them adapt their style of leadership to any demand of the workplace. The literature shows that women who are in leadership tend to create an environment that is conducive for better performance compared to their male counterparts, which is fundamental to EI from a leadership perspective (Mulawarman & Komariyah 2021). The findings and the literature have indicated that women face additional challenges at work as there are people who still do not trust women leaders. Participants mentioned that women leaders can overcome these challenges and become successful in their leadership roles.

While this study emphasises the role of EI in shaping the effectiveness of women leaders, it is important to acknowledge that other factors may also have contributed to their success. Professional experience, organisational culture, access to

resources and supportive networks can each influence leadership outcomes and may interact with EI in complex ways. Overall, the findings underscore that EI is a vital competency for both women and men in leadership roles. However, because women leaders face unique barriers, including organisational culture challenges, gender bias and work–life balance pressures. Emotional intelligence becomes especially critical for their empowerment and leadership effectiveness. Consistent with existing literature (Goleman & Boyatzis 2017; Kanesan & Fauzan 2019; Mulawarman & Komariyah 2021; Raghubir 2018), EI-driven strategies such as emotional regulation, enhanced self-awareness and improved interpersonal skills enable women to navigate these challenges successfully.

### Limitations and future research

Although this study contributes important insights into the role of EI in women's leadership and management within the CoJMM, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study adopted a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample of 15 women in leadership positions. While this sample size is appropriate for qualitative, in-depth research, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to all female leaders within South African municipalities. The perspectives and insights captured are context specific and may not accurately reflect the experiences of women leaders in municipalities with different organisational cultures, resource constraints or governance structures.

Secondly, the study was constrained by time and budgetary limitations, which restricted access to a broader or more diverse group of participants. Engagements were limited to those who were available and willing to participate within the study period, which may have excluded voices that could have offered alternative perspectives and viewpoints.

Thirdly, the findings are based on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by individuals' willingness to

disclose, recall accuracy and attitude towards EI and leadership. As with most qualitative studies, the interpretation of data is shaped by the researcher's analytical lens, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and methodological rigour.

Fourthly, the study focused specifically on women leaders in one metropolitan municipality. Factors such as organisational structure, political environment and institutional culture may differ significantly across municipalities, and these differences may influence how EI is perceived and implemented in leadership roles.

An additional limitation of this study is the potential for affirmation bias, as the research predominantly assumes EI to be a positive contributor to leadership effectiveness. Future study should investigate the potential in which EI may not definitely contribute to better leadership outcomes. Such research would offer a more balanced and thorough understanding of the function of EI in leadership.

### Conclusion

Table 2 gives an overview of the key findings on the benefits of high EI and their practical implications.

Drawing from the outcomes of the study as summarised in Table 2, EI plays a meaningful role in ensuring the effectiveness of leadership. Women who are in leadership positions and emotionally intelligent are trusted and respected by their subordinates. Emotionally intelligent women leaders can create positive working environments where staff members are comfortable and enjoy working. The perception of the participants on the impact of EI is that the emotionally intelligent leader contributes significantly to the effective functioning of an organisation.

Women in leadership positions need to have strategies for managing their emotions to ensure effective management of their responses. Leaders who use EI strategies in managing their emotions respond well in all situations compared to leaders who do not have any EI strategies.

**TABLE 2:** Summary of the findings and implications.

| Description                                 | Key findings                                                                                   | Implications and recommendations                                               |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional intelligence (EI) and empowerment | EI empowers women leaders by enhancing decision-making, conflict resolution and team dynamics. | EI may enhance effective leadership and organisational success.                |
| Manager's leadership style and EI           | Women leaders with high EI adopt flexible leadership styles and adapt to workplace demands.    | Flexibility in leadership improves team morale and organisational performance. |
| Self-regulation and decision-making         | Emotionally intelligent women leaders regulate emotions, leading to sound, unbiased decisions. | EI training can improve leadership efficacy and trustworthiness.               |
| Workplace relationships                     | EI may foster positive relationships and a conducive work environment.                         | Improved relationships enhance collaboration and productivity.                 |
| Gender and EI                               | EI is not gender specific; both men and women benefit from EI development.                     | EI training should be inclusive and organisation wide.                         |
| Challenges faced by women leaders           | Gender bias, organisational culture and work–life balance hinder EI development.               | Organisations must address systemic barriers and support EI growth.            |
| Strategies for emotion management           | Techniques include delaying responses, self-awareness and reflection.                          | Leaders should be trained in emotion regulation strategies.                    |
| Training and development                    | EI should be a criterion for leadership placement; training is essential.                      | Organisations should implement EI-focused leadership development programs.     |
| Impact on organisational Culture            | EI may contribute to a respectful, empathetic and high-performing culture.                     | EI integration into organisational culture may enhance overall effectiveness.  |

EI, emotional intelligence.



Women leaders that can manage the emotions of others professionally are likely to be respected by their subordinates. A woman leader who is respected by her subordinates can have a positive influence on their subordinates. An emotionally intelligent woman leader develops good human relations in the workplace, because they can promote teamwork and respect among others, which further ensures the effectiveness of the organisation.

The study acknowledges the significance of a leader who can solve complex social challenges in an organisation. This means that a strong relationship exists between EI and the performance of a leader within an organisation. Many successful women leaders show a flexible style of management. This means that they adapt their leadership style according to the demands of the environment in which they are working. Emotional intelligence assists women in leadership and tends to create a conducive environment for better performance. This has been identified as a critical aspect of the development of women leaders. Women who are in leadership positions may face additional barriers and biases that can hinder their leadership opportunities and recognition, as shown in the results of the study.

The findings have shown that EI is perceived to have a positive influence on women in leadership positions. Therefore, this study recommends that EI should be a requirement for placing women in leadership positions. It is possible to find people who are not just competent but also capable of leading with empathy and effectiveness. This can be achieved by taking a comprehensive strategy that considers these EI characteristics in addition to technical abilities and experience. There is a need to acknowledge the significance of stress management and work-life balance. Women leaders frequently manage a variety of tasks, and encouraging a great work-life balance enhances EI by supporting emotional well-being. Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that organisations consider integrating EI assessments and development opportunities into their leadership selection, support and training processes. The participants highlighted the value of emotional regulation, self-awareness and the ability to manage interpersonal dynamics, suggesting that these competencies contribute positively to leadership effectiveness. Incorporating EI-related development such as training on emotional regulation, communication and managing workplace relationships may therefore assist both current and emerging leaders in performing their roles more effectively.

Organisations must develop specialised training courses that emphasise EI proficiencies like empathy, self-control, self-awareness and interpersonal skills. The leadership training programmes should include workshops on EI skills as a way of equipping the women leaders. The literature and findings are consistent about training women in leadership positions on EI skills. Future research on the effective strategies for managing emotions that can be used by women in leadership positions is required. Such research findings must be made available to all relevant parties within organisations.

The findings and literature have shown that EI is a significant aspect of women in leadership positions, and because of that, the study recommends that organisations such as the CoJMM should encourage leadership sessions where leaders can learn from each other. This can be achieved through a session where leaders come together to share their different EI strategies, which they use in their respective units within the organisation. The sessions could be made compulsory for all men and women in leadership positions. Future research could be conducted on the relationship between EI in women leaders and their psychological well-being by exploring the level-headed application of EI in the workplace through observing the participants.

The findings have shown that it is significant for women who are in leadership positions to have a good relationship with their subordinates. This study recommends that women in leadership positions support, respect and care for the subordinates they are leading. The interview results have shown that people face various challenges in their lives; hence, it is significant for leaders to show empathy towards their subordinates.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Vukosi M. Makhubele's master's thesis titled 'Emotional Intelligence and empowerment of women leaders in South Africa', submitted to the Wits Business School in 2024. The thesis is currently unpublished and not publicly available. The thesis was supervised by Jabulile Msimango-Galawe. The thesis was reworked, revised and adapted into a journal article for publication. The author confirms that the content has not been previously published or disseminated and complies with ethical standards for original publication.

The authors would like to thank Jacques Myburgh for his valuable assistance with editorial support at the end of this project. While his contribution was important, it did not meet the criteria for authorship.

## Competing interests

The authors, Vukosi M. Makhubele and Jabulile Msimango-Galawe, have reported that they received funding from the Female Academic Leaders Fellowship (FALF) under the 2024 Research Grant that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. They have disclosed those interests fully and have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Vukosi M. Makhubele: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. Jabulile Msimango-Galawe: Project administration, Supervision and Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

## Funding information

The authors, Vukosi M. Makhubele and Jabulile Msimango-Galawe, disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. This work was supported by the Female Academic Leaders Fellowship (FALF) under the 2024 Research Grant.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Jabulile Msimango-Galawe. The data are not publicly available because of confidentiality agreements with participants.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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