



Exploring men's perceptions of implicit bias and exclusion on women's advancement to senior leadership roles

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Background: Gender bias and exclusionary practices continue to hinder women's progression into senior leadership, particularly in male-dominated sectors. Understanding men's perceptions of these biases is crucial for addressing unseen barriers and promoting an inclusive leadership environment.

Aim: The aim of the research was to explore male perspectives on implicit bias and exclusion that affect women's career advancement.

Setting: The study focused on male-dominated industries in South Africa, including technology, mining, supply chain, manufacturing, financial services and print, to offer insights into how cultural norms and industry-specific biases influence organisational practices.

Methods: A cross-sectional qualitative research approach was used, involving semi-structured interviews with male participants from diverse backgrounds within male-dominated industries. Thematic analysis, informed by the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders, was conducted to identify patterns of bias and potential strategies for inclusion.

Results: The findings revealed four primary themes: organisational culture and gender bias, barriers to female leadership, empowerment strategies and leadership traits compatible with career progression. Key insights included the role of male validation, the impact of cultural expectations on Black women and the need for inclusive mentorship and re-entry programmes in physically demanding sectors.

Conclusion: The research findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive, intersectional policies that recognise and address unique challenges faced by women, particularly black women, in leadership pathways.

Contribution: Organisations should consider leadership criteria and implement targeted support systems to build a more inclusive environment that values diverse leadership qualities.

Keywords: gender bias; implicit bias; male perspectives; leadership advancement; intersectionality; organisational culture; diversity policies.

Introduction

Gender bias presents a persistent barrier to women's advancement into senior leadership roles, particularly within male-dominated sectors. Organisational diversity initiatives have evolved, yet subtle and systemic biases continue to reinforce male-dominated norms, implicitly positioning men as more suited for leadership roles and placing women at a disadvantage (Diehl et al. 2020; Eagly & Karau 2002). Addressing these barriers demands not only understanding women's experiences but also examining how men perceive, interpret and potentially reinforce these biases, as men often hold key decision-making roles and shape organisational culture (Greenwald & Lai 2020).

Exploring men's perspectives uncovered the hidden structures and attitudes that subtly limit women's access to leadership. In traditionally male-dominated industries such as technology, mining, supply chain, manufacturing, financial services and print, insights from men revealed how organisational cultures often create exclusive, male-centric networks, reinforcing bias in both decision-making and opportunity distribution. Men's viewpoints shed light on the internal dynamics and informal networks that sustain these barriers, which may remain unseen within the formal scope of diversity programmes. These insights deepen the understanding of organisational cultures where subtle biases operate unchecked, hindering women's career progression (Rosette & Livingston 2017).

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To explore these dynamics, the adaptation of the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders provided a nuanced framework for assessing implicit bias in leadership contexts (Diehl et al. 2020). Applying this tool from a male perspective captures the ways in which decision-making processes, validation of ideas and assessments of leadership traits may unconsciously favour men. Rather than simply acknowledging bias, this approach enabled a detailed examination of how men perceive and perpetuate subtle forms of exclusion, often embedded within traditional notions of leadership that favour assertiveness, risk-taking and competitiveness, qualities frequently coded as masculinity (Ely & Thomas 2020).

Adding to this complexity are cultural expectations uniquely impacting black women, who often face heightened obligations and culturally rooted deference, especially towards older male colleagues. These intersectional barriers, rarely addressed by generic organisational diversity policies, underscore the need for interventions adapted to different cultural backgrounds and work-life dynamics. In the South African context, where cultural norms shape both personal and professional interactions, recognising these multi-layered barriers is essential for creating truly inclusive policies that acknowledge the varied experiences of women in the workplace.

Research purpose and objectives

This research explores men's perspectives on implicit gender bias and exclusionary practices that restrict women's advancement to senior leadership roles in male-dominated sectors. By identifying both structural and cultural barriers, it aimed to uncover actionable pathways to promote women's leadership progression and inclusivity. Examining these biases through a male perspective provided a unique lens, offering insight into how men perceive and potentially perpetuate these barriers. This approach deepened the understanding of organisational bias dynamics by highlighting men's roles not only as observers but as influential factors in shaping leadership pathways. By focusing on perspectives within traditionally male-dominated industries, the study enriches the literature with a fuller, more nuanced view of gender-based exclusion and career progression.

Research questions

This research sought to answer the following two questions:

Firstly, how do men in male-dominated sectors perceive and interpret the role of implicit bias and exclusion in hindering women's advancement to senior leadership roles? Secondly, what strategies and pathways do men in male-dominated sectors believe could effectively mitigate implicit bias and exclusion, thereby promoting women's advancement to senior leadership roles?

Literature review

The literature on gender bias explores how implicit biases and exclusionary practices continue to hinder women's advancement into senior leadership roles. Despite significant

organisational efforts towards gender diversity, subtle biases remain pervasive, shaping workplace dynamics in ways that limit women's access to leadership opportunities (Eagly & Karau 2002; Kossek, Su & Wu 2016). Key constructs such as gender roles, implicit bias and intersectionality contribute to these barriers (Diehl et al. 2020; Rosette & Livingston 2017). Organisational practices often reflect these biases despite visible diversity initiatives, underscoring the necessity of examining men's perceptions to understand unseen barriers in male-dominated industries.

Roles and leadership

Gender roles, defined as societal constructs dictating expected behaviours, significantly shape leadership dynamics. Leadership is often linked with masculine qualities such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while women are expected to embody communal traits such as empathy (Eagly & Karau 2002). According to Social Role Theory, these norms affect both career paths and perceptions, leading to a double bind for women who are pressured to display both competence and warmth to avoid negative evaluations (Heilman, Caleo & Manzi 2024). This creates barriers, particularly in male-dominated fields where leadership traits are viewed through a gendered lens (Kossek et al. 2016). As leadership roles evolve to embrace diverse styles, understanding these norms becomes essential in promoting gender diversity (Laskar, Sahu & Choudhury 2024).

Gender diversity and organisational performance

Gender diversity at board and workforce levels positively impacts organisational outcomes, including financial performance and innovation. Organisations with greater gender diversity benefit from enriched decision-making, leading to stronger firm performance and higher employee engagement (Laskar et al. 2024). Firms with more women leaders report higher returns on assets and improved customer satisfaction (Hoobler et al. 2018; Triana, Richard & Su 2019). Gender-diverse teams promote inclusion, enhancing job satisfaction and organisational adaptability (Islam, Mattingly & Scott 2021). However, these benefits are often limited by lingering biases, as many companies struggle to effectively implement diversity (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2017).

Gender discrimination in the workplace

The glass ceiling, which represents the unspoken barriers preventing women from reaching top roles, remains a persistent challenge in many industries (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2017). While explicit discrimination has decreased, more subtle, systemic biases remain. Women are subject to harsher scrutiny in evaluations, facing negative stereotypes that question their leadership potential (Zhang, Jia & Yan 2022). These biases are compounded for women of colour, who experience intersectional challenges because of both gender and racial biases, highlighting the need for more nuanced diversity initiatives (Rosette & Livingston 2017; Showunmi 2019).

Evolution of implicit bias in organisational contexts

Implicit biases, once understood primarily as individual attitudes, are now seen as embedded within organisational systems, influencing processes such as hiring and evaluations (Greenwald & Lai 2020). Organisational cultures favouring masculine traits can marginalise women, underscoring the need for structural reforms to mitigate these biases (Annabi & Lebovitz 2018). Addressing these institutionalised biases requires examining how they manifest across women's career trajectories, influencing advancement at every level (Diehl et al. 2020).

The role of implicit bias on women's advancement

Implicit bias significantly impacts women's career progression by limiting access to promotions and high-visibility assignments (Diehl et al. 2020). Women face barriers in accessing mentorship and sponsorship opportunities essential for advancement, which reinforces biases (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb 2019). This impact is amplified for women with intersecting identities, such as race and socioeconomic status, underscoring the importance of recognising these compounded biases (Rosette & Livingston 2017).

Implicit bias and exclusion

Implicit bias, defined as unconscious stereotypes shaping perceptions, often manifests through exclusionary practices that limit women's access to leadership roles. In organisational settings, these biases lead to biased performance evaluations and restricted access to decision-making networks (Kossek et al. 2016; Thompson 2024). The subtle nature of these biases complicates detection, yet their impact is profound, as women are sidelined from high-visibility opportunities essential for career advancement (Steele & Aronson 1995).

Gender bias and leadership advancement

Gender bias in organisations has evolved from overt exclusion to subtler forms of bias embedded within cultural norms. Implicit biases perpetuate gender disparities by reinforcing perceptions that leadership requires traditionally masculine qualities, disadvantaging women (Greenwald & Lai 2020). These biases are challenging to dismantle because of their subtlety and pervasive influence on evaluations and promotions (Steele & Aronson 1995). Addressing these biases requires a shift beyond awareness training towards systemic changes in organisational policies and culture (Nelson & Zippel 2021; Noon 2018).

Subtle gender bias

Subtle gender bias includes microaggressions, performance biases and informal exclusion from leadership networks, impacting women's career trajectories (Diehl et al. 2020; Kossek et al. 2016). Ambivalent behaviours, often directed unconsciously, create additional challenges for women in leadership roles, who face organisational cultures that undermine their contributions (Diehl & Dzubinski 2016).

Overcoming these biases demands a shift in organisational assumptions, recognising the unspoken standards that perpetuate gender hierarchies (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb 2011).

The Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders provides a tool for measuring subtle forms of organisational bias, particularly relevant in environments where male perceptions are critical to understanding gendered leadership challenges. This scale highlights categories such as competence assumptions, exclusion from networks and biased evaluations, offering a comprehensive assessment of how biases affect women's leadership advancement (Diehl et al. 2020; Madsen 2021). Utilising this tool aligns with the research objective to capture nuanced data on gender biases affecting women's leadership opportunities.

Intersectionality and exclusion

The intersectionality framework examines how social identities interact, creating unique challenges for women from diverse backgrounds (Kaufmann & Derry 2023). Inclusive organisations benefit from a broader range of talents and perspectives, which supports a culture of innovation (Rahming 2021). By implementing policies that address multiple forms of marginalisation, organisations can create more equitable workplaces that leverage the strengths of a diverse workforce (Kossek et al. 2016).

Organisational outcomes of gender diversity

Empirical studies demonstrate that gender-diverse leadership teams outperform their less diverse counterparts across financial, creative and cultural metrics (Rahming 2021). Gender diversity has been linked to enhanced employee engagement and job satisfaction, which promotes retention and organisational success (Ely & Thomas 2020). This makes gender diversity an imperative not only for moral reasons but also as a strategic advantage in competitive industries (Arora 2021; Fernandez & Campero 2016). However, implicit biases can restrict these benefits, revealing the importance of addressing these barriers to fully realise diversity's advantages (Kossek et al. 2016).

Research design and methodology

Research approach

A qualitative approach was chosen to explore male perspectives on implicit gender bias and exclusionary practices within leadership pathways. This approach is well-suited for understanding complex social dynamics, especially when examining deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes that may not be immediately visible in quantitative data. By focusing on participants' narratives and experiences, the study aimed to reveal the underlying perceptions that influence organisational culture and affect women's progression to senior leadership roles. The flexibility of a qualitative approach allowed themes to emerge naturally from the data, enabling a richer, more nuanced understanding of how gender bias operates in male-dominated sectors without imposing predetermined categories or expectations (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were administered to gather detailed insights, using an interview guide with open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to share their thoughts in their own words. This interview format was particularly effective because it balanced structure with the freedom for participants to elaborate on their experiences, fostering an environment where unanticipated responses could surface. Open-ended questions enabled the study to delve into specific incidents and personal observations, while follow-up questions encouraged deeper reflection. This approach provided a robust framework for capturing both expected and unexpected themes, offering a comprehensive view of how gender bias and exclusionary practices are perceived by men within organisational contexts (Golbeck et al. 2016).

Research strategy

Semi-structured interviews were administered by the researcher using an interview guide. The questions covered critical themes such as perceptions of implicit gender bias, experiences with exclusionary practices and observations on women's progression to leadership roles within male-dominated sectors. This allowed for structured exploration of key topics while also enabling flexibility for deeper insights. Open-ended questions were used, inviting participants to express their perspectives in their own words, which enriched the data with authentic, personal narratives. Follow-up questions were posed to encourage elaboration and responses that the researcher had not anticipated, capturing unplanned insights and nuanced reflections. Examining lived experiences allowed participants to share their views on organisational gender dynamics, revealing the nuanced impact of gender biases that might not be readily apparent. This approach was suited for exploring the subtleties of implicit bias, given the study's focus on individual perceptions and experiences within male-dominated fields (Schultheiss 2021).

Research method

Establishing research roles

Access to participants was secured by the researcher post formal approval from the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria Ethics Committee. Each participant was approached individually, and the research objectives, scope and ethical considerations were explained to obtain their informed consent. The researcher ensured that participants were fully aware of their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. All interviews were conducted by the researcher.

Research participants and sampling methods

The study population comprised of men from male-dominated sectors and diverse ethnic backgrounds, chosen to reflect the organisational barriers impacting women's advancement (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2017). Criteria included participants from different ethnic backgrounds and who have worked with or reported to women in senior roles, within male-dominated

industries, as shown in Table 1. This provided a deep understanding of how men perceive organisational dynamics, particularly as these pertain to bias and exclusion impacting women's career advancement (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants, ensuring they met criteria relevant to the study's objectives, including experience in male-dominated industries and exposure to senior leadership roles (Kossek et al. 2016). Fourteen interviews were conducted, achieving thematic saturation when no new insights emerged, ensuring a comprehensive range of perspectives that enriched the study's validity through diversity in participant experiences (Guest, Namey & Chen 2020; Hennink & Kaiser 2022).

The individual participant formed the unit of analysis, allowing a detailed examination of personal perspectives on implicit bias within organisational structures. This approach aligns with the study's goal of capturing the micro-level dynamics that reinforce gender hierarchies (Annabi & Lebovitz 2018).

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews, informed by an adaptation of the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders (Diehl et al. 2020), were used to capture rich qualitative data. The interview guide featured open-ended questions designed by the researcher to gather male perspectives on gender dynamics, workplace exclusionary practices and organisational culture. This format allowed participants to share experiences in depth, ensuring data captured nuanced attitudes and perceptions relevant to implicit bias (McCracken 1988). By framing questions around key categories in the gender bias scale, the study provided a robust framework to explore subtle biases, including perspectives about women's leadership abilities and exclusion from decision-making. Active listening techniques and open-ended follow-up questions were employed to establish rapport, encouraging participants to share insights openly (Nassaji 2020). Applying the scale with male participants offered a novel perspective on how these biases impact women's progression to senior leadership (Diehl et al. 2020).

Data recording

Interviews were conducted online and audio-recorded, each lasting between 28 and 70 minutes. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, labelled and stored securely, ensuring a reliable foundation for analysis (Creswell & Creswell 2019). This approach allowed for accurate documentation and facilitated comprehensive thematic exploration in the analysis phase.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Several quality controls were employed, including thematic saturation, triangulation and transcript validation. Thematic saturation was achieved by the 13th interview, ensuring data collection reached a natural endpoint with no new

TABLE 1: Sample population (hierarchical level, industry and ethnicity).

Participant number	Interview duration (minutes)	Management experience of 5 years and longer	Has report to a women leader	Hierarchical level	Industry	Ethnicity
Participant 1	70	Yes	Yes	Director	Technology	White person
Participant 2	54	Yes	Yes	Middle management	Mining	Black person
Participant 3	44	Yes	Yes	Senior management	Mining	Black person
Participant 4	44	Yes	Yes	Senior management	Supply Chain	Coloured person
Participant 5	44	Yes	Yes	Executive	Mining	Indian person
Participant 6	37	Yes	Yes	Middle management	Financial Services	Black person
Participant 7	35	Yes	Yes	Senior management	Manufacturing	Indian person
Participant 8	34	Yes	Yes	Middle management	Print	Indian person
Participant 9	33	Yes	Yes	Director	Technology	White person
Participant 10	30	Yes	Yes	Senior management	Mining	Black person
Participant 11	30	Yes	Yes	Director	Technology	White person
Participant 12	30	Yes	Yes	Middle management	Mining	Black person
Participant 13	32	Yes	Yes	Senior management	Mining	Black person
Participant 14	28	Yes	Yes	Middle management	Technology	Indian person

insights emerging (Guest et al. 2020). Triangulation across participant perspectives enhanced reliability, and transcripts were carefully checked against audio recordings for accuracy, reinforcing the methodological rigour of the study (Johnson, Kirk & Keplinger 2018).

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a phenomenological approach using open, axial and selective coding to develop themes. ATLAS.Ti was used to generate 144 initial open codes from participant narratives, which were then consolidated into 22 axial codes and then further categorised into nine before refining them into four selective codes. This inductive process allowed themes to emerge organically from the data, capturing participant perspectives and enhancing the depth and reliability of findings (Williams & Moser 2019).

Data were analysed iteratively, with transcripts revisited multiple times to ensure comprehensive theme identification. The coding process was grounded in participants' words, allowing theme generation directly from the data. This rigorous approach yielded themes that provided a cohesive understanding of the barriers and pathways to women's leadership advancement within male-dominated sectors (Bell et al. 2019).

Reporting style

The findings are organised thematically, with each theme explained clearly and illustrated by quotes from participants to highlight key insights. Selected quotes capture participants' perspectives authentically. Themes are presented with a focus on the main research objectives, ensuring a clear and concise presentation of the data. This approach provides a comprehensive view of male perspectives on gender bias and exclusion in leadership.

Findings

The analysis process involved coding and categorising participants' responses, beginning with 144 open codes.

Through iterative analysis, these were refined into 22 axial codes and then further distilled into four overarching themes. Each theme represents a distinct area where organisational dynamics influence female leadership opportunities, capturing participants' insights on the barriers and biases that shape women's progression to senior roles. The main themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2.

Theme 1: Organisational culture and gender bias

Male participants highlighted three key areas where this bias emerges: firstly, by reinforcing traditional gender roles, especially in physically demanding sectors such as mining; secondly, through male-dominated decision-making networks that exclude women from key discussions; and thirdly, by placing a high value on male endorsement as a prerequisite for female credibility. Together, these factors contribute to a culture that prioritises male leadership qualities, limiting both the perception and progression of women in senior roles.

Sub-theme 1.1: Organisational culture and gender roles

The research found that men within the mining industry, opposed to men in the other industries, expressed stronger views on women's roles as passive or supportive, often attributing this perception to the physically demanding nature of the sector. Participants highlighted how organisational culture enforces traditional gender roles, positioning men as natural leaders while viewing women as better suited for supportive positions. Across 24 codes, men described a culture where assertiveness and decisiveness are culturally linked to male leadership, while empathy and collaboration, qualities often associated with women, are undervalued in leadership assessments.

Participant 8 described this bias as follows (Code: Male privilege in workplace expectations – Category: Cultural norms and gender stereotypes):

'Males feel that they are more entitled to positions. Men feel that they don't need to be to listen to their female counterparts, that even if they are on the same level, the male always feels like he is

TABLE 2: Themes, categories and sub-themes.

Selective themes	Categories (Axial)		Open (144 codes)
	(22)	(9) Sub-themes	
Organisational culture and gender bias	Organisational culture and gender roles	Cultural norms and gender stereotypes	10
		Cultural adaptation and bias	14
	Male favouring decision-Making processes	Bias in leadership opportunities	7
		Institutional barriers	4
	Requirement for male validation for credibility	Cultural and structural barriers	3
		Validation through male authority	5
Barriers to female leadership: Failure and exclusion	Setting up for failure	Challenges in female leadership	5
		High-Risk leadership roles	5
		Barriers to success	10
	Social exclusion	Organisational sabotage	4
		Exclusion in leadership dynamics	6
		Exclusion because of cultural and language barriers	4
Empowerment and success strategies	Mentorship and sponsorship	Building leadership through mentorship	4
		Structured leadership development	4
	Success stories	Overcoming bias and exclusion	5
		Positive female leadership impact	4
	Strategies to reduce bias and exclusion	Practical strategies for bias reduction	5
		Institutional and leadership initiatives	6
Leadership traits and gender compatibility	Gender traits compatible with organisational career progression	Assertiveness and self-advocacy	4
		Adopting male leadership persona	4
		Personality traits and leadership	4
		Career barriers and sacrifices	27

one slightly of a higher level because of the fact that he's male.' (P8, Middle Management, Print, Indian person)

Participant 2 described gender roles as the following (Code: Gender bias – Category: Cultural adaption and bias):

'Processing is more office based, less hard work, as compared to the mines, whereby it is still hard labour based, and there's still some bias there in terms of prejudice towards women that they cannot do hard labour, even though they have demonstrated their ability.' (P2, Middle Management, Mining, black person)

Participant 10 stated the following (Code: Organisational consciousness on gender representation – Category: Cultural adaption and bias):

'The easier way is obviously through the organization, but we must always look at this in lens of, how do we transform communities? How do we transform people to not only think of this when they walk in the doors of an organization, but to be truly transformed in their thinking around the value and the worth and the capability of women to be able to truly accept that.' (P10, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Sub-theme 1.2: Male-favouring decision-making processes

Participants indicated that decision-making processes within the organisation frequently favour men, establishing exclusive circles where critical decisions are discussed, and influence is concentrated among male colleagues. Informal networks and

long-standing relationships create a 'feeder system' that grants men disproportionate access to information and strategic discussions, leaving women excluded from essential conversations.

Participant 5 explained the following (Code: Male dominated feeder system – Category: Bias in leadership opportunities):

'The old guard would have developed certain relationships that would make concepts and visions and strategies land better with the rest of the old guard.' (P5, Executive, Mining, Indian person)

Participant 12 shared the following (Code: Male dominated feeder system – Category: Bias in leadership opportunities):

'We know that guys find it easy to hang out with each other, especially in corners and all the informal settings, talking about soccer and things that they commonly like sports, and that's when they discuss informally what is happening within the company. They share knowledge, and surprisingly, you might find also even that major decisions are also taken. You would not even know of what was agreed upon.' (P12, Middle Management, Mining, black person)

Sub-theme 1.3: Requirement for male validation for credibility

The findings reveal that male validation remains a crucial factor in establishing credibility for female leaders, revealing a structural bias that undermines women's authority and reinforces male dominance in leadership roles. This perspective, grounded in male participants' own observations, provides a novel angle, shedding light on how men perceive and contribute to the dynamics that demand male endorsement for female contributions to be acknowledged. Men's insights into their own reactions and biases offer an unfiltered view into why female voices often struggle to gain equal recognition in leadership spaces.

Participant 4 described the following (Code: Disregard for female authority – Category: Validation through male authority):

'She said something, I say exactly what she's said in a different way, and then they don't get the response right? The Leadership Team literally does not respond. They almost just brush it over and move on, which is sad, because it demoralises females in the workplace. They feel like they don't have a voice, and the fact that they constantly need to reassure and affirm why they are sitting at the table.' (P4, Senior Management, Supply Chain, Coloured person)

Participant 3 explained the following (Code: Fears of female authority – Category: Challenges in female leadership):

'There's a fear, what if she does so well, and then she becomes our boss tomorrow? How are we going to deal with it? I think it's a consideration that males may have, if you really want to suffer, have a female boss, you are going to suffer. I have seen great female bosses, but because they're not so many, and there are few examples of where it seems to be working out, people fear having to experience it, and therefore may act in manners that are not supportive of female careers out of fear of the unknown.' (P3, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Theme 2: Barriers to female leadership: Failure and exclusion

The findings reveal that men observe significant barriers to women's leadership progression, with structural biases and cultural norms both playing roles. Male participants noted how women often face the 'glass cliff', placed in high-risk roles without adequate support, and are excluded from informal networking spaces, limiting their visibility with senior leaders. Participants also highlighted that these barriers differ by background; Black women, for instance, encounter added pressures from family responsibilities and cultural norms that discourage assertiveness with Black male bosses. Together, these male perspectives underscore how organisational and cultural biases intertwine, restricting women's advancement in leadership.

Sub-theme 2.1: Set up for failure

Participants highlighted the concept of the 'glass cliff', where women are promoted to high-risk roles with limited support, seemingly set up to struggle rather than succeed. Participant accounts suggest that such roles are offered with insufficient resources or guidance, making it challenging for women to thrive under the same conditions as their male counterparts. In addition, the research reveals how organisational biases favour individuals with greater visibility to senior leaders, contributing to a form of strategic exclusion that limits women's access to leadership pathways.

Participant 8 stated the following (Code: Glass cliff – Category: High risk leadership roles):

'She was very capable. She was not given the support that she needed. It was almost a situation where they were put there to see if she will succeed or not. It wasn't a matter of putting her there in that position and giving her the support that she needs in order to succeed, giving her the help that you need in order to succeed.' (P8, Middle Management, Print, Indian person)

Participant 10 highlighted the following (Code: Strategic exclusion from leadership – Category: Organisational sabotage):

'There are instances for a career opportunity, it speaks to visibility, and being in proximity to senior leaders often puts you front of mind when it comes to promotions, appointments, etc. If I see someone often, I might be more likely to recommend them for a position, or if I see some or if I have more in common with someone I might, you know, perceive them to be a lot more competent than they actually truly are, and I think that creates a bit of a bottleneck. And I do think in that particular case, they needed to have a bit more sensitivity and foresight to be able to think differently about that.' (P10, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Sub-theme 2.2: Social exclusion

The findings reveal that social exclusion remains a significant barrier to women's advancement in leadership roles, often occurring in informal yet influential settings. Male participants highlighted how exclusion from activities such as golf outings and team-building events, commonly preferred by men, limits women's networking opportunities and interaction with senior leaders. These settings allow for bonding and visibility, which play a crucial role in leadership dynamics but inherently exclude women who may not engage in such activities. Furthermore, participants noted that these exclusionary

practices stem from cultural norms and social expectations that extend beyond the workplace, rooted in long-standing beliefs and behaviours shaped by early socialisation.

Participant 3 shared the following (Code: Exclusion from networking opportunities – Category: Exclusion in leadership dynamics):

'There are events that allow the team members to interact with people outside their ordinary teams. And what you will see in most organisations, like in our industry, is there will be things like a golf team building. Now you would know that traditionally, nobody stops women from playing golf, but it's not something that we hear a lot of women say, "I am going out this evening or I went out on Friday." We're going to play golf, right? So, by virtue of deciding that the majority of male's play golf, and therefore the team building, or the afternoon excursion is golf, alienates the women because they don't play golf. Somebody can say, yes, they can come and cart around, but I mean, they are here to play right, and now they are being deprived of that interaction, or the bonding in the group. The interaction maybe with other senior people, because you find that the person that has arranged the golf day is the executive wanting to interact with this team, leadership and maybe the subordinates to the people. You will find that the women are predominantly not there. In terms of exposure, where the executive gets to interact with people and just get to know them better, it's happening in a setup that did not lend itself well to females being part of those activities.' (P3, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Participant 10 mentioned the following (Code: Generation impact of exclusion – Category: Exclusion because of cultural and language barriers):

'To be able to solve this problem of exclusion, we as people need to look at broader than just organisational. These things come from home, and what we're dealing with, and usually it's easier to deal with it in an organisation, because an organisation is structured, but these things come from home. These are things that are embedded at home. And for you to be able to solve these problems, you need to somehow be able to do that within a community. It's the things that get said on a Friday night. It's those comments that get made at the gym. It's the things that are ingrained in how people are brought up, where people grow up, to truly be able to transform.' (P10, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Theme 3: Empowerment and success strategies

Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship and sponsorship as tools that provide guidance, skills and influential networks, essential for equipping women to navigate leadership pathways. In addition, success stories of female leaders overcoming challenges act as powerful models, encouraging shifts in male perceptions of female capability. Finally, strategies to mitigate implicit bias, such as transparent promotion criteria and standardised evaluations, emerged as critical yet complex solutions, requiring authenticity to avoid undermining women's credibility.

Sub-theme 3.1: Mentorship and sponsorship

Mentorship and sponsorship were consistently viewed as essential tools for supporting female leaders and were the fourth most quoted phrase. This sub-theme, supported by

eight codes, highlighted the role of mentorship in providing guidance and access to influential networks for women in leadership.

Participant 14 mentioned the following (Code: Mentorship and sponsorship – Category: Building leadership through mentorship):

‘Mentors can provide valuable advice, support and coaching in terms of navigating the business and political landscape within the business with the skills and knowledge that would be required to do so. So, whether it is a mentorship from another leader within the organisation or even from outside the organisation within the industry, I think that guidance and development as part of that, mentorship would certainly help women leaders navigate the business landscape.’ (P14, Middle Management, Technology, Indian person)

Participant 2 reflected as follows (Code: Grooming female successor – Category: Structured leadership development):

‘I’m going to use an example of a male, and the way in which they were grooming a potential female successor, and the way in which in which was phenomenal. But what they did was they identified the individual and then set up a 3-year program to say, in 3 years’ time. I need to build technical capability. I need to help them with the network. I need to build the leadership prowess. So, there’s, there was a very structured program around that. And I know this is different, because it’s taking over, as opposed to, you know, being promoted, but I think setting up people for success. They did 6 months rotations in each one of the areas, and it wasn’t just a job shadowing. And look at how great I am. I’m your male, white leader, you know, look at how good I am. Look at how big my network is. It wasn’t that, yeah, they actually gave that person responsibility and then set them up with individuals that could help them succeed. They got to learn the vocation they were succeeding in doing that. So, they were success. And at the same time, they made learning opportunities available, and they paired them up with coaches and mentors within the industry that could help them develop, or at least at a rapid pace, develop those things. I think, for me, that is that is possibly the best program I have seen in in making sure that someone who lands in that role is successful in that role.’ (P2, Middle Management, Mining, black person)

Sub-theme 3.2: Success stories

The presence of success stories, highlighting women who have overcome barriers to reach leadership positions, was frequently mentioned as a powerful influence on male perceptions of female leadership. Supported by nine codes, these stories serve as aspirational models that challenge stereotypes and promote organisational change.

Participant 8 shared the following (Code: Overcoming bias and exclusion – Category: Success stories):

‘She may not know everything about the business, about the manufacturing side of the business. The printing industry is very, very male dominated. But although she doesn’t have a lot of that knowledge, she surrounds herself with people who are capable and who do have the knowledge, and in that way, she’s able to get the job done.’ (P8, Middle Management, Print, Indian person)

Participant 2 stated the following (Code: Overcoming bias and exclusion – Category: Success stories):

‘It becomes acceptable enough for people to accept female leaders, even on the floor supervisors for men, we’re seeing a lot of ladies in there, not just in production, but also in the engineering side. We’re seeing ladies coming up and taking command, taking control, and we see deliverables or performance coming up as well. So, there is growth. Although there’s still the dominance of the past, but there’s growth.’ (P2, Middle Management, Mining, black person)

Sub-theme 3.3: Strategies to reduce bias and exclusion

Participants frequently identified the need for structured strategies to address implicit biases, including transparent promotion criteria and standardised performance evaluations. These insights, drawn from 11 codes, suggest that clear, objective policies are crucial to mitigating bias and establishing fair assessments. However, the findings also reveal how some bias-reduction strategies can be undermined by performative actions, where promotions appear motivated by reputation management rather than a genuine commitment to inclusivity.

Participant 9 stated the following (Code: Practical strategies for bias reduction – Category: Strategies to reduce bias and exclusion):

‘The promotion wasn’t because of the woman, it was because of a counter, an intervention by the men saying, “I want to use this as an opportunity to showcase that I’m invested in women, because I promoted them to this level.” So, it was a bit of a selfish move. It was about that particular individual saying, well, people are branding me that we’re a male dominated environment and that I’m only promote male. “So what I’m going to do is I’m going to promote a Vice President to a Principal prematurely, and individual are going to be failing, at least I can say I’ve tried, and this is what I’ve done.” And I think that happens, and sadly, that’s when women become trophies more than actual contributors or people being respected in the organisation. This is the reality. So being promoted often being put into positions of compromise, because that the male promoting them is managing his brand and his image and the promotion of the female is merely the method, not the invested interest of females ... They realised that they were promoted because they were black females, not because of their competency, and that their promotion and I know this because I was the coach and mentor for them, and the reason they left that organisation was because they started realising that their promotion and elevation was designed to elevate the head, the white male head. They don’t want to be recognised for being a black female. They want to be recognised for having skills and competencies which can compete with anyone in the organisation, male, female, transgender doesn’t matter.’ (P9, Director, Technology, White person)

Theme 4: Leadership traits and gender compatibility

The findings highlight a prevailing organisational belief that effective leadership aligns with traits traditionally viewed as masculine. This assumption shapes who is perceived as ‘fit’ for leadership roles and restricts women’s progression by favouring men in demanding work environments. Participants

shared insights into how these ingrained stereotypes about gender and leadership limit diverse expressions of leadership potential, perpetuating a cycle where leadership is narrowly defined and is less inclusive of varied strengths.

Sub-theme 4.1: Gender traits compatible with organisational career progression

The findings show that organisational perceptions often link leadership compatibility with traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness and availability for demanding schedules. With 27 codes supporting this sub-theme, male participants noted a tendency to favour male candidates for leadership roles, particularly in industries such as mining, where demanding work environments are seen as incompatible with perceived female availability. This perception also extends to how women in leadership are sometimes viewed by their peers, with participants observing that women leaders face scrutiny not only from male colleagues but occasionally from other women as well.

One of the participants mentioned the following (Code: Role stereotyping – Category: Career barriers and sacrifices):

‘In our industry, there’s this perception that maybe we should get a male candidate because the job is demanding. Call outs are going to be made. We will have to wake this person up as a leader. They need to coordinate work in odd, late hours. There needs to be a lot of interaction between them with their colleagues, and you see that the decision is made on the fact that it seems that it’s perceived that men are more available to lend themselves to those kinds of environments, whereas it is perceived that women would not really be available.’ (P3, Senior Management, Mining, black person)

Another participant highlighted the following (Code: Women as detractors of female leadership – Category: Career barriers and sacrifices):

‘Sometimes woman, in my experience, are the greatest detractors of other women in leadership roles. That’s what I can tell you. Because when I was at my previous mining company, I had a hard time with my previous boss, but the two ladies that were senior managers with me had a worse off time with her.’ (P5, Executive, Mining, Indian person)

Discussion

Outline of the results

The purpose of this research was to explore men’s perspectives on the implicit biases and exclusionary practices that hinder women’s progression into senior leadership roles. This study aimed to identify specific barriers embedded in organisational culture and to uncover potential pathways for addressing these biases, contributing new insights into the subtle biases that perpetuate gender disparities in male-dominated sectors. By focusing on male viewpoints, the research sought to illuminate unseen barriers while exploring effective strategies for promoting inclusion. The Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders was utilised, and the analysis revealed how organisational culture, decision-making processes and societal expectations reinforce structural barriers. Four main themes emerged, each addressing unique facets of bias and

gender dynamics that shape leadership advancement. By including novel findings on industry-specific and cultural barriers, this discussion deepens understanding of the varied and layered nature of challenges women face, especially those from diverse backgrounds.

Theme 1: Organisational culture and gender bias

Organisational culture plays a significant role in reinforcing gender roles and shaping perceptions of leadership suitability. Men’s perspectives highlighted the enduring stereotypes within physically demanding sectors, where leadership qualities are often equated with traditionally male characteristics. The sub-theme of *Organisational culture and gender roles* underscores how these views perpetuate implicit biases against women. Men frequently noted that roles in mining, for example, require physical strength, thus positioning women as less fit for certain leadership paths (Eagly & Karau 2002). This aligns with Social Role Theory, which suggests that gendered societal expectations shape career trajectories (Heilman et al. 2024).

In addition, through the lens of *Male favouring decision-making processes*, men reported that leadership conversations in male-dominated sectors often exclude women from informal but impactful discussions. Male participants referred to these exclusive ‘feeder systems’ where key insights and decisions are shared informally, typically in male-only circles, leaving women at a disadvantage in gaining crucial information.

A particularly revealing sub-theme, *Requirement for male validation for credibility*, highlights how male endorsement is often a prerequisite for female credibility in leadership. Participants described instances where women’s ideas were dismissed until repeated by a male colleague, thus undermining women’s authority. These experiences are consistent with research on implicit gender biases, where male validation becomes a necessary but unspoken qualifier for female leaders, further embedding a culture of male-centric authority (Greenwald & Lai 2020).

Theme 2: Barriers to female leadership: Failure and exclusion

Barriers within organisational culture often manifest subtly yet systematically, creating obstacles that are difficult for women to overcome. Participants expressed that women in male-dominated sectors frequently encounter the ‘glass cliff’, where they are promoted to risky leadership positions without sufficient support, as highlighted in the *Setting up for failure* sub-theme. Participants noted that these positions lack the resources necessary for success, making it challenging for women to perform as effectively as their male counterparts, aligning with high-risk appointments as a gender-specific barrier (Chisholm-Burns et al. 2017).

In the *Social exclusion* sub-theme, men explained that informal networks, often established through male-centric bonding activities such as golf outings, further restrict women’s access to leadership circles. Participants pointed

out that women are typically absent from these events, which are important for networking and establishing trust with senior leaders. Such exclusions have a significant impact on career advancement, as they limit women's access to high-visibility discussions and decision-making opportunities outside of the office environment (Diehl et al. 2020). These exclusion practices create invisible barriers that prevent women from building the same depth of relationships as their male counterparts, reinforcing a cycle of gender inequity in leadership access.

Theme 3: Empowerment and success strategies

Participants acknowledged the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, and structured bias-reduction strategies as pathways for women's advancement. *Mentorship and sponsorship* emerged as a critical sub-theme, with men expressing that formal mentorship programmes equip women with the guidance, technical knowledge and influential networks needed to succeed. Male participants recognised their role in mentorship as crucial, highlighting how structured, intentional mentorship can create practical support systems for women. One participant recounted a structured programme in which a female leader received rotational experience across multiple areas, illustrating how intentional skills transfer prepares women for leadership (Ibarra et al. 2019).

In the *Success stories* sub-theme, men shared experiences of working with successful women leaders who broke down stereotypes and redefined expectations, which they felt could serve as a model for future bias reduction. They also discussed actionable *Strategies to reduce bias and exclusion*, emphasising the need for transparent criteria in performance evaluations and promotions. Participants observed that these strategies, if applied consistently, can create more objective assessments and minimise implicit bias, which links standardised evaluations with reduced gender disparities in leadership (Kossek et al. 2016).

Theme 4: Leadership traits and gender compatibility

Participants expressed that certain leadership traits, such as assertiveness and risk-taking, are implicitly associated with men and deemed essential for career progression. This sub-theme revealed biases in favour of traditionally masculine traits, which men noted are often perceived as necessary for successful leadership. Participants discussed how qualities such as empathy and collaboration, while valuable, are not equated with leadership potential within their organisations, reinforcing a narrow, male-centric view of leadership.

The findings indicate a need for redefining leadership compatibility to include a wider array of traits. Some participants suggested that incorporating diverse leadership styles would promote inclusivity by allowing women to leverage their strengths without conforming to traditional male norms. Research supports this view, as broadening the range of leadership attributes can encourage gender diversity, ultimately benefiting organisational performance and adaptability (Rahming 2021).

Practical implications

Two significant insights emerged from men's reflections that illustrate specific barriers unique to women, particularly within the mining sector and Black cultural contexts. These findings contribute new perspectives on the varied nature of challenges faced by women in male-dominated and culturally complex environments, highlighting the importance of nuanced organisational policies.

The findings of this research inform several practical strategies to help mitigate gender bias and support women's career progression in male-dominated sectors. Organisations should implement re-entry programmes for women on extended leave, especially in industries such as mining, to ensure continuity in career growth. Culturally sensitive initiatives are needed to address the unique work-life challenges faced by black women, who often balance extensive additional responsibilities not fully explored. Redefining leadership traits to value diverse styles and implementing structured mentorship alongside merit-based promotion criteria will further counteract biases, aiding to build more inclusive and equitable organisational culture.

Limitations and recommendations

This research was limited by its cross-sectional data collection period, capturing perceptions at a single point in time, which restricts insights into evolving organisational biases. In addition, findings reflect the South African context, where unique cultural dynamics may differ from those in other countries. Future studies could examine countries with similar cultural contexts to replicate and validate these insights, ensuring the applicability of findings across diverse environments.

The results of this research inform several targeted strategies for addressing intersectional barriers in women's leadership advancement and highlight the need for organisations to address unique intersectional barriers, such as those faced by black women particularly in balancing cultural expectations and professional advancement, with targeted, sustainable interventions. Organisations should implement culturally responsive mentorship programmes that acknowledge these distinct challenges, create flexible re-entry policies to support women in physically demanding sectors such as mining, and redefine leadership models to value diverse traits beyond traditional masculinity. By tackling these nuanced barriers, organisations can advance a more inclusive leadership pipeline and empower women to access senior roles without compromising personal or cultural integrity. Future research should explore longitudinally how these interventions impact organisational dynamics, promoting broader applications of these findings across global contexts.

Future research should investigate the industry-specific and intersectional cultural barriers identified in this study, which uniquely affect women's career advancement, particularly in

sectors such as mining and among Black women in leadership roles. Examining these barriers across various industries and cultural contexts could provide a deeper understanding of their impact on women's progression to leadership positions. Two key areas warrant further exploration, firstly, the distinct challenges faced by women in physically demanding fields such as mining, and secondly, the intersectional cultural obstacles impacting black women's advancement into leadership roles.

Industry-specific barriers for women in physically demanding sectors

Findings from the mining sector highlighted additional challenges that women face in physically demanding fields, where traditional views on physical strength often limit women's perceived suitability for certain roles. Further research could examine how these perceptions, alongside policies surrounding health and safety (e.g. pregnancy-related restrictions), shape women's career trajectories. Investigating whether these policies inadvertently disrupt career momentum because of extended time away could inform the development of re-entry support structures tailored to physically intensive industries.

Intersectional cultural barriers affecting black women's leadership progression

This research highlighted unique cultural expectations impacting Black women's career advancement. For instance, Black women face heightened work-life balance pressures because of culturally rooted family responsibilities, a factor that standard diversity initiatives often overlook. In addition, cultural norms discouraging younger Black women from asserting themselves with elder male colleagues emerged as a barrier, suggesting the need for diversity policies that account for cultural nuances. Future studies could explore how intersectional factors such as ethnicity and cultural expectations shape women's leadership opportunities, as well as how organisations can better support diverse women in overcoming these specific challenges.

Expanding on these findings in future research could deepen our understanding of the layered and complex barriers women face, helping organisations to design more inclusive, context-sensitive diversity initiatives that account for both industry demands and cultural dimensions.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reinforce the need for nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches to gender inclusion within organisational leadership. Key insights demonstrate how gender biases, manifesting as exclusionary practices or traditional leadership assumptions, persistently shape career trajectories, particularly in male-dominated sectors. By embedding support structures for women, broadening the definition of leadership compatibility and developing intersectional policies, organisations can advance towards equitable leadership representation.

This research reveals the importance of addressing both overt and subtle forms of bias, with a focus on intersectionality, especially as it pertains to Black women and their unique work-life balance challenges. These findings highlight the potential for inclusive diversity policies to not only support individual career advancement but also drive organisational innovation by tapping into the full spectrum of leadership potential across gender and cultural lines.

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Authors' contributions

B.L.R. is the lead author in this study, which was completed as an MBA thesis. M.R. is the supervisor who advised, guided and provided supervision during the course of the thesis. Both the authors are aware of the sequence of the authorship and agree to the copyright agreement.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The data are available on request from the journal. It is freely available.

Disclaimer

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