

University of Calgary

**Navigating Female-Dominated Workplaces
from the Perspectives of Women in Academic Leadership Positions**

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Abstract

Women in leadership positions continue to face gender-based challenges in the workplace, including those in both male- and female-dominated industries. Due to the dominant stereotypes favouring men in leadership positions, many women leaders reported being assigned and performing tasks at work based on their gender identity, rather than their skills and abilities. The purpose of this research is to explore how women leaders in female-dominated academic fields perceive their connections with the values, environment, and others in their workplace. Focusing on female-dominated academic fields further uncovers how women navigate the challenges in their workplace, with contrast to more gender diverse settings outside of their faculties. To answer my research question, I conducted an empirical, qualitative study. I used a purposive sampling method to recruit women leaders from the faculties of Nursing, Education, and Social Work at a Western Canadian University. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with three participants to develop an understanding of their perspectives and experiences of their workplace environment and values, along with their interactions with others. Through NVivo, I employed a thematic analysis approach to analyze the data gathered from interview transcripts. The results of my research can contribute to the further improvement of gender equality initiatives in workplace settings, as well as the promotion of female representation in leadership positions.

Keywords: Qualitative research, women in leadership, female-dominated workplace, academia, gender inequality, gendered organizations

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Introduction

Despite their extensive qualifications, a complex set of factors creates barriers for women to advance into higher-ranking positions (D'Andrea, 2021). In the context of academic staff at Canadian universities, for instance, a census report from Statistics Canada (2025b) indicated that women are underrepresented in higher-ranking positions, such as Full Professors (33%), in comparison to Assistant Professors (53%) in 2024/2025. Accordingly, women faculty were less likely to agree that promotions are fair and equitable, relative to their male counterparts (Uppal & Hango, 2022). The underrepresentation of women in higher-ranking positions is critical, as it is the leading predictor of the gender wage gap in Canadian universities, while also resulting in feelings of unbelonging among women leaders and discourages other women from achieving high-ranking positions (Liu et al., 2024; Statistics Canada, 2025a; Wane, 2023).

Furthermore, these structural gender inequalities continue to be present in female-dominated departments. Uppal & Hango (2022) found that the departments of Education, Health, Social Sciences and Law are dominated by women faculty. In particular, 7% of women faculty were in Education (3% men), 22% were in Health (14% men), and 21% were in Social Sciences & Law (16% men). However, approximately 50% of women occupy management positions in these departments: 51% in Health, and 55% in Education and Social Work (Lavigne, 2020). In other words, despite having significantly higher number of women in these departments, the ratio of women to men in leadership positions is almost equal.

In addition to their representation, women in leadership positions continue to face gender-based challenges in the workplace, including those in both male- and female-dominated industries. Due to the dominant stereotypes that assume men to be more technically skilled and embody more authority, men are favoured in leadership positions while women leaders are often

assigned tasks involving fewer technical skills (D'Andrea, 2021; Lorello et al., 2020; Sheppard et al., 2024; Wane, 2023). As such, they often struggle to embrace their leadership identity as well as develop feelings of inferiority and unbelonging (Byrne & Chadwick, 2024; D'Andrea, 2021; Wane, 2023). Since women are often assumed to embody innate abilities related to empathy and providing care, they are often expected to take on the domestic care work responsibilities at home (also known as the private sphere) in addition to their paid work responsibilities (i.e. the public sphere) (Chatillon et al., 2018; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). As a result, prior studies found that women in leadership positions reported the struggle to balance time between paid and unpaid work, which often hindered their performance and opportunities at work (D'Andrea, 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Lorello et al., 2020; Ng & McGowan, 2023).

As I will discuss more thoroughly in the following section, existing literature highlights the challenges female leaders face in the workplace, along with the ways in which they cope with these challenges. The purpose of this research is to explore how women leaders in female-dominated academic fields perceive their connections with the values, environment, and others in their workplace. This includes their interactions within their own faculties as well as across other faculties. Focusing on female-dominated academic fields will further uncover why women continue to face gender-based challenges in environments with fewer male representation, with the contrast to more gender diverse settings outside of their faculties. These insights can contribute to the improvement of gender equality initiatives in workplace settings, as well as the promotion of female representation in leadership positions.

Literature Review

A common theme across prior literature is that women leaders expressed having to act in a specific way in order to be successful in their career (Lorello, et al., 2020; Sheppard et al., 2024; Wane, 2023). In their study, Lorello et al. (2020) found that women leaders were expected to exhibit both male-coded (e.g. authority) and female-coded (e.g. nurturing) traits, which they respectively referred to as agentic and communal traits. In particular, they found that male-coded agentic traits are related to rigidity and harshness, while the female-coded communal traits were associated with appearing weaker and softer. Accordingly, women leaders expressed how female-coded traits were often de-legitimized and devalued in relation to their leadership role; some even highlighted their efforts to avoid bringing attention to their gender identity (Byrne & Chadwick, 2024). D'Andrea's (2021) findings suggested that women leaders tended to be assigned tasks that are less challenging based on their gender identity, rather than their skills, resulting in feelings of inferiority and need to prove their worth in the organization. This was further enhanced when accounting for the intersection of race and gender, as studies found that racialized minority women in leadership positions were held to even stricter standards and struggled to fit-in with the organization's culture due to microaggressions (Wane, 2023). In particular, the abilities of Black women leaders are questioned due to both their race and their gender: as such, they are expected to "perform her race" (e.g. managing their tone, the way they speak) alongside their gender to evade disrespect and scrutiny from others (Atkins & Kalel, 2023; Wane, 2023).

Other studies emphasized the difficulty for women in leadership positions to internalize their leadership role and identity. For instance, Byrne & Chadwick (2024) found that women leaders tended to downplay their successes and avoided embodying confidence and assertion;

these are male-coded traits that are associated with leaders, and consequently, women leaders did not feel comfortable displaying these traits and labelling themselves as “leaders”. Lorello et al. (2020) concluded that women leaders often expressed feelings of self-doubt and lacking self-confidence in their accomplishments as a result of living in a world dominated by men.

Women in leadership positions frequently referred to the challenges of work-life balance, especially those who had children. In particular, women in high-level leadership positions described how their work required 24/7 availability, resulting in a lack of time to sleep, eat healthy, and exercise (Liu et al., 2024). When they were on parental leave, their productivity was often questioned, which ultimately lead to delays in their career progression (Lorello et al., 2020). As a result, women leaders expressed concern for having to choose between their families and career, with most declaring they would choose the former over the latter (D’Andrea, 2021; Ng & McGowan, 2023).

To help them overcome these challenges in the workplace, female leaders highlighted that mentorship was important for creating connections with others with similar experiences (D’Andrea, 2021; Wane, 2023). They expressed how their mentors helped them navigate the gender-based challenges within and outside of the workplace. Many female leaders perceive their gender-based strengths (such as empathy, compassion, and collaboration) to enhance their ability to lead others (Amatullah, 2024; Byrne & Chadwick, 2024). As a result, studies found that women in leadership positions often encourage other women in the workforce to pursue such positions (Dengate et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). However, since women face systemic barriers based on their gender identities, and consequently fewer female representation in leadership roles, there are fewer women mentors available to provide support to others (D’Andrea, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

In the 1800s, the European and American industrial revolution introduced market production, where men dominated the paid work force (known as the public sphere) and women were responsible for the domestic unpaid labour responsibilities (known as the private sphere) (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). This gendered division of work was based on the belief that women have innate skills and capabilities (such as nurturing and empathy) required for domestic care work, while men are inherently skilled (through assertion and strength) for paid work responsibilities (Chatillon et al., 2018). In other words, the predisposition for emotionality and care work may be considered as female-coded traits, while male-coded traits define the proclivity for authority and assertion.

In my analysis, I will refer to Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations and the ideal worker to conceptualize how participants described the gendered nature of their organization's expectations, values, and interactions. Correspondingly, I will also reference Daniels' (1987) notion of invisible work, along with Hochschild & Machung's (1989) second shift, to facilitate my discussion on women leaders' care work responsibilities in the private and public spheres. As for the interactions of women leaders, impression management (Goffman, 1959) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) will support women leader's attempt to comply to normative gender expectations. I will contrast this with the notion of "undoing gender" to understand women's resistance against such gender-based expectations in the workplace, in accordance with Butler's (2004) and Deutsch's (2007) definitions.

Gendered Organizations & The Ideal Worker

In her theory, Acker (1990; 2012) posits that the gendering of organizations relies on the following five interacting processes: (1) organizing processes, (2) organizational culture (3)

interactions on the job, (4) gendered identities, and (5) organizational logic. In particular, men (who tend to dominate leadership positions) divide labour based on the gender of their subordinates, specifically assigning the skilled work to men and allocating the unskilled tasks to women. These processes are reinforced by the organization's culture (characterized by symbols, values, attitudes, and behaviours): for instance, masculinity is often tied to the image of a dominant and highly skilled man. Consequently, interactions between men and women workers further contributes to the reinforcement in gender differences, where women are expected to act submissively towards their dominant male colleagues. As such, the nature of these interactions links back to the individual identities of men and women workers, which in turn mediates their decisions and self-presentation; for example, the pressure for women leaders to "manage like a man" (Acker, 2012, p. 216). Lastly, these features construct and maintain the organization's underlying expectations and practices, which is defined by organizational logic. While organizational logic appears to be gender-neutral, its assumed congruence between responsibility, complexity, and hierarchical position produces gender inequalities. Namely, women tend to occupy lower-ranked positions which, in accordance with organizational logic, must be characterized by limited skills and responsibilities.

Acker (1990; 2012) further contends that men are more likely to portray an "ideal worker" than women. Similarly to organizational logic, organizations give the illusion that ideal workers are abstract and gender neutral. However, ideal workers are primarily characterized by individuals who do not express their emotions, do not procreate, and are unencumbered by other responsibilities outside of the organization (such as unpaid domestic care work). As organizations (along with other social institutions) tend to identify women as inherently caring, emotional, and gentle (and are therefore expected to take responsibility for domestic care work,

such as childrearing), the organization's definition of an ideal worker excludes women at large. On the other hand, men are often considered to be competitive, emotionless, highly skilled (in terms of their technical abilities), and are unburdened by responsibilities outside of the organization: which therefore complies with the organization's definition of an ideal worker.

The Second Shift & Invisible Work

Hochschild & Machung (1989) argue that the second shift performed by women, along with the failure of organizations to accommodate for the second shift, contributes to the persistence of gender inequality by preventing women from achieving higher-paying jobs (as cited in Blair-Loy et al., 2015). The second shift refers to the tendency for women to engage in unpaid work at home (such as childcare and household chores) after their "first shift" of paid work. As a result, women are more likely to perform significantly more work (paid and unpaid) than their male counterparts, often leading to exhaustion and a "leisure gap" (i.e. women's lack of time for leisure activities, relative to men). Furthermore, organizations lack flexibility for such domestic responsibilities, ultimately aligning with the notion that the "ideal worker" must always be available for their paid work responsibilities. Consequently, women are less likely to achieve higher-paying positions due to their unpaid work responsibilities, in which deviates from the organization's expectations of an ideal worker.

Accordingly, Daniels (1987) posits that the feminization of domestic care work in the private sphere is devalued and overlooked. In particular, domestic care work activities are deemed as "women's work," and as a result, it is devalued and unpaid (p. 403). The skills required to perform care work activities, along with the value of care, tends to be overlooked by social institutions in the public sphere. Therefore, Daniels defines the devaluation and hidden nature of domestic care work as "invisible work." Furthermore, when women perform acts of

support for others in the public sphere (e.g. through volunteer work, or consoling others in the workplace), it continues to be undermined and unpaid, therefore remaining “invisible.” Due to the gendered nature of care work, women continue to perform invisible work in both the private and public spheres. In more recent literature, Hatton (2017) expanded the notion of invisible work to account for the involvement of cultural, legal, and spatial sociological mechanisms in its economic devaluation. In terms of care work, Hatton’s concept enables the understanding of how this type of work is rendered invisible due to all three mechanisms: naturalization of caregiving at the occupational level (cultural), its noneconomic and informal-nature (legal), and its tendency to be performed in the private sphere (spatial) all work together to devalue care work in the workplace. Since it is devalued, care work is rendered invisible and unpaid in the organization.

Impression Management & Emotion Work

In terms of the performances of women in leadership positions, I will refer to Goffman’s (1959) impression management. In particular, this refers to the ways in which individuals present themselves in attempt to be viewed favourably by others. The maintenance of favourable impressions may be stressful for individuals due to the risk of others discovering the falsity behind the impression (Raffel, 2013). As such, prior literature suggests the importance of impression management for marginalized groups, such as women, in attempt to gain respect and recognition among the dominant, powerful groups in society (Atkins & Kalel, 2023). In other words, women leaders may enact impression management strategies to achieve respect and recognition in their roles from their male counterparts.

Moreover, we may also consider women’s engagement in emotion management strategies in the workplace. Hochschild (1979) introduced the notion of emotion work to describe an individual’s effort to shape their emotions to comply with their surroundings. While this may

involve suppression – the attempt to stifle undesired emotions – it may also entail evoking desired feelings. Emotion work involves cognitive, bodily, and expressive techniques where the individual attempts to change their thoughts, somatic symptoms, and their outward physical expressions associated with the desired/undesired emotion they are trying to evoke/suppress. Having that said, more recent work has suggested that emotion management techniques vary in terms of the context; in the particular context of leaders, these emotion management attempts are arguably complex (Iszatt-White, 2009). Drawing from Bolton & Boyd (2003), Iszatt-White (2009) posits that leaders are ‘skilled emotional managers’ who utilize multiple forms of emotion work simultaneously based on the situation’s demands. Specifically, leaders will manage their emotions based on the expectations of the organization (i.e. “how leaders should be”) (p. 463) while also evoking emotion during their interactions with colleagues, which defines prescriptive and philanthropic emotion management respectively.

Undoing Gender

To account for women leader’s actions of resistance, I will refer to the notion of “undoing” gender in the workplace. As opposed to West & Zimmerman, Deutsch (2007) argued that “doing gender” solely refers to performances that promote gender differences, while “undoing gender” alludes to presentations that dismantle gender differences. That said, Butler (2004, as cited in McDonald, 2013) defined “undoing gender” as the subversion from normative gender expectations. In other words, while Deutsch posits that undoing gender resists the *differences* between men and women, Butler asserts that it resists the *normative expectations* associated with men and women. In her study, McDonald (2013) argued that these definitions of undoing gender are interrelated and should therefore both be considered when analyzing the resistance strategies of women leaders. As such, I will combine Deutsch’s and Butler’s

definitions of undoing gender in my analysis, where undoing gender is defined by the dismantling of gender differences and norms.

Methods & Data Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explore how women leaders in female-dominated academic fields perceive their connections with the values, environment, and others in their workplace. This population was selected based on the assumption that participants hold insights on the values, environment, and culture of their workplaces from a leader's point of view. To answer my research question, I designed an empirical, qualitative study, which was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB25-1560).

I utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit the participants for this study. This method enabled the selection of participants who embody in-depth knowledge and insight of their workplace culture as leaders (Lorello et al., 2020). Through their faculties' website, I selected and invited 19 women in leadership positions from female-dominated faculties at a western Canadian university to participate in this study. Statistics Canada's (2025c) census report of occupational characteristics by gender indicates health (79%), education and social/community/government services (69%) as female-dominated industries. Based on these findings, I selected the faculties of Nursing, Education, and Social Work to recruit women leaders, as they reflected female-dominated industries. Additionally, I referred to the contact information page on each faculty's website to confirm the ratio of women to men in leadership positions. Consequently, the men in leadership positions were outnumbered by women across all three faculties, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Number of Women and Men in Leadership Positions by Faculty*

Faculty	Women Leaders	Men Leaders
Social Work	5	1
Education	6	1
Nursing	7	1

As such, I identified women leaders in the faculties of Nursing, Education, and Social Work through their respective faculty's website and invited them via email to participate in the study. Those that were interested to participate in the study completed an online pre-screen form (via Microsoft Forms) to confirm their position title, faculty, and gender identity (See [Appendix A: Pre-Screen Questions](#)). The pre-screen form also included a section for participants to select their preference to complete their interview either online (via Zoom) or in-person. Once their interest in the study and suitability was confirmed, I contacted them by email to schedule an interview. As all participants preferred to complete their interviews online over Zoom, I sent each of them a copy of the consent form to complete prior to their scheduled interview date.

Out of the 19 women leaders invited to participate in the study, 4 expressed interest to participate in the study. Interviews were completed with a total of 3 participants, which were all included in the data analysis and findings. Focusing on a smaller sample allowed for the development of an in-depth understanding of each participant's unique experiences and insights (Amatullah, 2024). In other words, a sample size of 3 permitted the gathering of rich qualitative data from each participant, while accounting for the limited pool of eligible candidates, small population size, and the time constraints of the undergraduate honours program.

In accordance with the research question, I selected a qualitative approach to develop a rich understanding of the experiences and perspectives of women academic leaders in their workplace. This approach allowed participants to share their detailed insights in their own words, which in turn limits the biases of the researcher (Kelly & Gurr, 2020). As such, I utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather data. In-depth semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their detailed experiences, perspectives, and ideas in their own words (Liu et al., 2024). With open-ended questions, this method allowed me to gain a deep understanding of each participants' insights. Additionally, conducting interviews individually allowed each participant to focus on the unique experiences and insights that were most important to them. Each interview was approximately one-hour in length and held virtually over Zoom. I asked participants to describe their perspectives and experiences of their workplace environment and values, along with their interactions with others in the workplace (See [Appendix B: Interview Guide](#)). With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded and generated into transcripts for data analysis.

I utilized a thematic analysis approach to analyze the interview data, which consisted of generating codes of recurrent ideas to identify themes (Allen et al., 2024; Kelly & Gurr, 2020; Lareau, 2021; Lochmiller, 2021). In particular, I used NVivo (Version 15.3.2) to code persistent ideas provided by the participants. Thereafter, I reviewed and analyzed the most recurrent codes to generate larger themes, which were all included in the data analysis and findings; a summary of the most central themes is presented in the table below (Table 2). Therefore, I did not establish themes prior to data collection or analysis: rather, I generated themes based on the recurring ideas (codes) provided by the participants.

Table 2*Central Themes Generated from Interview Transcripts*

Themes	Number of references
Male-coded skills associated with leadership	12
Relationships with colleagues to cope with inequalities	12
Lack of support from the organization	11
Negative/inferior perceptions of women	11
At-home care work (second shift) performed by women	8
Value of supporting & respecting other colleagues	8
Resistance against organizational expectations	6
Structural inequalities	6
Hidden needs & responsibilities	6
Intersectional factors (age & race)	6
Pressure & lack of time	5
Male dominance & authority	4

To humanize the voices of their individual insights and experiences, I assigned pseudonyms to each of the participants (Wang et al., 2024). While I offered participants the opportunity to select their own pseudonym, none of them indicated their preference for a specific name. Considering the nature of this thesis and the ideas shared by the participants, I selected their pseudonyms based on well-known, influential feminist theorists: Dr. Bell, Dr. Collins, and Dr. Smith. I specifically included their title (i.e. “Dr.”) to recognize the status and position of the participants, especially since this is often devalued for women in leadership positions (which I will further discuss in the following sections).

Findings

Throughout the interviews, participants described their perceptions and experiences with their workplace environment, their relationships with colleagues, as well as their values and responsibilities. Particular key themes pertaining to participants' workplace environment included: male dominance and inferior perceptions of women, along with the intersectional factors of age and race. As such, participants referred to their strong relationships with their women colleagues to cope with experiences of gender inequalities, while also maintaining caution in terms of disclosing their personal struggles to others. In terms of their personal attributes and values, participants referred to women leaders' embodiment of male-coded skills, along with a high regard for providing support to their colleagues (which is often overlooked or "hidden"). In the following sections, I will expand on participants' descriptions of their workplace environment, their interactions, along with their skills, values and responsibilities.

Workplace Environment

Male Dominance & Inferior Perceptions of Women

When reflecting on their interactions outside of their faculties, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith described instances in which women are often not taken seriously by their male counterparts. This is especially the case during faculty meetings involving multiple faculties across campus, where women (especially those in female-dominated faculties) are overlooked by men from other faculties:

"I remember one of the junior faculty members saying in the faculty meeting: 'it's always the men that are talking.' So, I think there's sometimes something about having expertise, having authority, and having space, that is gendered." – Dr. Bell

“I don’t always feel like, in sort of whole campus discussions, that faculties like Education, probably Nursing, Social Work... that we necessarily get seen as real faculties. And so, when we share ideas or say “oh, this is how we do it,” that there can be instances... of not taking that seriously. [...] So that’s one of the things that I do think that the gender nature of our faculty actually has impact on our relationships and our sort of position in discussions, and sometimes it’s very surprising.” – Dr. Smith

Accordingly, all participants described how the contributions of women are more prone to scrutiny and devaluation, particularly in terms of its significance and complexity. Dr. Bell contrasted this with the contributions of men in leadership positions, who are often perceived as employing “real expertise and authority.” Consider the following passages from Dr. Collins and Dr. Smith:

“My perception is women are scrutinized more by members. Their legitimization is often questioned more. And so, I think we are held to a higher standard in terms of our ethical stance and our transparency. And the critiques from within a gendered, I would say. But I don’t know if among leaders that has shifted, I just think the scrutiny and critique amongst our members is different.” – Dr. Collins

“I think from my own research on gender and science that the female-dominant nature of our field is part of that. It is a gendered perception that the sort of female work is not as serious. It’s not as hard. Even taking those kinds of relationships seriously somehow devalues your scholarly work. And I find it’s happening a bit less and less over time, which is great. But that is the part that can appear in interaction, not always, but can appear in interactions of the university more widely.” – Dr. Smith

Themes of self-reflection related to gender devaluations also emerged from all three participants. In particular, Dr. Bell described an instance earlier in her career when she was “disliked” by her male colleagues, especially as she was the only woman leader. As I will discuss in a later section, Dr. Bell also highlighted the intersection of race and age (seniority) when she expressed that she was disliked by her *senior white* male colleagues. Conversely, while Dr. Collins expressed how she personally feels respected and heard by her male colleagues, she noted how other women may disqualify themselves from pursuing a leadership role in accordance with larger social perceptions of women:

“Women, as a trend, may not see themselves as leaders, and so there’s an element of factually and descriptively telling them why they actually do have emergent leadership into and encourage them. So, I think there’s a cultural element for women who are like: “Oh, I never thought of myself to do that leadership role.” And I’m like, “Oh my gosh, let me just talk it through with you.” – Dr. Collins

Accounting for the Intersectionality of Race and Age with Gender

It also important to note that all three participants acknowledged their experiences and observations of intersectional factors. In particular, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith shared their experiences of disadvantages due to their age and gender, specifically in terms of receiving lack a respect from their colleagues. For instance, Dr. Smith provided an example of a time earlier in her career when she was assigned to join the social committee at work. As for Dr. Bell, she described the challenges she faced when she was young women, as well as an older woman.

“I got asked if I would like to join the social committee. [...] I think then it was more about being a young woman... I think it was in my early 30s or late 20s, somewhere

around there. I finished my PhD and was my first academic job. And just the sort of assumption of like: “Well of course, you know, all young women like parties,” without event taking a second to get to know me.” – Dr. Smith

“So, I’ve seen age on both sides of the continuum. So, when I started, I was a younger leader and saw that it was hard to get the respect and to move things and so be seen as a leader. And now I’m at the other end and I see the same thing happening. So, I think it’s interesting that you’re discounted ... I think it’s probably more so than male leaders, because of your age and gender connecting.” – Dr. Bell

In terms of the intersection of race and gender, while none of the participants were racialized minorities, they all expressed how they are particularly attentive to their colleagues who are women of colour. Consequently, they described how they provide support to these colleagues, while acknowledging that racialized minority women may be subject to further oppression (in comparison to white women) due to the intersection of their race and gender:

“When folks reach out to me for advice or [mentorship] partnering, I think I feel more committed if they are women, especially if they are women from developing countries who have less resources and abilities. Because I think... women face different levels of oppression than their male counterparts.” – Dr. Bell

“But I am attentive, to particularly, I’d say racialized minority women... I think there’s another nuance in terms of their ability to celebrate their success and to leverage their success. And so, I’m particularly attentive when there’s a dual component where there’s a nervousness that they might be under the radar partly for themselves and their culture or their faith, but also... gender.” – Dr. Collins

“I definitely, in my career, have focused on venturing female graduate students. [...] And, especially women from... countries with more challenging histories and gender equity and more challenging presence in gender equity. And I think that that's been really, really important to me and also working with them.” – Dr. Smith

Lack of Support from the Organization

Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith also expressed how the individual experiences and needs of employees, along with the corresponding support provided by themselves and administration teams, are often overlooked by the organization. These participants highlight that their institution is more concerned with the results (such as a recognition for productivity and innovation), rather than the individual needs expressed by their colleagues. Consider the following passages from Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith:

“...because I think that we are operating in a big, huge system, multi-layered levels of systems that tend to disregard individuals' experiences and needs and desires and personalities and all those things. They get hidden.” – Dr. Bell

“Sometimes I actually think that the smaller administration roles that people have... sometimes the overall structure doesn't value that work because it doesn't sound like something new and innovative. But at the same time, it's really essential to what needs to happen and that those things can't happen if the basic needs of programs and students aren't met and things aren't running smoothly in classes and registrations and kind of all of the not exciting parts of the university. So sometimes I do feel there's a bit of a conflict there, that there's a priority towards big and new, which makes it harder to focus on the

building blocks. Those like essential pieces that are actually the core work of the university.” – Dr. Smith

Workplace Interactions

Managing Impressions

In terms of their workplace interactions, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith both emphasized the importance for women (including themselves) to be cautious of how they act and what information they share with others:

“This is my advice to myself and advice to other faculty members who are women is: I say that they have to be really careful if they disclose personal challenges to leadership. [...] I’ve seen other instances of faculty members being treated harshly for things like that.” – Dr. Bell

“I think no matter what, and as bigger societal forces too, that women do have to think more about how they act, how they speak, how they’re perceived. Then I’ve seen, even friends who I really respect, who have been men in leadership roles: it doesn’t seem to be something that they feel like they have to think about.” – Dr. Smith

Furthermore, Dr. Smith provides some examples of the ways in which women present themselves at work to evade negative perceptions from others:

“And I think that’s one in particular where gender really does play a role because there’s a lot of pitfalls, I think, in particular for women in either seeming too conciliatory, too soft, a pushover. Or like too shrieky and angry. Like I think the general perceptions of men in those roles is a bit more latitude of how to be assertive in a way that’s received positively. [...] And so the people, I think, that are really good leaders are

really able to ... work in that narrow band of “I’m a serious person, I’m taking this seriously,” but not perceived as reactionary, you know, angry woman who wants to put you down.” – Dr. Smith

“I think it was a lot when I was younger of: you either have to pretend you don’t care about those things or you don’t talk about your kids, you don’t talk about your family because that’s going to make it seem like you’re not serious.” – Dr. Smith

Contrastingly, Dr. Collins described how she overtly expresses her ideas with others, which she refers to as “radical candour.” In the following passage, she describes how this plays a role in her interactions with her colleagues:

“I have this... some people call it this “radical candour,” so I don’t shy away. I’m very candid with individuals. I do it with dignity and respect. I talk about the issue, not the individual. But that has kept me ethically very comfortable in terms of how I govern myself in my work. [...] You know, on occasion I get into trouble, as you know, radical candour can. But people appreciate my... explicit articulation of what’s occurring in the political landscape and in the educational landscape. [...] They might not agree with me, but they do appreciate my thoughtfulness to the issues. And I vehemently disagree with many of the policies that are coming out, but I still have a good working relationship with the government, despite the significant ideological differences.” – Dr. Collins

Relationships with colleagues to cope with inequalities

Lastly, all three participants frequently referred to their positive relationships with their colleagues. They all emphasized how these relationships provided significant support in their careers, especially as leaders. While Dr. Collins and Dr. Smith referred to their relationships with

women mentors, Dr. Bell explained how she built strong connection with her black male mentor based on their shared experiences of marginalization.

“On the surface, [my mentor and I] look very different, because he’s a male, he’s black, straight male... and he’s older than me... So, on the surface, we look very different, but we did share our identities as being marginalized. So, I think that made him a suitable mentor for me in terms of the experience that we would have in the academy.” – Dr. Bell

“I would say two former women [colleagues] have been life-changing in terms of how they challenged me to think more strategically... to give more voice and agency... to redress some systematic inequalities that were within the faculty. And challenge me to become a voice on a national level. [...] Two of them utterly have shifted my notion of leadership.” – Dr. Collins

“[My leader] appointed me for a couple committees when I was really young... even just her sort of belief in my ability to do these things was really, really important. And always said nice things about me to other people, and also actually really in that way provided a role model... She was somebody who really walked that line beautifully. She was very kind, warm kind of person. And yet, she was still able to also kind of command a lot of respect and authority for her knowledge and really walked that line of being a high-level female leader extremely well... Sustained me through the difficult mid-career times.”

– Dr. Smith

Skills, Values, & Responsibilities

Male-coded skills

All three participants associated leadership with male-coded skills, such as courage, initiative, and productivity. However, there were notable discrepancies in terms of how each of the participants made this association. In particular, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith explained how the embodiment of these skills (specially for leaders) aligned with the expectations of their organization. In the following excerpt, Dr. Smith describes how she is working on improving these male-coded skills:

“I think I probably came to this role better prepared for the relationship management part of things, encouraging people to feel included, wording things in ways that don’t get people’s backs up, that kind of stuff. Whereas the kind of taking charge of a big initiative and moving it forward is something that’s more stepping outside of my comfort zone.”

– Dr. Smith

Alternatively, Dr. Collins explained how she (along with other women leaders) employs these male-coded skills, notably as a method of resistance against structural gender inequalities:

“I think women leaders are incredibly courageous. And I would say, my perception is that women leaders will often take on the very difficult ethical issues that have often been unresolved or unresolved from the historical practices of men. [...] I’ve seen many, many of my women colleagues who have not shied away from it and addressed it, and including myself. [...] I think women leaders are phenomenally brave and courageous in the face of adversity and vulnerability.” – Dr. Collins

Supporting Colleagues & The “Hidden” Responsibilities of Women

Throughout their interviews, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith frequently expressed their high regard for providing support towards their colleagues. Particularly, Dr. Smith described the importance of listening to the needs of her colleagues and showing them respect, regardless of their position:

“Something I think is truly important to me, but also that I try to make sure stays front of mind, is respect for the hard work that everyone on our team [...] Everybody’s work in these roles is challenging and they’re all busy and they all do things that are essential to what we do. So, trying to always listen to people [...] no matter what the role is, that it really does have challenges. And so, listening to people’s needs and kind of truly respecting that their job is difficult in whatever ways that it is, because they all are.”

– Dr. Smith

Moreover, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith emphasized their particular devotion to support their women colleagues. Notably, Dr. Bell distinguished the difference between men and women colleagues in terms of the type and frequency of support they seek:

“I would say that almost all the folks who reach out to me are women. And I think it’s maybe not because women have more challenges, but maybe they do because they have the dual burden of doing all the caregiving and stuff at home. They have the caregiving [at work] or the colleagues and those sorts of things that I mentioned. And then they have [work responsibilities]. So maybe that is too much, or maybe women are more comfortable talking about those challenges. Whereas men, they use other venues to talk about those challenges. Maybe they talk about their female partners and things like that.”

– Dr. Bell

As mentioned in Dr. Bell's above excerpt, all three participants also highlighted their engagement in supporting women colleagues through the burdens of work-life-balance and domestic care work responsibilities. As a mother herself, Dr. Collins frequently described how she supports her female colleagues with children. When asked about how their workplaces can be improved for women, Dr. Collins and Dr. Smith referred to the importance of improving work-life balance for women leaders with children, as described in the passage below:

"I think there has to be an attentiveness to flexibility of notions of work. I'm particularly my faculty or many are childbearing. So, age. So, I think, flexibility to have how leadership looks and entails, and whether and how for those individuals who want to take up leadership positions, how I might look different. So, I think that's one key area." – Dr. Collins

Furthermore, all three participants referred to supporting the needs of their colleagues as a "hidden" or overlooked responsibility:

"And I think the other thing that maybe in general, women leaders do, is they do a lot more of the caring work. So, they're the ones that are told about, you know, their father's illness, or their miscarriage, or their children's disruptive behaviour, or just normal life circumstances that the academy really doesn't have the time and the space for, but that happens in the lives of people. And particularly, maybe more so in the lives of women who have more responsibilities for caregiving, but the academy doesn't have a place for that. So, I think women leaders do more of that, have more of those hidden responsibilities. Like, if you think about the mental health crisis for students, and things like racism and other kinds of oppressions that students face and also faculty members face. Those are kind of – not unspoken because the leadership does have some systems

around those – but they play out in individual ways. And I think it’s the women leaders that face the brunt, and I don’t mean in a negative way, but are open to being involved in those discussions and in those issues, more so than other folks.” – Dr. Bell

“So, probably one of the most demanding and most complex aspects of the role that often isn’t highlighted in these areas: to navigate between the complex individual and collective needs, reconciling that with the unions, reconciling that with the collective agreements administration.” – Dr. Collins

In accordance with Dr. Bell’s above passage, Dr. Smith also highlighted the gendered nature of these “hidden” responsibilities. In other words, the expectation for women to address these needs:

“And there’s the kind of pervasive feeling that asking women to do things that take additional time isn’t as bad as asking a man to do that.” – Dr. Smith

Discussion

Male-Coded Organizations & Ideal Workers, with Account for Intersectionality

The ways in which the participants described their workplace environment, along with the association of male-coded skills with leaders, may be conceptualized by Acker's gendered organizations theory and the ideal worker. In her theory of gendered organizations, Acker (1990; 2012) posits that gender inequalities are reproduced in organizations through division of labour, organizational culture, worker identities and interactions, and organizational logic. Skilled work is distributed to men based on the assumption that they inherently possess relevant skills and traits (e.g. productive, technical, competitive, emotionless, and authoritative), making them "ideal workers." As such, images and discourses related to the male-coded ideal worker are reflected in the organizational processes and interactions of workers. This was apparent when Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith associated the embodiment of male-coded skills (such as productivity and taking initiative) with their organization's expectations for leaders, rather than female-coded skills of supporting others and maintaining relationships. For instance, Dr. Smith described how she was "better prepared for the relationship management, [...] encouraging people to feel included" aspects of her role (which are female-coded), while "taking charge of a big initiative" (a male-coded skill required for her role) was outside of her comfort zone. As such, this translated to their interactions: participants described experiences of being dismissed by their male colleagues during campus meetings, as well as the propensity for women's work to be devalued, since dominance and productivity are primarily associated with male leaders. For instance, Dr. Bell illustrated this when she mentioned that "having expertise, having authority... is gendered" (i.e. these are male-coded traits). Dr. Smith also described how these gendered

perceptions are extended to female-dominated faculties at large (including Education, Nursing, and Social Work), as they are not considered as “real faculties” by men in other departments.

Furthermore, Acker (2012) expanded her theory to account for intersectional factors, such as race. Similarly to gender, stereotypes and discourses associated with race are reproduced through organizing processes and interactions in the organization. As a result, organizational inequalities are further complicated when accounting for the intersection of gender and race. While none of the participants were racialized minorities, they did acknowledge the complexity of inequalities when accounting for the intersection of gender and race in terms of their colleagues who are racialized minority women. For example, Dr. Collins described how she was particularly attentive to her colleagues that are racialized minority women due to the “dual component” (i.e. intersection) of their marginalized gender and race combined. Likewise, this discussion can be extended to account for the intersection of age and gender (Gray et al., 2019). In correspondence, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith explained their experiences of being devalued by their colleagues when they were younger and older; Dr. Bell highlighted how this was “more so than male leaders” due to the intersectionality of age and gender.

Female-Coded Invisible Work & the Second Shift

While participants continuously highlighted their personal devotion to provide support to their colleagues, they all characterized such responsibilities as overlooked by their organization. Notably, Dr. Bell explicitly referred to this work as hidden: “I think women leaders ... have more of those hidden responsibilities.” In other words, they described how the female-coded responsibilities, such as supporting colleagues through personal challenges, are necessary but not accounted for by the organization. While on the other hand, traditional male-coded

responsibilities represent the main priorities recognized by the organization, such as productivity and innovation. This is consistent with Daniels' (1987) concept of "invisible work," which defines the devaluation and hidden nature of women's care work responsibilities in the public and private spheres. The characterization of care work as "women's work" leads to the devaluation of such responsibilities and is therefore not recognized or rewarded by the organization. Despite its essential significance, women supporting their colleagues in the organization is devalued due to its informal and noneconomic nature, as well as its tendency to be performed in the private sphere, which therefore renders the work invisible and is unpaid by the organization (Hatton, 2017). Accordingly, Dr. Smith explained how asking a woman to take on the additional responsibility of supporting their colleagues "isn't as bad as asking a man," suggesting that care work is female-coded and therefore devalued. It is also important to consider Dr. Bell's passage where she described how she is mostly approached by her women colleagues for support with personal challenges, whereas the men primarily seek assistance regarding work-related challenges; this may indicate that men recognize that emotional support is gendered, devalued and not ideal in the workplace, leading them to seek support from their female partners in the private sphere.

Participants also highlighted the organization's lack of support in terms of balancing their paid work responsibilities (in the public sphere) and their unpaid domestic care work responsibilities (in the private sphere), also known as the second shift. As mothers, Dr. Collins and Dr. Smith both described how the second shift especially affects women in leadership positions, as the combined demands of paid and unpaid work are each time consuming and exhausting. In accordance with Hochschild (1989, as cited in Blair-Loy et al., 2015), organizations' lack of flexibility for the second shift ultimately prevents women from achieving

higher-ranking positions, as the timely demands of domestic work interfere with the expectations of the ideal worker (who must always be available for paid work responsibilities). As such, both Dr. Collins and Dr. Smith expressed that more flexibility from the organization for work-life-balance will improve the experiences of women in leadership positions at work.

Responses to Gender Inequalities: Impression Management & Undoing Gender

In response to gender inequalities, there were notable variations between the experiences of the participants. In particular, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith alluded to their enactment of impression management as a mechanism to evade further scrutiny from their male colleagues and the organization at large. Impression management describes the ways individuals control their self-presentations in attempt to appear favourably to others (Goffman, 1959; Raffel, 2013). For example, Dr. Smith explained the importance for women to think carefully about “how they act, how they speak, and how they are perceived” in the workplace and to be cautious about disclosing their personal challenges with leadership. In accordance with the discussion of gendered organizations, these participants associated favourable impressions in the organization with the male-coded ideal worker. Consistent with emotion work – the attempt to manage thoughts and expressions of emotion – Dr. Smith described how “good” women leaders are able to suppress their anger to comply with the organizations’ expectation of an ideal leader, while also evoking enough assertion to be taken seriously by their colleagues (Hochschild, 1979; Iszatt-White, 2009). Consequently, Dr. Bell explained how the failure to produce a favourable impression (characterized by the “emotionless” trait, which is not associated with masculinity and therefore female-coded) may result in “harsh” treatment from colleagues.

Conversely, Dr. Collins described how she overtly expresses her candid opinions and ideas with her colleagues, which she defined as “radical candour.” Rather than presenting herself in a manner that will generate favourable impressions from her colleagues, she instead exerts assertion in her interactions (i.e. a male-coded trait) with the understanding that it may not always be received positively from her colleagues (“they may not agree with me”). This is consistent with both Deutsch’s (2007) and Butler’s (2004) definitions of undoing gender, which describes the process of dismantling gender differences and normative expectations (as cited in McDonald, 2013). That is to say, Dr. Collins’s use of a male-coded trait (assertiveness) subverts from the normative expectation for women to embody submission in response to her male counterparts, while also dismantling the gender-based differences in their interactions (i.e. both Dr. Collins and her male colleagues are communicating in a similar manner). Furthermore, she later extends this notion of undoing gender to other women leaders when she described them as “phenomenally brave and courageous in the face of adversity and vulnerability”; in other words, these women are utilizing traditional male-coded characteristics (courage and assertion) to resist gender inequalities, expectations, and differences in the workplace.

Conclusion

This research aimed to provide further insight into the perceptions and experiences of women leaders in female-dominated academic workplaces, specifically in terms of their connections to their values, environment, and colleagues. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, participants described the environment and interactions within their workplace, as well as their skills, values, and responsibilities in relation to gender. Consistent with Acker's (1990) gendered organization theory and the ideal worker, all three participants shared how their organization (and their male colleagues) tended to associate male-coded traits with successful leaders, paired with undermining the contributions of women leaders and their associated female-dominated faculties. The participants also acknowledged how the intersection of age and/or race with gender further intensifies the devaluation abilities for women leaders who are younger, older, and/or racialized minorities. Findings also indicated the tendency for women leaders' additional efforts to provide emotional support to their colleagues to be overlooked and undervalued by their organization, which is consistent with Daniel's (1987) concept of invisible work. This devaluation was also extended to their domestic care work responsibilities in the private sphere (the second shift) (Hochschild, 1989), as their organization provided limited support for work-life balance; this can be further understood by the notion of the male-coded ideal worker, which expects their employees to be unencumbered by responsibility outside of their paid job (Acker, 1990). Moreover, there were notable discrepancies between participants in terms of their responses to gender inequalities at work. In particular, Dr. Bell and Dr. Smith referred to their efforts to manage their behaviours and emotions in attempt to evade scrutiny from their colleagues, particularly in ways that aligned with impression management and emotion work. As for Dr. Collins, her frequent tendency to overtly share her candid ideas and

opinions with her colleagues was characteristic of undoing gender, as her embodiment of traditionally male-coded traits of assertion (as opposed to submission and compliance) served to dismantle gender-based differences and expectations in the workplace (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007).

With this in mind, these findings indicate that women leaders' workplace environments and interactions continue to be governed by male-coded organizational expectations. Consistent with prior literature, participants emphasized the need for organizations to recognize their care work responsibilities performed both in the public (at work) and private (domestic) spheres. While these burdens are further enhanced with the intersection of age, future research may focus on the specific experiences of younger and/or older women in leadership positions. As such, these insights enable additional in-depth understanding of the experiences of women leaders in female-dominated academic fields, which can therefore contribute to gender equality initiatives in the workplace and the promotion of female representation in leadership positions. These initiatives are essential to help women feel respected and included in their positions and in their workplace environment at large, encourage them to seek and to be considered for higher-ranking positions, and therefore reduce the gender wage gap.

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Appendix A

Pre-Screen Questions

Confirmation of Interest to Participate in this Study

1. Please confirm your interest regarding your participation in this study. (*Please note that participation is completely voluntary*). *
- ☐ Yes, I would like to participate in this study.
- ☐ No, I do not want to participate in this study.

Demographic Questions

The following section includes demographic questions to confirm your eligibility for the study.

2. Please select your faculty. (*This will NOT be linked to your individual responses in the written thesis or public presentations*) *
 - ☐ Faculty of Social Work
 - ☐ Faculty of Nursing
 - ☐ Faculty of Education
3. What is your current position title? (*This will NOT be included in the written thesis or public presentations*) *
 4. How long have you been working in your current position? *
 5. Please confirm your gender identity. *
 - ☐ Woman
 - ☐ Man
 - ☐ Non-binary
 - ☐ Other

Interview Schedule

The following section will ask questions regarding your availability for an interview. Please note that interviews are 1-hour in length, and will be taking place between January 19, 2026, and February 27, 2026.

6. Would you like to participate in this interview in-person or online? *
 - ☐ In-person
 - ☐ Online (via Zoom)
 - ☐ Other
7. Please provide the days and times you will be available to participate in an interview (either online or in-person). *

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Preamble

(Review consent forms and ensure that the proper signatures have been obtained).

Thank you for your participation in this study! The purpose of this research is to explore how women leaders in female-dominated academic fields perceive their connections with the values, environment, and others in their workplace. This will include the interactions of female academic leaders in their own faculties, as well as across other faculties. As such, the study will contribute to the further improvement of gender equality initiatives in workplace settings, as well as the promotion of female representation in leadership positions.

I would also like to point out that I am aware of other intersectionality factors that may shape the experiences of female academic leaders. For the purpose of this study, I will only be asking questions that focus on gender. However, if you would like to bring light to any other influencing factors in relation to your experiences, please feel free to share them!

Position Overview

1. Please describe your role and responsibilities in relation to your position at work.
 - What does a typical day at work look like for you? What are your day-to-day tasks?
 - What type of interactions do you have at work? Who are these interactions with, and how often do you interact with them?
2. In your opinion, what are the characteristics and skills required to be a successful [leader]?
 - Which of these characteristics or skills do you possess?
 - Why these skills?
3. Do you know any other women in positions of leadership? What qualities do they possess that make them a good leader?
4. What are the characteristics and skills do you believe your institution values in a successful [leader]?
 - How may this differ from your own opinion regarding the required characteristics to be a successful [leader]?
 - Why these skills?
5. Have you noticed any differences between male and female [leaders] in terms of how they approach their role and responsibilities?
 - Can you provide an example of how male and female [leaders] have handled situations differently?
 - Have you noticed any differences in their work-related values, or how they have been treated by others? Please provide examples.
6. How do you think being a woman has influenced the way you approach your responsibilities at work?

- Advantages? Disadvantages?

Workplace Values

7. When reflecting on your experiences at work, what values (related to your role and responsibilities) are the most important to you?
 - Why are these values the most important to you?
8. What values do you perceive to be the most important to your organization?
 - How might these values align or conflict with your own values?
9. Please describe how the values of your workplace may have shaped your experiences at work.
 - Career performance?
 - Job satisfaction?
 - Connections with others?

Workplace Environment

10. How would you describe the overall environment of your workplace? Including the expectations (held by the institution, yourself, and others), and interactions between yourself and others.
 - What characteristics in your workplace do you like the most? What characteristics do you dislike, or like least?
11. Overall, how do you think being a woman influences your ability to advance in your career? How about in terms of becoming a leader?
 - Has there been anything that has held you back?
12. Please describe any situations where you feel you may have experienced gender discrimination as a woman leader in your workplace.
13. How have you been supporting other women in your workplace or faculty?
 - Is there anything else you can do (or would like to do) to support these women?

Connections & Interactions with Others

14. How would you describe your interactions with your colleagues within your faculty?
 - How do your interactions with members outside of your faculty differ from those within your faculty? Why are/aren't these interactions different?
15. Have you noticed times where your gender identity, as a woman, has influenced your interactions with others? Whether this may have been positively and/or negatively?
 - How you perceive/communicate with others?
 - How they perceive/communicate with you?
16. How have other women influenced you?
 - Women leaders? Subordinates?
 - What about this relationship was meaningful to you?

17. As you reflect on your career, can you point to any critical mentors who helped advance your career?
- Please describe how have they helped you.

End of Interview

18. How do you think the culture of your workplace can be improved for women in leadership positions?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share or clarify?

Thank interviewee and stop the recording.