



Gendered Barriers to Female Academics' Managerial Advancement in TVET Colleges

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Abstract :

This study aimed to examine factors influencing female academics' access to managerial positions in TVET colleges. Women remain underrepresented in college leadership despite constitutional and policy commitments to gender equality. Existing studies offer limited insight into how stereotypes, institutional practices, professional relationships, and policy implementation interact within TVET institutions. The study used a qualitative multiple-case design within an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected lecturers and analyzed thematically alongside observations. First, participants associated leadership competence and authority more strongly with men than women. Male leadership was therefore treated as the institutional norm. Second, masculine leadership expectations contributed to self-doubt, fear of failure, and some women's reluctance to pursue promotion. These responses reflected socially produced barriers rather than incapacity. Third, limited solidarity among women and preferences for male leaders weakened peer endorsement, mentoring, sponsorship, and legitimacy for female leadership. Together, these mechanisms formed a self-reinforcing cycle sustaining male managerial dominance. The study implies that confidence-building alone is insufficient. TVET colleges should strengthen transparent promotion processes, mentoring, sponsorship, selection panels, and equity accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Technical and vocational education and training colleges contribute to social and economic development by equipping students with practical knowledge and occupational skills (Selane & Odeku, 2024). In South Africa, they are expected to improve employability, reduce unemployment, and support national development through market-relevant training (Magadza & Mampane, 2024). Their effectiveness, however, also depends on leadership that reflects workforce diversity (Li et al., 2025). Excluding women from managerial positions may limit institutional perspectives, decision-making capacity, and governance quality (Heubeck, 2024). Gender-inclusive leadership is therefore important for organizational legitimacy, fairness, and broader participation in development (Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025). Examining women's access to management is consequently essential for assessing whether TVET colleges fulfill their democratic and developmental responsibilities.

South Africa's Constitution, national gender-equity policies, and Sustainable Development Goal 5 affirm women's equal right to leadership and decision-making opportunities (Masenya, 2023). Despite these commitments, male dominance remains

evident across educational institutions, workplaces, political structures, religious organizations, mining, and construction (Galea & Chappell, 2022). This persistence indicates that formal policies have not fully removed the social and institutional barriers limiting women's advancement (O'Brien et al., 2023). Previous studies associate women's underrepresentation with gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, weak policy implementation, and limited monitoring of equality measures (Cornejo-Abarca et al., 2025; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). These conditions restrict women's career progression and reinforce the belief that leadership is inherently masculine (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The central problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation of female academics in leadership and management positions within Eastern Cape TVET colleges. Institutional visits indicated that positions such as principal, rector, director, and head of department were predominantly occupied by men. This pattern persists despite policies promoting gender equity, non-discrimination, and women's participation in institutional decision-making (Hervías Parejo & Radulović, 2023). The problem is not only numerical but may reflect inequalities in recruitment, promotion, professional recognition, organizational support, and access to leadership opportunities (Domingo et al., 2022). Cultural expectations and gender stereotypes may also shape how competence, authority, and leadership suitability are evaluated (Heilman et al., 2024).

Existing research shows that women's access to leadership is influenced by interconnected social, cultural, legal, and organizational factors. Sebastian-Tirado et al. (2023) identify gender stereotypes as a significant barrier, while Smith & Sinkford (2022) emphasizes that leadership opportunities should be available irrespective of gender, race, or ethnicity. Fellegi et al. (2023) highlight harmful norms, policy gaps, and weak monitoring as obstacles to women's representation. Khan et al. (2025) similarly links limited female inclusion in senior leadership to sociocultural practices affecting selection and promotion. Studies conducted across African and international contexts confirm that women's underrepresentation does not result from individual incapacity but from structural arrangements and socially embedded assumptions that shape whose leadership is recognized, supported, and legitimized.

Nevertheless, important gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on universities, mining, construction, public administration, or women's participation in vocational education rather than the managerial progression of female academics in TVET colleges (Selane & Odeku, 2024). Some studies document underrepresentation without examining how workplace culture, professional networks, institutional procedures, stereotypes, and policy implementation interact to restrict women's promotion (Liani et al., 2021). Other studies address gender inequality at national or continental levels, providing limited insight into the specific realities of Africa's TVET institutions (Bray-Collins et al., 2022). This study addresses that gap by investigating gendered leadership within the organizational and governance context of public vocational colleges.

The novelty of this research lies in its context-specific examination of how stereotypes, cultural norms, institutional practices, leadership expectations, and policy implementation collectively shape female academics' access to management. Rather than merely confirming women's underrepresentation, the study explains how masculine authority is reproduced through everyday organizational practices and perceptions. By applying a feminist perspective, it connects formal gender-equality commitments with the lived realities of academics in an underexplored educational sector. This focus is important because continued exclusion may weaken institutional transformation, reduce leadership diversity, and undermine confidence in public commitments to gender justice.

Accordingly, the study investigates the factors influencing female academics' access to managerial positions in selected Eastern Cape TVET colleges. It argues that women's limited representation results primarily from interacting structural, cultural, interpersonal, and organizational barriers rather than from inadequate competence or ambition. These barriers may include gender stereotypes, patriarchal expectations, unequal professional support, opaque promotion processes, limited leadership development, and inconsistent implementation of equity policies. Conceptually, the study contributes to understanding gendered leadership in vocational education. Practically, it provides evidence for developing fair recruitment procedures, transparent promotion systems, mentoring programs, leadership development initiatives, and accountability mechanisms that can strengthen women's participation in TVET management.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism was appropriate because the study sought to understand how academics interpreted their experiences of gender, leadership, promotion, and access to managerial positions within specific institutional and sociocultural contexts. Rather than measuring predetermined variables, the study examined the meanings participants attached to organizational practices, gender stereotypes, professional relationships, and career advancement opportunities (Vohra, 2024). The multiple-case study design enabled an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon across five TVET colleges while supporting comparisons between institutional contexts and preserving the real-life conditions in which women's managerial advancement occurred (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024; Perez et al., 2023).

The research was conducted in five of the eight public TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The province and participating colleges were purposively selected because preliminary visits indicated that senior positions, including principals, directors, and heads of departments, were predominantly occupied by men. This setting was therefore considered relevant for examining the organizational, cultural, and professional factors affecting female academics' progression into management. Including five colleges allowed the researcher to identify similarities and differences across institutional environments. The study was bounded within the Eastern Cape public TVET sector and excluded universities, schools, support staff, and other post-school institutions to maintain a clear focus on the governance and occupational characteristics of TVET colleges.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with five purposively selected lecturers, comprising three women and two men, with one participant representing each college. Participants were selected because of their knowledge of academic employment, promotion practices, leadership structures, and gender relations. Purposive sampling enabled the recruitment of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed accounts of the research phenomenon (Khoza et al., 2023; Mbanaso et al., 2023). Managers were excluded to reduce potential conflicts of interest and the influence of institutional authority on sensitive disclosures. Semi-structured interviews allowed consistent questioning while enabling follow-up probes for clarification and depth (Rathnasinghe et al., 2026). Non-participant observations of organograms and leadership structures complemented the interviews. Institutional permission, written informed consent, and voluntary participation were secured before data collection.

Interview and observational data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning. Following Braun and Clarke's procedures, the researcher repeatedly listened to the recordings, transcribed the interviews verbatim, and read the transcripts closely to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were generated from statements concerning stereotypes, cultural expectations, promotion, institutional support, leadership opportunities, policy implementation, and career barriers. Related codes were grouped into provisional themes, which were reviewed against the transcripts and observational evidence. The themes were then refined, defined, and named before being integrated into the findings (Christou, 2022; Squires, 2023). Observations of institutional organograms were used to contextualize the interview data and strengthen the analysis through methodological triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male Leadership Superiority

Gender stereotypes and perceptions of male leadership superiority refer to socially constructed beliefs that associate authority, decisiveness, competence, and managerial effectiveness more strongly with men than with women. In this study, the theme emerged from participants' statements portraying men as naturally more suitable for senior leadership positions, while women were viewed as less capable, insufficiently prepared, or less convincing as institutional leaders. These accounts do not demonstrate that male academics possess greater leadership competence. Instead, they reveal how masculinity functioned as the normative standard against which leadership suitability was assessed. Such assumptions may shape how female academics are perceived by colleagues, supported within their institutions, and considered during promotion processes. The finding therefore reflects both explicit preferences for male leaders and implicit expectations that women must demonstrate exceptional competence before being recognized as legitimate managerial candidates.

Marrie stated that female academics were less capable of performing principals' duties than men and that some lacked the self-esteem required to view themselves as effective managers. Apple similarly explained that traditional community beliefs continued to position men as having greater potential for management in TVET colleges. These statements reveal that male performance was frequently treated as the benchmark for leadership, while women were evaluated through assumptions of deficiency, uncertainty, and inadequate readiness. The researcher interpreted these accounts not as evidence of women's actual incapacity, but as manifestations of a gendered discourse that grants leadership credibility more readily to men. This framing also risks shifting responsibility for underrepresentation onto individual women by emphasizing self-confidence while overlooking unequal opportunities, biased appointment practices, limited professional development, and institutional cultures that may constrain women's career advancement.

The broader interviews and institutional observations reinforced this interpretation. Participants repeatedly described women as fearful of failure, reluctant to apply for management positions, or inclined to underestimate their potential, while male leadership was treated as familiar and acceptable. Organizational structures and organograms also indicated that men predominantly occupied senior positions. Although these observations did not establish the direct causes of male dominance, they showed that participants operated within environments where male authority was highly visible and normalized. The limited presence of women in senior roles may symbolically

strengthen the belief that leadership is primarily a male domain. Overall, the data suggest that leadership legitimacy was not evaluated solely through qualifications, experience, or demonstrated performance. Instead, gender stereotypes operated as an interpretive framework that conferred greater credibility on men and positioned female leaders as exceptional, uncertain, or potentially ineffective.

Table 1. Evidence of Gender Stereotypes and Perceived Male Leadership Superiority

Informant position	Interview excerpt	Indicator
TVET college lecturer-Marrie	"I think female academics are not capable of performing principals' duties like males in schools; some female academics lack self-esteem to the point that they do not see themselves excelling in managing the tasks."	Perceived female incapability; male performance used as the leadership benchmark
TVET college lecturer-Ompie	"Female academics are not ready for leadership and management positions, and they view leadership and management roles as best suited to male academics."	Leadership associated with masculinity; perceived lack of female readiness
TVET college lecturer-Timza	"Women lack confidence in themselves. They do not want to be failures; instead, they tend to give up when facing challenges and community stereotypes."	Gendered expectations; fear of failure; effect of community stereotypes
TVET college lecturer-Apple	"In this area, most people are still living according to old beliefs; they mainly believe that only men have the potential and are better suited for management positions in their TVET colleges."	Traditional gender beliefs; assumed male managerial superiority
TVET college lecturer-Cabbage	"Females have an inferiority complex and are not convinced that they can excel in management positions as principals; for that reason, they do not even apply for management positions."	Internalization of gender stereotypes; withdrawal from managerial competition

Table 1 shows that participants consistently associated leadership suitability with men while describing female academics as less capable, less prepared, lacking confidence, or reluctant to apply for managerial positions. This contrast indicates that leadership was not perceived as a gender-neutral professional role. Instead, participants reproduced a masculine leadership prototype in which men were presumed to possess the qualities required for management, whereas women were evaluated through deficit-oriented assumptions. Such informal beliefs may influence nominations, recommendations, peer support, interview assessments, and perceptions of leadership potential, even when recruitment and promotion policies formally endorse gender equality.

The findings further indicate that gender stereotypes operated through both external judgments and internalized self-assessments. Repeated exposure to male-dominated leadership, limited female representation, and expectations of male authority may weaken women's perceived legitimacy and confidence. This creates a self-reinforcing pattern: masculine leadership norms shape institutional expectations, these expectations affect women's opportunities and willingness to pursue management, and their continued underrepresentation is then used to confirm the belief that men are more suitable leaders. Consequently, informal gender beliefs may continue to sustain male dominance within TVET college management.

Internalized Inferiority and Limited Leadership Self-Confidence among Female Academics

Internalized inferiority and limited leadership self-confidence refer to a condition in which female academics absorb and reproduce socially constructed beliefs that question women's competence and legitimacy as leaders. In this study, the theme emerged from participants' descriptions of women who underestimated their abilities, feared failure, withdrew when confronted with challenges, and refrained from applying for managerial positions. These behaviors were not interpreted as evidence of inherent psychological weakness. Rather, they were understood as possible consequences of persistent gender stereotypes, male-dominated leadership structures, limited access to female role models, and institutional cultures that associate managerial authority with masculinity. The finding therefore reflects the interaction between external gender expectations and women's self-evaluation.

Ompie stated that female academics viewed leadership roles as more suitable for men and often underestimated their potential to become principals. Similarly, Cabbage explained that some women were unconvinced of their ability to succeed in management and therefore did not apply for leadership positions. These accounts suggest that internalized doubt may influence women's participation before formal selection processes begin. The researcher interpreted this as anticipatory self-exclusion, in which qualified women may avoid promotion because they expect rejection, question their competence, or assume that male candidates will be preferred. However, such reluctance should not be treated solely as an individual deficiency, as it may reflect previous marginalization, limited professional encouragement, unequal access to mentoring, and unclear advancement pathways.

The interview and observational data indicate a self-reinforcing pattern. Repeated messages that men are more suitable leaders may weaken women's leadership confidence, increase fear of failure, and discourage applications for promotion. Limited female participation then contributes to the continued dominance of men in managerial positions, which may further normalize male authority and reduce the visibility of female role models. Institutional organograms showing predominantly male senior leadership provided contextual support for this interpretation, although they did not directly measure women's confidence. Overall, internalized inferiority should be understood as a socially and organizationally produced response rather than an inherent characteristic of female academics. Addressing it therefore requires institutional reform, transparent promotion systems, mentoring, leadership development, and stronger professional support, rather than merely encouraging individual women to become more confident.

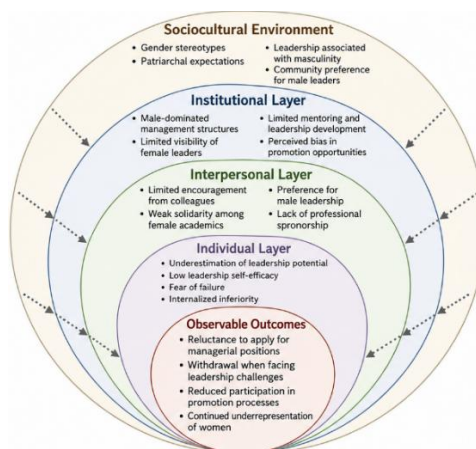


Figure 1. Multilevel Contexts Shaping Internalized Inferiority and Leadership Self-Confidence among Female Academics

Figure 1 illustrates that internalized inferiority among female academics is embedded within multiple and interconnected levels of influence. At the sociocultural level, patriarchal expectations and persistent gender stereotypes construct leadership as a predominantly masculine role. These beliefs are reinforced at the institutional level through male-dominated management structures, the limited visibility of women in senior positions, and insufficient leadership development opportunities. At the interpersonal level, limited encouragement, weak professional sponsorship, and preferences for male leadership may further reduce the recognition of women's managerial potential. These conditions converge at the individual level, where some female academics may underestimate their capabilities, fear failure, and question their legitimacy as prospective leaders. The observable result is not simply low confidence, but reduced participation in managerial recruitment and promotion processes. The model therefore locates women's self-doubt within broader organizational and sociocultural conditions rather than treating it as an inherent personal deficiency.

Table 2. Indicators of Internalized Inferiority and Limited Leadership Self-Confidence

Informant position	Interview excerpt	Indicator
TVET college lecturer-Ompie	"Female academics are not ready for leadership and management positions, and they view leadership and management roles as best suited to male academics; furthermore, female academics underestimate their potential to become principals."	Underestimation of leadership potential; acceptance of male leadership as the norm
TVET college lecturer-Timza	"Women lack confidence in themselves. They do not want to be failures; instead, they tend to give up when facing challenges and community stereotypes."	Fear of failure; reduced persistence; limited leadership confidence
TVET college lecturer-Marrie	"Some female academics lack self-esteem to the point that they do not see themselves excelling in managing the tasks."	Low professional self-efficacy; inability to envision managerial success
TVET college lecturer-Cabbage	"Females have an inferiority complex and are not convinced that they can excel in management positions as principals; for that reason, they do not even apply for management positions."	Internalized inferiority; anticipatory self-exclusion; reluctance to apply
TVET college lecturer-Apple	"Negative attitudes of females against one another result in a preference for males over females."	Limited peer validation; internalized preference for male authority

Table 2 shows that negative self-evaluation may reduce women's participation in leadership pathways. Ompie and Marrie described female academics as underestimating their potential, while Timza linked low confidence to fear of failure and withdrawal when difficulties arise. Cabbage further indicated that some women may avoid applying for managerial positions because they doubt their ability to succeed. These accounts suggest that internalized inferiority may weaken leadership self-efficacy and reduce women's willingness to pursue promotion.

The findings also indicate that internalized inferiority is shaped by interpersonal and institutional conditions, rather than by individual psychology alone. Apple's statement regarding women's preference for male leaders illustrates how gender stereotypes may be reproduced among female colleagues. Limited peer support, professional encouragement, sponsorship, and visible female role models may intensify self-doubt and reinforce the belief that men are more suitable leaders.

The data reveal a self-reinforcing pattern. Gender stereotypes reduce women's perceived leadership legitimacy, which may contribute to lower confidence, reluctance to apply, and withdrawal from advancement opportunities. Women's continued

underrepresentation in senior management then reinforces male dominance and further normalizes leadership as a masculine role. The finding therefore reflects an institutional cycle of internalized exclusion rather than an inherent lack of ability or ambition among female academics.

Limited Solidarity among Women and Preference for Male Leaders

Limited solidarity among women and preference for male leaders refer to attitudes and interpersonal practices through which female academics provide insufficient recognition, encouragement, or professional support to other women seeking leadership positions while simultaneously regarding male leadership as more acceptable or legitimate. In this study, the subtheme was identified through participants' statements indicating that some women preferred to be led by men, expressed negative attitudes toward female colleagues, or considered managerial responsibilities more appropriate for male academics. The finding does not establish that women are naturally competitive, unsupportive, or incapable of collective action. Rather, it indicates that gendered leadership assumptions may also be reproduced by women who have been socialized within male-dominated institutional and community environments. Such attitudes may weaken the professional legitimacy of aspiring female leaders by limiting peer endorsement, informal sponsorship, mentorship, and collective advocacy. The subtheme therefore captures the interpersonal reproduction of gender inequality through internalized preferences for male authority and restricted support for women's managerial advancement.

Table 3. Interview Evidence of Limited Solidarity and Preference for Male Leadership

Interview excerpt	Indicator	Informant
"Negative attitudes of females against one another result in a preference for males over females."	Limited solidarity among women; negative peer evaluation; preference for male authority	Apple, TVET college lecturer
"As far as I am concerned, I prefer to be led by men rather than being under female leadership."	Explicit preference for male leadership; limited acceptance of female authority	Anonymous TVET college lecturer
"Female academics view leadership and management roles as better suited to male academics."	Internalized association between leadership and masculinity	Ompie, TVET college lecturer
"In this area, most people still hold traditional beliefs that only men have the potential and are better suited for management positions in TVET colleges."	Traditional gender beliefs; perceived male managerial superiority	Apple, TVET college lecturer

Table 3 shows that the preference for male leadership was not only imposed by broader community norms but was also reproduced through the attitudes of some female academics. Apple's account suggests that negative evaluations among women may generate stronger support for male candidates than for female colleagues. This pattern may reflect internalized sexism, whereby individuals adopt gender hierarchies that disadvantage members of their own gender. However, it should not be interpreted as evidence that women are inherently unsupportive. Such attitudes may develop within institutional environments where leadership opportunities are limited, women are subjected to greater scrutiny, and career advancement is perceived as competitive rather than collectively attainable.

The participant's explicit preference for male leadership further reveals a legitimacy gap between male and female authority. This preference was based on gender rather than qualifications, experience, or demonstrated performance. Consequently, female leaders may face resistance before and after appointment. Before appointment, limited peer endorsement may weaken nominations, recommendations, professional networking, and confidence to apply. After appointment, reluctance to recognize female authority may reduce cooperation, weaken institutional trust, and subject female managers to greater scrutiny. Women's managerial advancement is therefore influenced not only by formal recruitment procedures but also by informal interpersonal processes through which leadership credibility is granted or withheld.

Observations of institutional organograms provided contextual support for this interpretation, as senior management positions appeared to be predominantly occupied by men. Although organizational structures could not directly demonstrate hostility or weak solidarity among women, the visibility of male leadership may normalize male authority and make female leadership appear unusual or less credible. Overall, the findings suggest that some female academics may not consistently recognize or support other women as legitimate leaders. This does not imply that all women oppose female leadership; rather, it shows how gender stereotypes may be internalized and reproduced through everyday professional relationships, limiting peer validation, mentorship, sponsorship, and collective support for women's advancement.

Table 4. Perceived Influence on Female Leadership Legitimacy

Informant position	Interview excerpt	Indicator
TVET college lecturer-Apple	"Negative attitudes of females against one another result in a preference for males over females."	Reduced peer support and weakened legitimacy of female leadership
TVET college lecturer-Anonymous participant	"I prefer to be led by men rather than being under female leadership."	Direct rejection or limited acceptance of women's managerial authority
TVET college lecturer-Ompie	"Female academics view leadership and management roles as better suited to male academics."	Internalized masculine leadership prototype
TVET college lecturer-Apple	"Most people believe that only men have the potential and are better suited for management positions."	Sociocultural validation of male authority

Table 4 shows that the attitudes identified in the interviews may influence female leadership legitimacy through three connected mechanisms. First, the internalized masculine leadership prototype causes managerial competence to be more readily associated with men. Second, explicit preferences for male leaders reduce the presumption that women possess equivalent authority and decision-making capacity. Third, limited peer support may deprive aspiring female leaders of informal resources such as encouragement, nomination, sponsorship, professional advocacy, and collective validation. These mechanisms can operate even when formal institutional policies prohibit gender discrimination. The table therefore demonstrates that equality in written policies does not automatically produce equality in everyday professional relationships. Informal attitudes may continue to affect whether women are encouraged to apply, viewed as credible candidates, accepted after appointment, and supported in performing managerial responsibilities.

A recurring pattern emerged across the interview and observational data. Gendered community beliefs first established men as the conventional and preferred leaders. These beliefs appeared to be internalized by some academics, including women,

who subsequently evaluated male authority more positively than female authority. This preference contributed to negative or doubtful assessments of women seeking managerial positions and reduced the likelihood of strong peer endorsement. Limited recognition and professional support could then discourage female academics from pursuing leadership or weaken their legitimacy when they entered managerial roles. The continued predominance of men in institutional management reinforced the perception that men were naturally more suitable leaders. The pattern can therefore be described as a self-reproducing cycle: male leadership dominance generates familiarity and legitimacy; familiarity encourages preference for male authority; preference reduces support for female candidates; and reduced support contributes to the continuation of male-dominated management. Limited solidarity among women is thus better understood as one manifestation of institutionalized gender beliefs rather than as an inherent characteristic of female professional relationships.

Discussion

The first finding demonstrates that leadership competence in Eastern Cape TVET colleges remains interpreted through a masculine prototype, with men presumed more capable and suitable for managerial positions. This pattern aligns with Tremmel & Wahl's (2023) finding that leadership continues to be associated with agentic characteristics attributed to men and with Buss et al.'s (2025) framework, which identifies perceptual bias and organizational context as determinants of women's leadership emergence. Comparable barriers have been documented in South Asian public universities, where gendered norms and organizational practices restrict women's inclusion (Islam et al., 2023), and in Jordanian universities, where stereotypes, weak institutional support, and promotion barriers constrain women's advancement (Alshdiefat et al., 2024). Women's numerical presence in higher education therefore does not automatically produce proportional representation in senior decision-making positions, as inequalities persist across teaching, research, and management (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023), while leadership gaps, limited role models, and delayed gender parity remain evident across regions (Correa et al., 2025). Evidence from South African universities similarly connects women's limited progression with biased selection, stereotypes, restricted networks, and inadequate mentoring (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). However, the present study extends this literature by showing that male dominance in vocational colleges is reproduced not only through formal institutional procedures but also through participants' everyday judgments that male leadership is more credible, making inequality simultaneously structural, cultural, and relational.

The second finding, concerning internalized inferiority and reduced leadership self-confidence, is consistent with social cognitive explanations of women's managerial career development. Bonesso & Cortellazzo (2024) argue that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, contextual support, and perceived barriers influence women's career aspirations and actions. At the same time Thien et al. (2025) identify social stigma, traditional expectations, personal constraints, mentoring, and role models as interconnected influences on leadership progression. Participants' fear of failure, underestimation of their potential, withdrawal from challenges, and reluctance to apply for leadership positions should therefore not be interpreted as inherent female deficiencies. Instead, these responses indicate that repeated exposure to masculine leadership norms can become incorporated into women's self-evaluations. This interpretation challenges deficit-oriented explanations that locate the problem within women themselves, demonstrating that reduced confidence can be institutionally

produced through restricted recognition, limited sponsorship, inadequate mentoring, and the persistent visibility of men as the dominant leadership model.

The third finding reveals an interpersonal mechanism through which gender inequality is reproduced: some women reportedly withheld support from female colleagues or expressed a preference for male leaders. This differs from Pillay-Naidoo & Vermeulen (2023) finding that workplace solidarity can help women persist in male-dominated professions because, in the present context, solidarity was not consistently available. Instead, gender hierarchy was sometimes reproduced horizontally through negative judgments of female candidates and greater acceptance of male authority. Maheshwari et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate that women's leadership trajectories depend on family, organizational, and interpersonal support, while Wang & Gao's (2024) identify persistent gaps between formal gender-equality policies and organizational practices. The findings do not suggest that women are naturally unsupportive; rather, scarce leadership opportunities, masculine institutional cultures, and repeated exposure to male authority may encourage women to distance themselves from female candidates, thereby weakening collective legitimacy, peer endorsement, professional sponsorship, and access to advancement opportunities.

Theoretically, the three findings support an integrated explanation combining feminist analysis, role congruity, social cognitive career theory, and internalized sexism. Gender stereotypes create a perceived mismatch between femininity and leadership, male-dominated structures reinforce this mismatch, repeated exposure weakens women's leadership self-efficacy, and limited peer solidarity restricts recognition and advancement. This multilevel interpretation advances scholarship that frequently separates perceptual, individual, and organizational explanations (Buss et al., 2025). The study's novelty lies in demonstrating how these mechanisms form a recursive cycle within Eastern Cape TVET colleges: masculine leadership norms generate self-doubt and preferences for male authority. At the same time, women's reduced applications and limited peer endorsement reproduce male managerial dominance. Unlike studies centred primarily on universities, this research locates the cycle within vocational education, an institutionally distinctive and underexamined post-school sector in which leadership decisions directly influence workforce preparation, skills development, governance, and regional economic participation.

Practically, the findings indicate that interventions focused solely on improving women's confidence may be insufficient and may inadvertently blame women for structurally produced disadvantages. TVET colleges should combine transparent appointment criteria, gender audits, monitored promotion outcomes, diverse selection panels, mentoring, sponsorship, leadership development, and institution-wide efforts to challenge gender norms. (Thien et al., 2025) emphasize gender-neutral policies, mentoring, and role models, while (Correa et al., 2025) recommend strategies that strengthen women's visibility, mentoring, and leadership diversity. Stewart et al. (2021) further review indicates that stereotype-change interventions are most effective when they address norms through multiple context-sensitive mechanisms rather than isolated awareness programmes. Peer-support networks should therefore be institutionalized through nominations, coaching, collaborative leadership projects, and access to influential professional networks. Overall, the study contributes empirical, theoretical, and policy knowledge by showing that beliefs in male superiority, internalized leadership doubt, and weakened solidarity operate as a self-reinforcing system of leadership exclusion rather than as independent barriers. Although these findings may inform fairer promotion decisions, a broader leadership pipeline, stronger institutional legitimacy, and

better use of women's expertise, they represent participants' situated perceptions and should not be generalized to all women or colleges. Future research should test this multilevel model across provinces, include managers and appointment records, and examine whether institutional reforms change women's applications, promotions, peer endorsement, and leadership acceptance over time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that female academics' limited access to managerial positions in Eastern Cape TVET colleges is shaped not by an inherent lack of competence or ambition, but by a self-reinforcing interaction among masculine leadership stereotypes, internalized leadership doubt, and limited solidarity for female leadership. The central lesson is that formal gender-equity policies are insufficient when everyday institutional beliefs continue to associate authority and managerial credibility with men. The study's principal scholarly contribution lies in integrating structural, interpersonal, and individual mechanisms into a context-specific explanation of leadership exclusion within the underexamined TVET sector. It extends feminist leadership scholarship by demonstrating how gender stereotypes can influence women's self-efficacy, peer endorsement, willingness to apply, and perceived legitimacy as leaders. Practically, the findings support transparent promotion systems, gender-responsive leadership development, mentoring, sponsorship, diverse selection panels, and stronger professional networks among women. However, the study was limited by its small purposive sample of five lecturers, its exclusion of managers, and its reliance on participants' situated perceptions and organizational observations. Future research should include larger samples across multiple provinces, incorporate managers and appointment-panel members, analyze recruitment and promotion records, and apply longitudinal or mixed-method designs to test whether institutional interventions improve women's applications, appointments, and acceptance in leadership.

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