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WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN MALE-CENTRIC ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE "MISMATCH MODEL" AND THE "QUEEN BEE" PHENOMENON

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Abstract

This study examines women's leadership in male-centred academic environments through the mismatch model and the Queen Bee phenomenon. It investigates how gendered expectations of leadership, care responsibilities, appointment practices, and relationships among women shape perceptions of women's access to leadership positions in higher education. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining an anonymous online survey of 21 higher-education employees with descriptive analysis of eight five-point Likert items and thematic analysis of open-ended responses. The findings show that 71.4% of respondents perceived assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance as important for advancement to leadership positions, while 57.1% identified family and care responsibilities as an informal barrier to women's progression. Gender-stratified exploratory analysis indicated that women, compared with men, reported significantly greater doubt toward formally qualified female candidates and a stronger perceived need to distance themselves from women's solidarity in order to succeed in male-centred academic hierarchies. Qualitative evidence further highlighted care responsibilities, gender stereotypes, unequal selection practices, and informal networks as relevant mechanisms. Importantly, reports of competition, distance, and gatekeeping among women leaders coexisted with reports of mentoring and active career support. The findings therefore do not support a deterministic interpretation of the Queen Bee phenomenon; rather, they suggest that women-to-women leadership relations are heterogeneous and shaped by organisational conditions. The study underscores the need for transparent appointment criteria, formal mentoring and sponsorship structures, and institutional policies that reduce the career penalties associated with care responsibilities. Given the small, non-probability sample, the results should be interpreted as exploratory and warrant replication in larger, institutionally diverse studies.

Keywords: *women's leadership; higher education; male-centred organisational culture; mismatch model; Queen Bee phenomenon; gendered career barriers; mentoring*

Women's Leadership in Male-Centric Academic Environments: An Analysis of the "Mismatch Model" and the "Queen Bee" Phenomenon

The representation of women in leadership positions within higher education institutions remains at a low level globally, constituting only one-fourth of the senior academic staff (Money, 2016). The artificial barriers hindering women's career progression are conceptualized in academic literature using the term "glass ceiling". This phenomenon is described as an invisible barrier preventing women from ascending to upper-level managerial roles (Abbas et al., 2021). Due to long-standing male dominance, the management culture in higher education is built upon "male-centric" norms, and this environment restricts women's leadership aspirations (Dunn et al., 2014). Male dominance creates a "hidden background identity" in the workplace, leading to the formation of an organizational culture based on hegemonic masculine values and the emergence of biased attitudes toward women.

In this context, the administration of educational institutions on a democratic basis aligned with the modern era necessitates a new critical approach toward existing managerial stereotypes (Mollayeva, 2024, p. 11). The humanization of management requires that developmental opportunities be equally accessible to every individual and that authority be distributed democratically among team members (Mollayeva, 2024, p. 14). Such a democratization process establishes the necessary theoretical foundation for softening the rigid, male-centric management norms within the academic environment.

Literature Review

At the macro level, the explanation of gender differences is provided through the socio-cultural theory proposed by Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001). According to this theory, gender differences stem from the historical gender-based division of labor in society. Biological factors – specifically women's childbearing capacity and men's larger physical size and strength – have catalyzed a functional division of labor in society. For instance, women's reproductive role led them to adopt more nurturing behaviors, while men's physical strength led to their participation in warfare or heavy labor. Consequently, this historically established division has led men to acquire higher status and power, while women have developed skills more oriented toward relationship management (Hyde, 2013).

How this historical division of labor is integrated into individuals' daily lives is explained by the cognitive social learning theory developed by Bush (2021). According to this theory, individuals' behavioral models are formed through the imitation of powerful or admired figures in their environment, as well as through mechanisms of reinforcement or punishment of specific behaviors. For example, children who observe the mother taking care of the children and household chores, while the father works to earn money and provide for the family, begin to imitate these roles. These differences are further reinforced by the social environment: when girls are praised for nurturing behaviors and boys are rewarded for being assertive rather than displaying emotion, these gender-based behaviors become entrenched in the individual's psychology.

The impact of these two factors on individuals' choices is reflected in the expectancy-value theory (Black, 2015). This approach demonstrates that two main factors play a crucial role in an individual's decision-making process: expectations regarding a specific task (the probability of success) and the value assigned to that activity (interest or importance). Social and cultural factors shape these expectations. For instance, outdated societal stereotypes regarding mathematical abilities can lower women's expectations of success in this field and their perceptions of their own capabilities, even in the absence of any real difference in ability (Hyde et al., 2019).

It is precisely due to these stereotypical societal expectations that women's confidence regarding competitive environments or senior management positions is artificially diminished. A profound analysis of gender differences and similarities is impossible without considering these contextual factors. To more clearly illustrate how sociological and psychological factors affect individual development and the formation of gender roles in society, the primary theoretical approaches are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. *Main Theories Regarding Contextual Factors Shaping Gender Differences*

Cognitive Social Learning Theory (Bush, 2021)	**Based on this theory, reinforcement and punishment shape both children's and adult's behavior, and people often imitate or model powerful or admirable people in their environment**
Sociocultural Theory (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001)	This theory proposes that gender differences arise from the historical division of labor by gender in a society.
Expectancy-Value Theory (Black, 2015)	According to this theory, expectancies and values are the two contributing factors to an individual's decision-making process

The "Mismatch Model" in Management

As a logical continuation of the aforementioned theoretical traditions, one of the most important concepts explaining the phenomenon of the limited representation of women in senior leadership positions, particularly in academic administration, is the "mismatch model" (Heilman, 2012).

According to the core postulate of the model, there is a profound contradiction between the characteristics traditionally attributed to women by society (kindness, sensitivity, nurturing, and communal orientation) and the traits required for leadership positions that are specifically attributed to men (dominance, assertiveness, and goal-orientation). In an organizational environment, this perceived mismatch causes female candidates to be deemed inadequate for leadership roles, regardless of their objective skills and experiences.

However, the modern pedagogical management paradigm prioritizes the transition from an administrative management system to a personality-oriented professional collaboration that considers the individual's inner potential, which is evaluated as a shift from vertical-hierarchical management to horizontal management (Mollayeva, 2024, P. 12–13). This new model requires the manager to act as a 'human-centered leader', supporting employees and considering their advice in the decision-making process (Mollayeva, 2024, p. 15). Such an approach proves that the 'communal' characteristics (nurturing, communication-oriented) attributed to women are not actually shortcomings for modern management; on the contrary, they serve as factors of efficiency.

The "Queen Bee" Phenomenon

Another problem women face in male-centric academic environments is the "Queen Bee" phenomenon. This phenomenon emerges as a reaction against gender stereotypes and inequality in male-dominated environments (Harvey, 2018). In this situation, some female leaders distance themselves from their female colleagues, assimilate into the existing male-centric leadership culture, and adopt masculine traits. They fail to support the career advancement of other women, thereby legitimizing the male-centric status quo (Faniko et al., 2017).

The Queen Bee Phenomenon was introduced by Staines et al. (1974). Queen Bee Phenomenon represents behavioural pattern which is characterized by a woman leader in male-dominated environments exhibit prevention for advancing of another woman.

The most obvious way in which women aspiring to achieve leader positions may try to fit in male-dominated organizations is by emphasizing what they see as masculine characteristics and leadership styles. Because stereotypes about the characteristics of successful leaders (i.e., agentic qualities) and the gender roles of women (i.e., communal qualities) are incongruent, women are at a disadvantage to achieve leadership positions (Wuertele, 2017). Although the initial definition of queen bee syndrome often refers to its occurrence in male dominated environments, it is important to note that today, female-dominated settings also exhibit patterns of queen bee phenomenon, particularly in fields such as healthcare and nursing (Wuertele, 2017). In the United States, the term "Eating the Young" is frequently used to describe a phenomenon in which older

nurses display aggressive behaviour toward younger nurses. There are three main explanations for this behaviour:

1. Fear of being replaced
2. Jealousy, driven by the need to outperform others
3. Resentment stemming from personal dissatisfaction, including the stress and challenges associated with nursing, such as long working hours, unfair pay, and heavy workloads.

Additionally, one of the reasons that female in top position distance themselves from other subordinate they are afraid of being replaced, characterized by withholding knowledge, and sabotage the advancement for other subordinates (Harvey, 2018). These combined factors can contribute to increased stress, which may manifest as aggressive behaviour.

The influence of identity-related dangers in senior women's unwillingness to assist other women in achieving success has also been measured more precisely in other studies. The study found that the less women are in the male dominated workplace settings, they were less likely to choose a female candidate. From this we can understand that there two kinds of threats: competition threat and collective threat from the competition threat it refers that women would not choose female subordinate. On the other hand, collective threat appears when a female assumes that with choosing female subordinate it directly threatens own performance (Baykal et al., 2020).

Derks et al. (2011) conducted two research studies and the results highlighted that queen bee phenomenon is not inevitable reaction of woman from high hierarchy. Rather, it is especially stimulated in workplaces where unfavourable stereotypes and gender discrimination pose a danger to women'ssocial identities. Ellemers et al. (2012) identified an additional factor contributing to women distancing themselves from other women. The study found that women exhibiting queen bee behaviour often distance themselves from those who have not yet made, or do not share, the significant personal sacrifices deemed necessary to succeed in male-dominated environments.

The role of the manager as a "cultural leader" is crucial in preventing the queen bee phenomenon; such a leadership type acts as a unifying factor within the team as the bearer of the institution's cultural values, ensuring healthy collaboration among individuals based on a "subject-subject" approach (Mollayeva, 2024, P. 13, 15–16). Unless the contradiction between existing formalism in management and the creative individual is eliminated, it remains inevitable for some female leaders to distance themselves from their colleagues by adapting to the rigid rules of the male-centric system (Mollayeva, 2024, p. 17).

Methodology

To deeply analyze gender stereotypes and management paradigms in higher education institutions, a mixed-methods approach was utilized in this study. Because the research topic encompasses complex social and psychological phenomena (the "Mismatch Model" and the "Queen Bee" phenomenon), it became necessary to measure both the statistical scale of the problem and the characteristics of individual perception. This approach serves to support the obtained quantitative indicators with qualitative individual experiences and to increase the reliability of the research.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured online questionnaire survey was applied to collect empirical data. The survey instrument consists of three main conceptual blocks:

Demographic and Professional Profile: Parameters determining the respondents' position status and experience.

Quantitative Measurements: To evaluate institutional stereotypes regarding leadership characteristics in management, a 5-point Likert scale was utilized. The response options were structured as follows: 1 – "Strongly disagree", 2 – "Disagree", 3 – "Neutral", 4 – "Agree", and 5 – "Strongly agree".

Qualitative Analysis: Open-ended questions were used to obtain respondents' personal observations regarding the internal dynamics in a male-centric academic environment.

Object of the Research. The target population of the research consists of the academic (faculty) and administrative management staff operating within the higher education system.

Because sensitive internal conflict topics such as the "Queen Bee" were addressed during the research process, the survey was conducted in a completely anonymous format to ensure the sincerity and psychological safety of the respondents. The quantitative data obtained from the Likert scale were converted into percentage and frequency indicators using descriptive statistics, while the texts obtained from the open-ended questions were synthesized with existing theories (Socio-Cultural and Expectancy-Value theories) and subjected to thematic analysis.

Empirical Findings, Discussion, Conclusion, and Survey Instrument

Women's Leadership in Male-Centric Academic Environments

Prepared from the anonymous higher-education survey dataset (N = 21).

Empirical Findings

The study draws on 21 valid questionnaire responses from personnel in higher education. The sample comprised 15 women (71.4%) and 6 men (28.6%). Sixteen respondents were teaching staff (76.2%), three were doctoral students (14.3%), one was a research-group assistant (4.8%), and one was a department head (4.8%). Eleven respondents had 1–5 years of higher-education experience (52.4%), four had 6–10 years (19.0%), and six had 11–20 years (28.6%). The data should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory account of perceptions in the participating group, not as population estimates for all higher-education institutions.

Table 2. *Participant Profile*

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Women	15	71.4
	Men	6	28.6
Professional status	Teaching staff	16	76.2
	Doctoral student	3	14.3
	Research-group assistant	1	4.8
	Department head	1	4.8
Higher-education experience	1–5 years	11	52.4
	6–10 years	4	19.0
	11–20 years	6	28.6

Note. Source: Author's anonymous survey

All eight Likert-type items were completed by all respondents. Scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and agreement denotes the combined share of response categories 4 and 5. The strongest consensus concerned the perception that advancement to leadership positions requires agentic traits – assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance. Fifteen respondents (71.4%) agreed with this statement (M = 3.52, SD = 1.03). A majority also identified family and care responsibilities as an informal impediment to women's advancement (57.1%; M = 3.05, SD = 1.53).

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Likert Items (N = 21)*

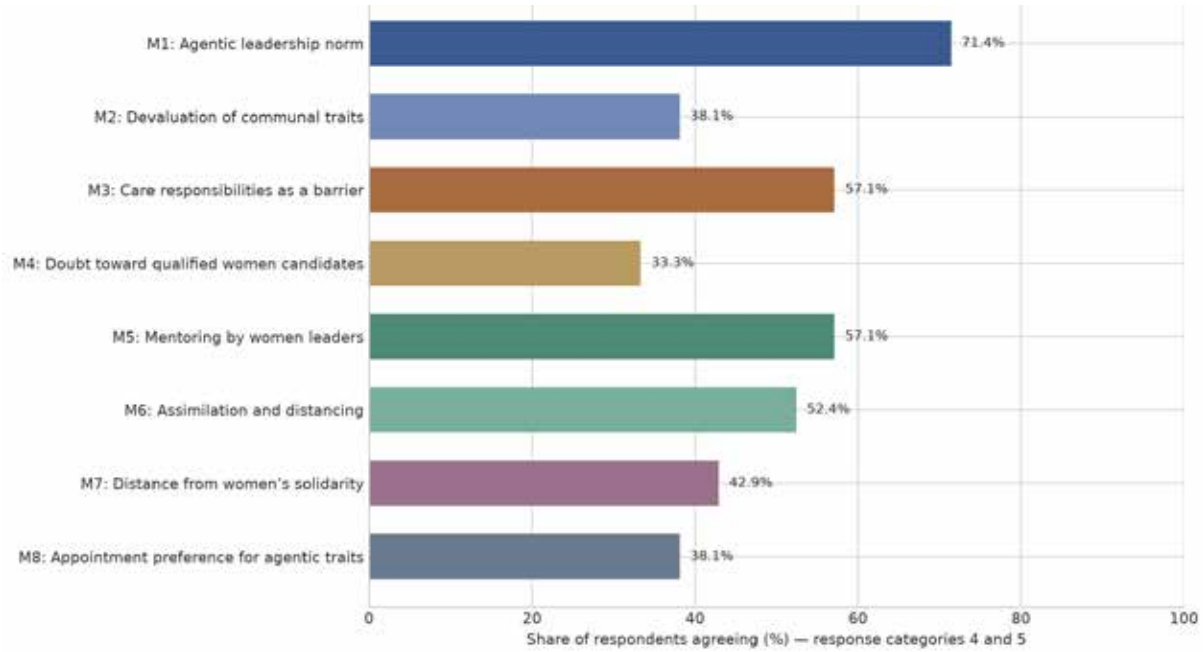
Item	Condensed wording	Mean	SD	Agree, n (%)	Neutral, n (%)	Disagree, n (%)
M1	Leadership advancement requires dominance	3.52	1.03	15 (71.4)	3 (14.3)	3 (14.3)
M2	Empathy is treated as weakness/inefficiency	2.95	1.12	8 (38.1)	5 (23.8)	8 (38.1)

Item	Condensed wording	Mean	SD	Agree, n (%)	Neutral, n (%)	Disagree, n (%)
M3	Care responsibilities are an informal barrier	3.05	1.53	12 (57.1)	1 (4.8)	8 (38.1)
M4	Qualified women candidates face greater doubt	2.90	1.34	7 (33.3)	6 (28.6)	8 (38.1)
M5	Women leaders actively mentor younger women	3.43	0.93	12 (57.1)	6 (28.6)	3 (14.3)
M6	Some women leaders are more distant/demanding	3.38	0.97	11 (52.4)	5 (23.8)	5 (23.8)
M7	Success requires distancing from women's solidarity	3.19	0.93	9 (42.9)	6 (28.6)	6 (28.6)
M8	Appointments prioritise dominance over teamwork	3.14	0.79	8 (38.1)	8 (38.1)	5 (23.8)

Note. Agreement = response categories 4–5; disagreement = categories 1–2. Source: Author's anonymous survey

The findings on women's leadership relations are deliberately mixed rather than unidirectional. While 57.1% of respondents agreed that women leaders actively mentor younger women (M = 3.43, SD = 0.93), 52.4% also agreed that some women leaders can become more distant or demanding toward other women (M = 3.38, SD = 0.97). Thus, both mentoring and distancing appear as context-sensitive experiences within the surveyed workplaces.

Figure 1. *Agreement Levels Across Likert Items (N = 21)*



Gender-Stratified Exploratory Analysis

Because the number of male respondents was small (n = 6), gender comparisons were treated as exploratory. Exact two-sided permutation tests were used to avoid a normal-distribution assumption, and Benjamini–Hochberg false-discovery-rate adjustment was applied across the eight item-level comparisons. Women rated two items substantially higher than men after this correction. Women were more likely to report that female

candidates face doubt despite satisfying formal requirements (women: M = 3.40, SD = 1.18; men: M = 1.67, SD = 0.82; mean difference = 1.73; Hedges' g = 1.51; p = .0079; q = .0316). Women also more strongly endorsed the view that success in a male-centred hierarchy may require distancing oneself from women's solidarity (women: M = 3.53, SD = 0.83; men: M = 2.33, SD = 0.52; mean difference = 1.20; Hedges' g = 1.51; p = .0067; q = .0316).

A further difference was observed for care responsibilities (women: M = 3.40; men: M = 2.17; Hedges' g = 0.81), but it was not retained after the multiple-testing adjustment (q = .2679). Its magnitude warrants substantive attention but requires replication in a larger and more balanced sample. No other item-level comparison survived the adjustment.

Table 4. *Exploratory Comparison by Gender*

Item	Women, M (SD)	Men, M (SD)	Diff. W–M	g	Exact p	BH q
M1	3.67 (0.98)	3.17 (1.17)	0.50	0.47	.3642	.3643
M2	2.73 (1.22)	3.50 (0.55)	–0.77	–0.68	.1997	.2679
M3	3.40 (1.55)	2.17 (1.17)	1.23	0.81	.1168	.2679
M4	3.40 (1.18)	1.67 (0.82)	1.73	1.51	.0079	.0316
M5	3.60 (0.83)	3.00 (1.10)	0.60	0.64	.2009	.2679
M6	3.60 (0.91)	2.83 (0.98)	0.77	0.79	.1380	.2679
M7	3.53 (0.83)	2.33 (0.52)	1.20	1.51	.0067	.0316
M8	3.27 (0.80)	2.83 (0.75)	0.43	0.53	.3643	.3643

Note. p = exact two-sided permutation probability; q = Benjamini–Hochberg adjusted value across eight tests. Higher values indicate stronger agreement

Scale Diagnostics and Qualitative Findings

Three conceptually grouped item sets were inspected as descriptive composites. Internal consistency was low for all three sets (Cronbach's α = .07–.48). Therefore, they should not be interpreted as validated scales and no composite-level hypothesis tests were used. Item-level results remain the primary quantitative evidence. Descriptively, the male-centred management-norm set was moderately associated with the gendered-career-barrier set (Spearman's ρ = .375), while the latter was moderately associated with the women's leadership-dynamics set (ρ = .499). Given N = 21 and weak internal consistency, these associations are descriptive signals only.

Table 5. *Descriptive Composite Diagnostics*

Conceptual item set	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Male-centred management norms	M1, M2, M8	3.21	0.67	.41	Low reliability; descriptive only
Gendered career barriers	M3, M4	2.98	1.17	.48	Low reliability; descriptive only
Women's leadership dynamics	M5, M6, M7	3.33	0.56	.07	Heterogeneous content; descriptive only

The open-ended responses contextualised the statistical pattern. Thematic coding was conducted at the level of meaning units; more than one code could be assigned to a response on underrepresentation. Care and family responsibilities constituted the most frequent explanatory theme (7 coded responses, 33.3%). Explicit references to

stereotypical expectations, unequal selection practices, male preference, and academic-capital disadvantage were also recurrent. Four respondents (19.0%) framed women's underrepresentation primarily in individualising terms, while three (14.3%) disputed the premise that women are underrepresented in academic leadership.

The comments on women leaders' relationships with women colleagues were similarly heterogeneous. Seven participants (33.3%) described competition, conflict, gatekeeping, distance, or heightened demands; four (19.0%) described mentoring and tangible career support; six (28.6%) reported no direct observation; and three (14.3%) explicitly attributed the pattern to individual character or local context rather than gender. This supports a contextual interpretation: negative experiences occur, but they coexist with mentoring and cannot be treated as a fixed or universal feature of women's leadership.

Table 6. *Thematic Coding of Open-Ended Responses*

Open-ended question	Theme	n	%
Reasons for limited representation	Family and care responsibilities	7	33.3
	Individualising explanations	4	19.0
	Underrepresentation not accepted	3	14.3
	Gender stereotypes/glass-ceiling references	3	14.3
	Other low-frequency structural themes	5*	23.8*
Relations with women colleagues	Competition, conflict, gatekeeping, or distance	7	33.3
	Mentoring and active support	4	19.0
	No observation/no substantive response	6	28.6
	Character- or context-centred explanation	3	14.3
	No direct observation; comparative comment	1	4.8

Note. Multiple codes were permitted for the first question; its category frequencies therefore do not total 100%

Discussion

The findings provide partial empirical support for the article's mismatch-model argument. The strongest aggregate result was the perception that leadership advancement relies on assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance. Yet the lack of majority agreement that empathy is treated as weakness, or that dominance is formally prioritised in appointment decisions, indicates that the proposed norm is neither total nor institutionally uniform. The evidence is more consistent with a contested cultural pattern than with a single, fully shared managerial rule.

The gender-stratified results are particularly important. Women participants reported substantially more doubt directed at formally qualified female candidates and a stronger perceived need to distance themselves from women's solidarity in order to progress. These differences are compatible with the socio-cultural account that gender roles and organisational expectations influence the appraisal of leadership and access to authority (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). They also show how aggregate statistics can obscure unequal experiences: the pooled score for M4 was modest, whereas the gender-specific analysis revealed a large difference.

The evidence does not justify characterising women leaders as uniformly unsupportive or treating the Queen Bee phenomenon as an inherent gender trait. Mentoring and support were reported alongside distance, competition, and gatekeeping. The pattern instead accords with scholarship that situates distancing behaviour in organisational

identity threat, discriminatory climates, and competitive structures (Faniko et al., 2017; Ellemers et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This mixed-methods exploratory study reveals a differentiated picture of women's leadership in male-centred academic environments. Participants widely perceived that advancement requires traditionally agentic characteristics, while family and care responsibilities emerged as the most frequent barrier in both the quantitative and qualitative evidence. Women respondents, more than men, perceived additional doubt toward formally qualified women candidates and greater pressure to distance themselves from women's solidarity in order to progress. These two gender differences remained statistically detectable after false-discovery-rate adjustment, although the small sample requires cautious interpretation.

The data do not support a deterministic account of the Queen Bee phenomenon. Mentoring and support from women leaders were reported alongside distance, competition, and gatekeeping. The most defensible conclusion is that women-to-women leadership relations are heterogeneous and shaped by organisational conditions. Future research should use a larger, stratified sample, validated multi-item measures, and systematic qualitative coding by more than one researcher. Such a design would enable stronger inference about how institutional culture, gendered career barriers, and leadership relations interact in higher education.

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Appendix A

English Translation of the Survey Instrument

The following English translation documents the wording of the Azerbaijani questionnaire used for this study. The translation preserves the substantive meaning of the original items. For statements M1–M8, respondents selected one of five response categories: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree.

Q1. Gender: What is your gender?

Q2. Current role/status: What is your current role/status in the higher education institution?

Q3. Higher-education experience: What is your total work experience in the higher education sector?

M1. Agentic leadership norm: At the institution where I work, it is believed that traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance are more necessary to advance to leadership positions.

M2. Devaluation of communal traits: In management positions, empathy, care, and community orientation are perceived as "weakness" or as ineffective.

M3. Care responsibilities as a barrier: Women's family and care responsibilities constitute an informal barrier to their nomination for leadership positions in higher education.

M4. Doubt toward qualified women candidates: Female professionals, even when they meet the formal requirements of the leadership post for which they are candidates, are more often criticised or doubted because they are considered not to fit the "management character."

M5. Mentoring by women leaders: At the institution where I work, women in leadership positions actively support (mentor) the career development of younger women staff.

M6. Assimilation and distancing: Some women who advance to leadership positions assimilate into the existing management system and become more demanding or distant toward the concerns of other women colleagues.

M7. Distance from women's solidarity: Women seeking success in a male-centred academic hierarchy often feel compelled to distance themselves from traditional women's solidarity.

M8. Appointment preference for agentic traits: Based on my observations, appointments to leadership positions in my institution place greater value on assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance than on empathy and teamwork.

Q12. Reason for limited representation: Based on your experience, what is the main reason why women are insufficiently represented in leadership positions (e.g., dean, department head)?

Q13. Observation of women leaders' relations: Can you share a memorable observation about how women leaders treat other women staff in your workplace – for example, whether they support career development, remain neutral, or compete?

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