



# **Gender and Leadership in Higher Education Institutions**

## **Conceptual Paper**

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Gender and leadership can be seen as integral aspects shaping everyday human interactions within society. Particularly in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs), the interplay between gender and leadership is one which has been subject to consistent discussion among scholars. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender and leadership and examine this relationship within the context of higher education institutions. HEIs are traditionally 'known as sites of learning for critical citizenship, knowledge production, and academic scholarship'.<sup>1</sup> With HEIs being recognised as hubs for social, cultural and academic development which shape society through the production of knowledge and promotion of critical thinking, their role in shaping the role and position of women in society is one which should not be ignored or discounted. This paper not only seeks to interrogate gender and leadership broadly but also within the context of HEIs. In order to fully interrogate the above the following paper has been divided into five sections. The first section aims to define and interlink the concepts of gender and leadership in order to provide a theoretical foundation for this paper. The next section then focuses on the practice of leadership in higher education exploring how leadership is understood and practiced in HEIs. The third and fourth sections then intend to situate the experience of women and explore gender, influence and hierarchies in HEIs particularly in the African context. Leading to the conclusion which draws attention to the wider societal implications of gender and leadership in HEIs. By providing a deeper understanding of the interaction between leadership and gender in HEIs this paper concludes by advocating for an understanding of leadership beyond the dominant position-based approach, with leadership being seen as a process and tool for transforming gendered dynamics in the HEIs, particularly in the African context.

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<sup>1</sup> Sader, Saajidha B. *et al* (2005) 'Globalisation, higher education restructuring and women in leadership: opportunities or threats?', *Agenda*, Vol. 19, No. 65, p. 58

## **Conceptualising Gender and Leadership**

The relationship between gender and leadership is one which is complex and constantly evolving. The inter-connected dimensions between gender and leadership not only have profound implications for individuals but also for organisations and wider society. In order to interrogate the relationship between gender and leadership particularly in relation to HEIs, their definitions and the key themes at the intersection of gender and leadership need to be explored.

### Gender

Gender is a multidimensional concept which surpasses binary understandings of biological sex and comprises an extensive spectrum of identities, roles and expressions. According to the WHO gender refers to;

*‘the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other.’<sup>2</sup>*

Gender in this sense can be seen as distinct from biological sex, as it does not refer to physical or genetic attributes but rather a set of social, cultural, and psychological attributes, roles, and expectations which constitute our beliefs of what it means to be male, female, or non-binary. One of the first intellectuals to discuss this distinction was Simone de Beauvoir who formulated the distinction between sex and gender by noting that one ‘is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’.<sup>3</sup> For Butler this distinction between sex and gender has ‘been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; [in this sense] sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body,

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (2023), *Gender and health*, [online] Available from: <[https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1)> [ Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2023]

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. (1997) *The Second Sex*, (United Kingdom: Vintage), p. 295

whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation'.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of gender is also acknowledged by Duerst-Lahti and Kelly who highlight that gender is not necessarily tied human body but rather can be defined as a 'category, as an attribute or property, as something we do, or as a normative position'.<sup>5</sup> Thus while sex is rooted in biological differences, gender is socially constructed and a matter of culture, with the terms "masculine" and "feminine" being a product of society and according to Millet 'the sum total of the parents, the peers, and culture's notion of what is appropriate to each gender by a way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression'.<sup>6</sup>

While historically in many societies there has been an adherence to binary understandings of gender and gender norms, it is important to note that social 'attitudes toward women and their role in society show remarkable differences across countries, including those with similar institutions or economic development'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the growing body of knowledge on the issue of gender continues to expand our understanding of gender identity, expression, roles and stereotypes. Gender can thus be seen as an evolving paradigm shaped by the interactions and experiences of individuals in society. It is this evolving paradigm which plays an important role in the intersection between gender and leadership.

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<sup>4</sup> Butler, Judith (1986) 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex', *Yale French Studies*, No. 72, p. 35

<sup>5</sup> Duerst-Lahti, Georgia and Kelly, Rita Mae (1995), *Gender Power, Leadership, and Governance*, (United States of America: University of Michigan Press), p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Millet, Kate (2016), *Sexual Politics*, (New York: Columbia ), p. 31

<sup>7</sup> Giuliano, Paola (2017), *Gender: An Historical Perspective*, IZA DP No. 10931, [online] Available from: <<https://docs.iza.org/dp10931.pdf>> [Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2023], p. 2

## Leadership

Bass notes that ‘no societies are known that do not have leadership in some aspects of their social life’.<sup>8</sup> Leadership continues to be one of the most complex, dynamic and elaborate social phenomena to be written about. Different definitions and conceptions of the term leadership have plagued academics, trainers and practitioners alike, with the work of scholars such as Rost identifying 221 definitions of leadership in 587 publications, written from 1900 to 1990.<sup>9</sup> Over the years leadership has been conceptualised in relation to traits, behaviours, situational factors, relationships with followers as well as influence and power. Scholars such as Grint and Northouse have crafted definitions to cover a significant amount of leadership conceptualisations, with Grint establishing leadership in the form of “Position”, “person”, “results” and “process”,<sup>10</sup> and Northouse defining leadership as a ‘process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal’.<sup>11</sup>

Early conceptions of leadership ‘go back nearly as far as the emergence of civilisation, which shaped its leaders as much as it was shaped by them’.<sup>12</sup> Classically leadership has been conceptualised from a “leader-centric” position which places “the person” at the centre of its conception. Scholars such as Thomas Carlye characterised leadership in relation to great men whereby leaders were born with inherent qualities and therefore not made.<sup>13</sup> This understanding not only highlights the importance of traits in traditionally conceptualising leadership but also,

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<sup>8</sup> Bass, Bernard and Bass, Ruth (2008), *The Bass handbook of leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 4th edn. (New York: Free Press), p.3

<sup>9</sup> Rost, Joseph C. (1993) *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (United States of America: Greenwood Publishing Group)

<sup>10</sup> See Grint, Keith (2010), *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 4

<sup>11</sup> Northouse, Peter (2013), *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 6th edn. (India: Sage Publications), p. 5

<sup>12</sup> Bass and Bass (2008), p. 4

<sup>13</sup> See Carlyle, Thomas (1840) *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall)

Carlyle's "great-man theory" introduces leadership as a male-centred topic. As leadership is understood in relation to the history of what "great men" have accomplished in the world.<sup>14</sup> The twentieth-century trait and behaviour approaches to leadership further denote this "leader-centric" position as they place personality and innate behaviours as the centre of one's ability to lead. This is demonstrated through the works of Mann who places an emphasis on how personality traits such as intelligence, masculinity, dominance and extroversion could be used to distinguish leaders from non-leaders, as well as research done by Ohio State University which draws importance to behaviour and styles for effective leadership.<sup>15</sup> Thus, leadership is built around the notion that individuals possess innate characteristics, qualities, behaviours and styles which make them "great leaders".

However, with the works of Stodgill acknowledging that individuals do not become leaders based solely on the qualities they possess, but rather the relevance of the traits to the situations leaders find themselves in, it shifts leadership away from this "person-based approach."<sup>16</sup> This shift towards situation-based leadership has allowed for an understanding of leadership as a complex and dynamic exchange between leaders, followers and the overarching context, whereby 'leaders influence followers, followers influence leaders, and all parties are influenced by the context in which the exchange takes place'.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, leadership can be seen as an interpersonal process with the exchange of influence being at the centre of its

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<sup>14</sup> Carlyle (1840), p. B

<sup>15</sup> See Mann, Richard D. (1959) 'A Review of the Relationship between Personality and Performance in Small Groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 241-270 and Hemphill, John K. and Coons, Alvin E. (1957) 'Development of the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire', in Ralph M. Stodgill and Alvin E. Coons, eds., *Leader Behavior: Its Description and Measurement* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, Bureau of Business Research), pp. 6-38

<sup>16</sup> See Stodgill, Ralph M. (1948) 'Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature', *Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 25, No.1, pp. 35-71 and Stodgill, Ralph M. (1974) *Handbook of leadership: A survey of theory and research* (New York: Free Press)

<sup>17</sup> Pierce, Jon L. and Newstrom, John W. (2003), *Leaders and the Leadership Process: Readings, Self-Assessments and Applications*, 3rd edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin), p. 5

conceptualisation. Furthermore, this exchange of influence for French and Raven is based on a leader's ability to exercise referent, expert, legitimate, reward and coercive power.<sup>18</sup>

With other contemporary conceptualisations of leadership such as transformational leadership, which characterises leadership on the 'basis of its alignment to a greater good as it entails the involvement of the followers in processes or activities related to personal factor[s] towards the organization and a course that will yield certain superior social dividend',<sup>19</sup> it draws attention to complex and multi-dimensional aspects of the concept. It is this understanding of leadership and its many multidimensional components which needs to be taken into consideration in understanding its wider interaction with gender and HEIs.

### The Intersection of Gender and Leadership

With gender and leadership being complex concepts themselves it is no surprise that the intersection between the two should be any less convoluted. Snaebjornsson and Edvardsson note in terms of leadership and gender that there is a significant level of confusion surrounding terminology such as "gender", "sex", "women", "men", "feminine", and "masculine".<sup>20</sup> For Duerst-Lahti and Kelly, gender in relation to leadership can be understood as a blanket term which not only covers 'femaleness and maleness, but includes men, masculinity, and manliness as well as women, femininity, and womanliness'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> French, John and Raven, Bertram (1959) 'The Bases of Social Power', in Dorwin Cartwright, ed., *Studies in Social Power* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research; University of Michigan), pp. 150-167

<sup>19</sup> Khan, Zakeer A. et al. (2016) 'Leadership theories and styles: A Literature Review', *Journal of Resources Development and Management*, Vol. 16, p. 3

<sup>20</sup> Snaebjornsson, Inga M. and Edvardsson, Ingi R. (2013), 'Gender, Nationality and Leadership Style: A Literature Review', *International Journal of Business and Management*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 90

<sup>21</sup> Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995), p. 5

Historically, one has to acknowledge that gender roles and expectations have been an influential factor not only in terms of how leadership is conceptualised but also in the attainment of leadership positions. As noted above leadership has historically been associated with “great men” with Vetter maintaining that leadership ‘has always primarily focused on public life, which is dominated by men’.<sup>22</sup> Thus while history has seen some prominent women from Cleopatra and Elizabeth I to Harriet Tubman, Marie Curie and Eleanor D. Roosevelt, it ‘was not until the 1980s that the number of women leaders reached critical mass and began to gain visibility’.<sup>23</sup> It is with this critical mass and visibility that literature focusing on understanding, the interaction between gender and leadership began to gain traction.

Pierce and Newstrom acknowledge that in recent years ‘leadership scholars have attempted to address the issue of sex-based and gender role difference within the context of leadership’.<sup>24</sup> When discussing the intersection between gender and leadership, three thematic areas become apparent. The first of these is the relationship between gender and leadership emergence. How men and women emerge into leadership positions can be seen as central to understanding the interaction between gender and leadership. Badura et al acknowledge that research ‘has shown that men tend to emerge as leaders more frequently than women’.<sup>25</sup> Studies such as the meta-analysis conducted by Eagly and Karau have contributed towards this notion, noting that in a mixed-sex group ‘men emerged as leaders to a greater extent than did women’.<sup>26</sup> However, the work of Kent and Moss countered this by highlighting that in terms of the effects of sex and

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<sup>22</sup> Vetter, Lisa P. (2010) ‘Overview: Feminist theories of Leadership’, in Karen O’ Conner, ed., *Gender and Women’s Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (United States: SAGE Publications), p. 3

<sup>23</sup> Klenke, Karin (2004) *Women and Leadership: A Contextual Perspective* (Ukraine: Springer Publishing Company), p. 2

<sup>24</sup> Pierce and Newstrom (2003), p. 97

<sup>25</sup> Badura, Katie L. et al. (2018) ‘Gender and leadership emergence: A meta-analysis and explanatory model’, *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 71, No. 3, p. 335

<sup>26</sup> Eagly, Alice H. and Karau, Steven. J. (1991), ‘Gender and the emergence of leaders: A meta-analysis’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 60, No. 5, p. 685



gender roles on self and group perceptions of leadership emergence, women were slightly more likely to emerge than men but gender roles had a stronger effect on emergent leadership than sex, maintaining that ‘androgynous and masculine subjects were the most likely to emerge as leaders’.<sup>27</sup> This leads to the next theme of gender and leadership styles.

Northouse states that as ‘more women are occupying positions of leadership, questions as to whether they lead in a different manner from men and whether women or men are more effective as leaders have garnered greater attention’.<sup>28</sup> While the works of Powell and Bartol have been able to highlight that there is no major difference in the leadership styles of men and women,<sup>29</sup> the works of Eagly and Johnson in particular have heavily contributed towards this distinction by noting that ‘women tended to adopt a more democratic or participative style and a less autocratic or directive style than did men’.<sup>30</sup> This is further reinforced by Rosener who states that men are more likely to describe themselves as transactional leaders, using position-based power where whereas women are more likely to adopt a collaborative and “nurturing” transformational approach by ‘getting subordinates to transform their own self-interest into the interest of the group through concern for a broader goal’.<sup>31</sup> This position reflects how traditional gender stereotypes underpin the perception of leadership styles as “more directive”, transactional styles are associated with masculinity while more collaborative transformational

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<sup>27</sup> Kent, Russell L. and Moss, Sherry E. (1994) ‘Effects of Sex and Gender Role on Leader Emergence’, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 5, p. 1335

<sup>28</sup> Northouse (2013), p. 350

<sup>29</sup> See Powell, Gary N. (1990) One more time: Do female and male managers differ?, *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 68-75 and Bartol, Kathryn M.(1978) ‘The Sex Structuring of Organizations: A Search for Possible Causes’, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 805-815

<sup>30</sup> Eagly, Alice H. and Johnson, Blaire T. (1990), ‘Gender and leadership style: A meta-analysis’, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 108, No. 2, p. 233

<sup>31</sup> Rosener, Judy B. (1990) *Ways Women Lead*. Harvard Business Review [online] Available form: <<https://hbr.org/1990/11/ways-women-lead>> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023]

styles are associated with femininity. These stereotypes particularly for women provide a challenge for those who do not conform to these traditional gender norms in leadership.

Leadership effectiveness and gender can be seen as the final theme at the intersection of gender and leadership. Research such as that done by Eagly et al. as well as Carli still highlights how gender differences can shape leadership effectiveness. Eagly et al. recognised that while men and women were equally as effective in their leadership roles, ‘women and men were more effective in leadership roles that were congruent with their gender’.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Carli reinforces the importance of gender composition in leadership effectiveness maintaining that “men have a greater influence than women and that this influence is moderated by the gender composition of groups, the communication style of interactants, and the gender bias of the task’.<sup>33</sup> Thus while the works of Jacobson and Effertz, and Tsui and Gutek have argued that there is little to no gender bias in relation to leadership effectiveness, one cannot ignore small differences evidenced through empirical research which seem to illustrate that women ‘experience slight effectiveness disadvantages in masculine leader roles, whereas roles that are more feminine offer them some advantages’.<sup>34</sup>

It is this key understanding of gender and leadership emergence, leadership style and leadership effectiveness which cannot be ignored especially when unpacking the relationship between gender and leadership in HEIs.

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<sup>32</sup> See Eagly, Alice H. et al. (1995) ‘Gender and the effectiveness of leaders: A Meta-Analysis’, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 1, pp.125–145 [and] Northouse (2013), p. 351

<sup>33</sup> Carli, Linda L. (2001), ‘Gender and Social Influence’, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 57, No. 4, p. 737

<sup>34</sup> Northouse (2013), p. 352

## **The Practice of Leadership in HEIs**

With the first section laying the theoretical foundations for this paper by conceptualising gender and leadership, the following section aims to interrogate the relationship deeper between gender and leadership within the context of HEIs. In order to fully interrogate the above a clear understanding of leadership and practice of leadership in HEIs is needed. The following section aims to discuss some of the various understandings and practices of leadership in HEIs and illuminate some of the gender nuances at the basis of this practice.

Newton offers a direct definition for leadership in higher education, defining it as getting ‘things done through others, by creating a common purpose where all concerned believe that the goals can be credibly achieved and that they, individually, have the wherewithal to do so in the context of a shared culture marked by mutual professional and personal respect’.<sup>35</sup> However, research on leadership in HEIs reveals that conceptualising leadership in relation to higher education is not as straightforward, as leadership can be understood and practised in a multitude of ways and is context-specific. For example, Seale et al. maintain that in ‘South Africa, the notion of university leadership has only recently expanded to include a wider understanding including Head of Academic Departments, Head of Academic School, Deans, and Deputies as well as Administrative Leadership, such as Registrars’ functions and Faculty Managers’.<sup>36</sup> With the acknowledgement that understandings of leadership and how it is practised may vary in relation to discipline, Jarrett and Newton note that leadership in the higher education world encompasses;

- Thought leadership (developing new areas of specialisation)
- Executive Leadership (role such as vice chancellor or head of a department)

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<sup>35</sup> Jarrett and Newton (2020), p. 4

<sup>36</sup> Seale, Oliver *et al.* (2021) ‘Enabling and empowering women in leadership in South African universities – Assessing needs and designing a response’, *Management in Education*, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 137

- Leadership in teaching and or supervision (at undergraduate or postgraduate level)
- Team leadership (in research programmes for example)
- Management roles<sup>37</sup>

Juntrasook empirical study based in one university in Aotearoa, New Zealand however characterises leadership in HEIs into four overarching meanings, “leadership as position”, “leadership as performance”, “leadership as practice” and “leadership as professional role model”.<sup>38</sup> While Juntrasook acknowledges that this understanding is similar to Grint’s fourfold leadership typology, the placement of these definitions in the academic context is seen as unique, with the ‘first two meanings (leadership as position and performance) [stressing] the hierarchical nature of departmental, institutional and disciplinary community contexts in relation to individuals’ leadership [and] last two meanings (leadership as practice and professional role model) [underlining] the everyday context of higher education and are less bounded.’<sup>39</sup> In this sense leadership in HEIs for the first two meanings is understood as in the form of official and public acknowledgement of one’s title as well as achievements, whereas leadership in the last two meanings is characterised through personal experiences and wider context such as academic literature and popular media, which emphasises personal recognition and [an] open-ended interpretation of how individuals practice and be(come) a leader[s] in their professional contexts’.<sup>40</sup> By defining leadership as “practice” and “professional role model”, it can be seen as less institutionally discursive as by defining it as “position” and “performance”

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<sup>37</sup> Jarrett, Kendall and Newton, Stephen (2020) *The Practice of Leadership in Higher Education: Real-world Perspectives on Becoming, Being and Leaving* (United Kingdom: Routledge), p. 4

<sup>38</sup> See Juntrasook, Adisorn (2014) ‘You do not have to be the boss to be a leader’: contested meanings of leadership in higher education’, *Higher Education Research & Development*, Vol. 33, No.1, pp. 19-31

<sup>39</sup> Juntrasook (2014), p. 28

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

it can ‘marginalise other individuals and groups of academics who do not subscribe to such categorisations’.<sup>41</sup>

The work of Bolden et al. seeks to deeper unpack the nature of leadership and how it is practised in HEIs. Bolden et al. study which comprises of 152 semi-structured face-to-face interviews in 12 UK universities and moves away from traditional leader-centric perspectives in HEIs, builds on understandings of leadership and how it practiced by outlining five main elements which constitute how leadership is practised in HEIs. For Bolden et al the practice of leadership in HEIs can be placed into the categories of “personal”, “social”, “structural”, “contextual” and “developmental”. The “personal” category refers to leadership in the traditional sense by highlighting that leadership is understood and practised in relation to personal qualities, experiences and preferences. Bolden et al. note that despite variations ‘there was general consensus on the need for academic or professional credibility (depending on role), consultation and openness (mirroring findings from Bryman, 2007), although the manner in which these translate into leadership behaviour varies considerably – some depending on charisma or force of character, while others construct forums for consultative and shared decision making’.<sup>42</sup> Placing emphasis on these qualities in relation to how leadership is practised and understood in HEIs is where gender nuances begin to reveal themselves as gender stereotypes are often placed at the centre of an individual’s leadership style and what causes them to emerge as leaders as noted in the prior chapter.

The next two categories noted by Bolden et al. in relation to how leadership is practised is the “social” and “structural” categories. When asking participants of the study how leadership is accomplished within universities Bolden et al. note that ‘most referred to the significance of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Bolden, Richard et al. (2008), ‘Tensions in Higher Education Leadership: Towards a Multi-Level Model of Leadership Practice’, *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 4, p. 364

social networks and relationships'.<sup>43</sup> The ability to circumnavigate and utilise informal and well as formal paths and networks was seen as a key way to practice leadership with the social dimensions identified referring to 'formal and informal networks and relationships within and beyond the institution ('social capital'), as well as the shared sense of identity and purpose within and between groups ('social identity').<sup>44</sup> The structural aspect was also acknowledged as an integral contribution to the understanding and practice of leadership in HEIs as it 'includes organisational systems, processes and structures, particularly those relating to finances, human relations, information technology, strategic planning and even the physical environment'.<sup>45</sup> This reflects on leadership being understood from a strategic standpoint in HEIs whereby leadership is practised in the form of providing a strategic vision and plan in order to advance the goals in HEIs.

The last two dimensions in relation to the understanding and practising leadership for Bolden et al. are "developmental" and "contextual". Developmental places significance on the notion that the practice of leadership needs to be adaptable in order to respond to the constantly developing nature of HEIs. The internal context (organisational culture, history and priorities) and external context (social, cultural and political environment) within which leadership is conducted in HEIs for Bolden et al. also shapes how leadership is understood and practised. Internally the history of a HEI as well as its current initiatives and priorities is at the centre of framing how individuals understand their leadership roles. Furthermore, the understanding that leadership stretches beyond HEIs is just as important with 'senior university leaders [becoming] increasingly engaged in high-level policy debates at local, national and international level'.<sup>46</sup> For Bolden et al. it is the combination of all five of these dimensions

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<sup>43</sup> Bolden et al. (2008), p. 366

<sup>44</sup> Bolden et al. (2008), p. 366

<sup>45</sup> Bolden et al. (2008), p. 367-368

<sup>46</sup> Bolden et al. (2008), p. 369

which contributes to understanding of how leadership is practiced, understood and experienced in HEIs.

In examining and discussing various understandings and practices of leadership in HEIs it is also important to acknowledge leadership as a collaborative task. Leadership is a collaborative task which involves the interaction between various stakeholders in HEIs including staff, students, faculty and administration. At the centre is the notion that successful leadership in HEIs requires strong relationships and networks among stakeholders in order to successfully achieve the goals of the institution. In this sense “leaders” in higher education space are seen as ‘skilled facilitators who encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, collective responsibility, cultural change, and an interest in the public good. They lead via partnerships and teams in systems that are web-like and non-hierarchical. And in an era of heightened accountability, the culture of evidence is critical to successful academic leadership’.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Power maintains that;

*‘The adoption of more open, collaborative styles of leadership, with greater emphasis on consensus and equality, not only give opportunities to women leaders to exercise their skills but also allow male leaders to learn from and develop their own style of leadership. Examples of female leaders who have achieved positions of leadership in universities are rare, but it is possible to detect a distinctive voice. Professor Richardson, the first female vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford called for the education of future leaders who can ‘think critically’ and ‘act ethically’ in order to better deal with issues like financial crises’.*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Power, Andrew (2020) ‘Understanding leadership in higher education as a tool for change in relation to gender’ in Eileen Drew and Siobhan Canavan, eds., *The Gender-Sensitive University. A Contradiction in Terms?* (London: Routledge), pp. 140–153

However, this point by Power also illustrates some of the gender nuances at the centre of how leadership is understood and practised in HEIs. For instance, with women often being associated with a more transformational leadership approach, which is deemed as more collaborative in practice it reflects on the gendered norms and stereotypes about their appropriateness for leadership, which are then translated into biased norms and structural practices in areas such as recruitment and promotion.<sup>49</sup>

In concluding this section it is important to acknowledge that leadership in HEIs is not only understood but also practiced in a multitude of ways which complement each other. By understanding how leadership is understood and practiced in HEIs as well as some of the gender nuances in relation to this, it helps deeper interrogate the interaction between leadership and the higher education space.

### **Situating the Leadership Experience of Women in HEIs**

With the previous section examining how leadership is understood and practised in HEIs and introducing dialogue around the gender dynamics at the basis of this understanding, it naturally leads to the following section which focuses on situating the experience of women in these spaces. While ‘HEIs are the most obvious custodians for merit-based progression; the pace of change in female participation at leadership levels remains slow and given the pressures institutions are facing to respond to the global digitalisation revolution, larger female representation needs to be expedited’.<sup>50</sup> This section seeks to explore some of the deeper explanations that help situate women’s leadership experiences in higher education institutions (HEIs), especially within the African Context. In order to do this the following section aims to

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<sup>49</sup> See Marshall, J. (1984) *Women managers: Travellers in a male world* (Wiley, Chichester)

<sup>50</sup> Mouzoughi, Yusra (2022) Reflection on female leadership experience in higher education’, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 126



explore issues of intersectionality, historical context, gender stereotypes and unconscious bias, work-life balance, policy and advocacy.

### Intersectionality

In the context of women and leadership in HEIs, an understanding of intersectionality can be seen as valuable in helping situate the leadership experience in these spaces. Intersectionality is a ‘concept of social dynamics that recognizes multiple, layered, crisscrossing ways in which varied historical, social, and economic backgrounds come together to situate individuals life chances and experiences’.<sup>51</sup> Intersectionality is based on the idea that different races, genders, sexual orientations and classes overlap and produce distinctive experiences of oppression and privilege. For Bernal acknowledging intersections of oppression and privilege is vital because ‘one’s identity is not based on the social construction of race but rather is multidimensional and intersects with various experiences’.<sup>52</sup> Intersectionality especially in relation to women, leadership and higher education can help illuminate why women from marginalised groups such as women of colour, women from low-income backgrounds, and LGBTQ+ women, face additional challenges in achieving leadership positions. Hailu notes that in the Ethiopian context, intersectionality is useful as it helps ‘think about how social systems—such as gender, class, geography, and religious traditions—work in tandem to position some women in uniquely subordinate positions in Ethiopia’.<sup>53</sup> Women at these intersections face a different experience from their counterparts for example Black women in HEIs may face different challenges than White women in relation to securing and maintaining leadership positions. This

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<sup>51</sup> Khizer-Varela, Aliya S. (2019) *Women in Leadership: The Impact of Intersectionality of Race, Gender and Education Level*, PhD Thesis [online] Available from: <<https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/ns064c397>> [Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2023], p.7

<sup>52</sup> Delgado Bernal (2002, p. 116)

<sup>53</sup> Hailu, Meseret F. (2022) “I Don’t Think It Makes the Difference”: An Intersectional Analysis of How Women Negotiate Gender While Navigating STEM Higher Education in Ethiopia, *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2, p. 324

is supported by Showunmi who highlighted that although ‘white women leaders also experienced challenges, due largely to their gender or class, the challenges were considerably more numerous and severe among BME women leaders – many of whom felt they had encountered racial prejudice and discrimination at work which hampered their progress as leaders’.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Black women may experience racism and sexism, as well as microaggressions, which are subtle forms of discrimination when it comes to gaining senior leadership positions. This is also highlighted by Seale et al. who note that ‘recently released research on black women academics’ experience in South African Universities echoes these findings and suggests that explicit racism and sexism pose insurmountable barriers to the advancement of particularly black women leaders in the Higher Education context in South Africa’.<sup>55</sup> Thus in exploring some of the deeper explanations that help situate women’s leadership experiences in HEIs, it is important to note that women at the intersections of gender, race, class and economic status experience leadership challenges based on their multiple identities which can make it more difficult for them to be seen as credible leaders and to be promoted to senior positions.

### Historical and Cultural Context

In examining deeper explanations that help situate women’s leadership experiences in HEIs it is also important to highlight how historical and cultural contexts shape these experiences, particularly in the African context. Seale et al. maintains that ‘unconscious and conscious gender discrimination with its male sub-economies has historically been built into the very way the university is structured’.<sup>56</sup> Mama highlights that when Blyden and Horton called for the

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<sup>54</sup> Showunmi, Victoria (2020) ‘The importance of intersectionality in higher education and educational leadership research’, *Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies*, Vol. 1, No.1, p. 58

<sup>55</sup> Seale, Oliver *et al.* (2021) ‘Enabling and empowering women in leadership in South African universities – Assessing needs and designing a response’, *Management in Education*, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 7

<sup>56</sup> Seale *et al.* (2021), p. 143

establishment of African universities as a move away from slavery and colonial exploitation and towards an independently-minded African intelligentsia it is unlikely that these new African universities were envisioned as places that would be equally accessible to women, as during this period ‘the Western academies that offered models to African nationalists were themselves proving resistant to the inclusion of women, as the testimonies of many eminent European women thinkers confirms’.<sup>57</sup> This is supported by Odhiambo who shares that historically the enrolment of women into HEIs in Kenya was neither a priority for the government nor the institutions as HEIs were established to train and educate men who would replace departing male colonial servants, which made this ‘civil-servant as male’ (think civil servant – think male) stereotype extended to other sectors and fostered bias against women in leadership positions’.<sup>58</sup> The experience of women in African HEIs can be seen as very much shaped by their historical contexts. For Johnson in sub-Saharan Africa ‘gender and identity are further burdened by historical circumstances’.<sup>59</sup> Looking at South Africa in particular one can argue that South Africa’s history in terms of apartheid has had a strong influence on the present leadership experience of women in HEIs with there being ‘more educated men than women, especially black women’.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that not all African countries share the same experience regarding women leadership experience in HEIs with cultural context also playing a key role in shaping this experience. Adongo et al. findings in relation to understanding women's experiences and challenges in patriarchal societies in Northern Ghana

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<sup>57</sup> Mama, Amina (2003) ‘Restore, Reform but do not Transform: The Gender Politics of Higher Education in Africa’, *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 106

<sup>58</sup> Odhiambo, George (2011) ‘Women and higher education leadership in Kenya: a critical analysis’, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol. 33, No.6, p. 668

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, Ane T. (2014) *Performing and defying gender: An exploration of the lived experiences of women higher education administrators in sub-Saharan Africa*, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, Vol. 42, No. 6, p. 837

<sup>60</sup> Khumalo, Minenhle and Zhou, Xiaoli (2019) ‘Women Leadership Experiences in Higher Education Institutions: The Context of South Africa’, *Proceeding of the SS9 & 3rd URICES*, [online] Available from: <<https://ices.prosiding.unri.ac.id/index.php/ICES/article/view/7891/6803>> [Accessed 11th September 2023], p. 192

established ‘that cultural beliefs deter women from leading men in various capacities [with] Cultural values and behaviours in society [being] found to influence women’s advancement to positions of leadership in education’.<sup>61</sup> This is also highlighted by Hailu who notes that in the Ethiopian context, contemporary culture is shaped by notions of religion, kinship, interdependence, familial interests and government hierarchies which can not only amplify patriarchal privilege but also in relation to HEIs may ‘compel collegiate Ethiopian women to internalize misogyny and to publicly insist that they fit into academic environments (i.e., distance themselves from their gender), even when they personally feel isolated’,<sup>62</sup> which can pose a challenge to their ascension in leadership roles in HEIs. Thus in examining deeper explanations that help situate women’s leadership experiences, historical and cultural contexts can be seen as vital factors.

### Gender Stereotypes and Unconscious Bias

A deeper understanding of gender stereotypes and unconscious bias also helps situate the women’s leadership experiences in HEIs. Eagly and Karau note gender stereotypes as the ‘activation of beliefs about women and men by gender-related cues [which] influences people to perceive women as communal but not very agentic and men as agentic but not very communal’.<sup>63</sup> The stereotypes of women being less competent and assertive than their male counterparts have made it difficult for them to be viewed as leaders. Furthermore, unconscious biases which favour men over women can also lead to women being overlooked or treated differently in relation to leadership positions in HEIs. This is acknowledged by Johnson who

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<sup>61</sup> Adongo, Awinaba A. et al. (2023) ‘Gender and leadership positions: understanding women's experiences and challenges in patriarchal societies in Northern Ghana’. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, ahead-of-print, p. 13

<sup>62</sup> Hailu (2022), p. 324

<sup>63</sup> Eagly, Alice H. and Karau, Steven J. Karau (2002) ‘Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Toward Female Leaders’, *Psychological Review*, Vol. 109, No. 3, p. 575

maintains that when women have veered ‘from these expectations in the sub-Saharan African context ‘their credibility was challenged and agency limited within the organization [where gender] is not an intrinsic identity within this context, but is one constructed through expectations, acts, and enforcement.’<sup>64</sup> Although the situation has evolved Khumalo and Zhou that gender stereotypes and biases are still prevalent in HEI’s in South Africa with them noting that ‘women still encounter stumbling blocks when they are trying to advance themselves in higher education’.<sup>65</sup> For example, ‘women in a South African university argued that beliefs and attitudes portraying women as inferior and incompetent were rooted in patriarchal culture, and were extended to institutions of higher learning.’<sup>66</sup> Odhiambo highlights that in relation to Kenya ‘gender stereotyping continued after independence as most leadership positions not just in civil service but other sectors such as higher education were viewed as ‘male positions’.<sup>67</sup> This is supported by Onsongo who highlights that in relation to Kenyan universities, the leadership experience for some women in HEIs can be an unfriendly work environment in which women leaders often experience resistance and hostility from junior and senior male colleagues ‘in the form of male intrusion in areas of responsibility, interruption at meetings and futile sexual harassment’.<sup>68</sup> It is this encounter of male biases and gender stereotyping in the everyday working of HEIs which make needs to be taken into consideration when situating the leadership of women, especially in this context. Furthermore works by Manya as well as Gachukia in this context have both acknowledged that gender stereotypes are rooted in HEIs

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<sup>64</sup> Johnson (2014), p. 837

<sup>65</sup> Khumalo and Zhou (2019), p. 193

<sup>66</sup> Liani, Millicent L. et al. (2020). ‘Understanding intersecting gender inequities in academic scientific research career progression in sub-Saharan Africa’. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 273

<sup>67</sup> Odhiambo (2011), p. 668

<sup>68</sup> Onsongo, Jane (2006) ‘Gender inequalities in Universities in Kenya’, in Colin Creighton and Felicia Yieke, eds., *Gender inequalities in Kenya*. [online] UNESCO, Available from: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001458/145887e.pdf>> [Accessed 12th September 2023], p. 38

even from the selection process as interview panels are usually male with female candidates often being subjected to gender-biased questioning which for the most part is unrelated to the role they are putting themselves forward for.<sup>69</sup> Gender and leadership positions in Northern Ghana are also ‘one of the areas in Ghanaian traditional societies where patriarchy is manifested through the exclusion of women leadership in educational institutions’.<sup>70</sup> This is supported by Adongo et al. who note that in relation to HEIs in Northern Ghana, gender stereotypes have been a formidable barrier in terms of the ascension of women to leadership positions with them acknowledging that respondents accept that negative remarks can discourage women from rising to the top thus suggesting that derogatory remarks can ‘influence women’s advancement to positions of leadership in education’.<sup>71</sup> Thus in discussing deeper explanations which help situate women’s leadership experience in higher education, gender stereotypes and biases is one which cannot be ignored.

### Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is another factor which provides a deeper understanding of women’s leadership experience in HEIs. Home and family life in terms of household duties and child care have been a constant variable which has shaped our understanding of women’s role in society. Adongo et al. contends that it is ‘widely accepted that a woman assumes the role of “motherhood” and family caregiver. Men, on the other hand, are viewed as the ‘breadwinner’ and head of the family.’<sup>72</sup> In this sense women can be seen as disproportionately responsible in

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<sup>69</sup> See Gachukia, E.W. (2002, June). *The role of higher education in empowering women in eastern Africa*, Keynote address. The Regional Training Workshop for Women and Higher Education Management, Catholic University, Nairobi [and] Many, M.O. (2000). *Equal opportunities policy (gender) means to increase the number of female senior managers and decisions makers at the University of Nairobi* (Unpublished master’s dissertation). University of London.

<sup>70</sup> Adongo et al. (2023), p. 3

<sup>71</sup> Adongo et al. (2023), p. 13

<sup>72</sup> Adongo et al. (2023) p. 6

relation to home and family life which can make it difficult not only for them to balance their work and personal life but also make it more challenging in relation to them taking on leadership positions which are often demanding. In relation to this difficulty in terms of work-life balance, Seale et al. comment that experiencing and ‘responding to the needs of family, perhaps children and ageing parents, has implications for research time and completing additional management duties, curbing promotions opportunities’,<sup>73</sup> which can put women at a disadvantage. In the Kenyan context, Odhiambo notes that this situation is worse for women leaders as they face a unique level of difficulty in terms of balancing Kenyan family life and a career in academia as while they ‘struggle to conform to a male-normed professional life, they also must respond in their personal lives to strong Kenyan cultural expectations and definitions of women’.<sup>74</sup> Odejide et al. study of Nigerian universities noted more explicit practices of discrimination grounded in the “inevitability of reproductive roles” has posed a barrier to the advancement of women to leadership positions with most respondents thinking that ‘the burden of family care affects women's productivity and advancement in the workplace’.<sup>75</sup> Work-life conflict was also highlighted in a study by Mankayi and Cheteni, alongside gender stereotypes, and lack of support in terms of finances, networks and mentors as some of the challenges experienced by female deans in South African universities.<sup>76</sup> Motherhood and marital status can be seen as key factors in relation to the leadership experience of women in HEIs. This is reinforced by Beoku-Betts articulate that in African societies gender roles often filter through to the workplace with women academics often being ‘constrained by the negative attitude of

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<sup>73</sup> Seale et al. (2021), p. 141

<sup>74</sup> Odhiambo (2011), p. 672

<sup>75</sup> Odejide, Abiola et al. (2006) ‘Does expansion mean inclusion in Nigerian higher education?’, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 29, No.6, p. 558

<sup>76</sup> Mankayi, Mandisa. and Cheteni, Priviledge (2021) ‘Experiences of female deans in South African universities: A Phenomological study’, *Cogent Education*, Vol. 8, No. (1), pp. 1-15

male colleagues who frown on those women who prioritize their careers over marriage and family obligations'.<sup>77</sup> This is further supported by Mabokela who noted that South African women in administrative roles in HEIs shared concerns about being treated as “wives” rather than competent administrators, where their male counterparts their male counterparts, even those in lower ranks, undermine their expertise and expect them to “serve them like their wives would at home.”<sup>78</sup> Thus in exploring deeper explanations which help situate the leadership experience of women in HEIs, work-life balance can be seen to have a distinct impact, especially in the African context.

### Institutional Culture, Infrastructure and Policies

The culture of a HEI as well as its infrastructure and policy can significantly shape the leadership experience of women in these spaces. Understanding the gender dynamics embedded in the culture or policy initiatives of an HEI can provide a basis which helps explain women’s leadership experiences. Despite progressive legislation, Hlatshwayo et al. note that women continue to be underrepresented in executive and senior management roles in South African higher education, with slow formulation and implementation of legislation to address gender imbalance causing unfavourable conditions for women leaders.<sup>79</sup> HEIs and their culture including the institution’s expectations, values and opinions have an effect on the leadership advancement of women as the ‘difference in power is attached to gender, and it plays out in various ways that cannot be addressed by admissions policies and student services alone’.<sup>80</sup> For example, infrastructural problems which are not sufficiently addressed such as inadequate

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<sup>77</sup> Beoku-Betts, Josephine (2005) “A lot of them thought I wouldn’t last there”: African women and career advancement in academic scientific careers’. *Journal of Technology Transfer*, Vol. 30, No. 4, p. 399

<sup>78</sup> Mabokela, Reitumetse O. (2003) “Donkeys of the University”: Organizational culture and its impact on South African women administrators’, *Higher Education*, Vol. 46, p. 142

<sup>79</sup> Hlatshwayo et al. (2022), p. 11

<sup>80</sup> Hailu (2022), p. 323



social behaviour in the form of gender-based violence and sexual harassment cannot be easily addressed and ‘can impede participation and achievement and contribute to drop-out, illness and in some instances suicide’,<sup>81</sup> which in turn impacts women’s leadership experiences in African HEIs. Universities which value gender equality, inclusion and diversity can be seen as more supportive environments for women in leadership positions which allows them to thrive and climb the ladder. Furthermore, HEIs with strong support networks and gender equity policies produce more favourable conditions for women to lead. However when this is not the case it can be to the detriment of women leaders in these spaces. For instance in the case of Ghana, Mabokela and Mlambo emphasise that institutional and ‘disciplinary cultures of academia while visibly open to women’s participation continue to perpetuate cultures of work that are not favourable to the social, cultural and biological experiences of women’.<sup>82</sup> Johnson also references that at the ‘University of Cape Coast in Ghana, women are expected to defer to men in public situations and are systematically excluded from decision-making and influential policy-making bodies on campus’.<sup>83</sup> It is this perpetuation of gendered work culture in HEIs which can cause challenges for women leaders. In the Kenyan context, Odhiambo notes that while there have been a number of interventions to help raise the number of women leaders in HEIs, including interventions to increase the number of women studies and gender equity in employment policies ‘these interventions are taking place within an institutionalised patriarchal ideology that is highly resistance to affirmative action’ [whereby efforts are] ‘uncoordinated with no clear government policies and actions to support them’.<sup>84</sup> This provides a challenge for women leaders in HEIs which in turn negatively impacts their leadership experience. Thus in

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<sup>81</sup> See Morley, Louise (2005) ‘Clare Burton Memorial Lecture 2003: Sounds, Silences and Contradictions: Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 46, p. 113

<sup>82</sup> Mabokela, Reitumetse O. and Mlambo, Yeukai A. (2015) "The older women are men:" navigating the academic terrain, perspectives from Ghana’, *Higher Education*, Vol. 69, No. 5, p. 768

<sup>83</sup> Johnson (2014), p. 837

<sup>84</sup> Odhiambo (2011), p. 675

exploring deeper explanations which help situate women's leadership experience in HEIs, institutional culture, infrastructure and policy can be seen as a vital factor as it formulates the environment in which these women emerge as leaders. Explanations

Overall, intersectionality, historical and cultural contexts, gender stereotypes and unconscious bias, work-life balance, as well as institutional culture, infrastructure and policies can be seen as key factors that provide a deeper explanation which helps situate the leadership experience of women in HEIs. With this section highlights that 'women experience a gendered context in which they see themselves as and are being at a disadvantage from a leadership and management perspective'.<sup>85</sup>

### **Gender, Hierarchies and Influence**

With the previous section exploring some of the deeper explanations that help situate women's leadership experiences in higher education institutions (HEIs), the following section aims to delve into notions of hierarchy and influence in relation to gender and leadership. This section seeks to unpack what gendered hierarchies exist within HEIs that shape the practice of leadership, the women's visibility HEIs and what forms of social power they exercise particularly in the African context. In order to examine the above the following section will be split into two parts. The first section seeks to identify some of these gendered hierarchies, particularly focusing on the glass ceiling and the double bind. The second section then aims to delve deeper into women's visibility in HEIs and the forms of social power they exercise in order to understand how they influence the higher education space.

#### **Gender and Hierarchies in HEIs**

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<sup>85</sup> Seale *et al.* (2021), p. 143

In order to gain a deeper understanding of gender and leadership in relation to HEIs it is important to identify the hierarchies that exist when it comes to the practice of leadership in higher education and how these hierarchies impact women in academic settings. While some of the hierarchies have been touched upon in the previous section such as work-life balance also known as the “maternal wall”, it is important to highlight some of the other hierarchies that manifest when it comes to the practice of leadership. The most common of these hierarchies come in the form of the glass ceiling and the double bind.

### The Glass Ceiling

One of the reasons for this is the hierarchies in HEIs as they often shape the gender dynamics in these institutions. The glass ceiling can be seen as one of these hierarchies. The glass ceiling concept over time has gathered strong acknowledgement in society, with awareness of this barrier becoming paramount when addressing issues of gender and leadership in higher education. Powell and Butter note that;

*The metaphor of the glass ceiling has become a popular explanation of why few women attain leadership positions, why they do not appear to move up the organizational hierarchy as rapidly as men, and why they tend to be faced with more stringent promotion requirements than are their male counterparts. The term “glass ceiling” has been used to describe an invisible barrier that is transparent, yet strong enough to stymie access to leadership for women and other minorities. Although the glass ceiling exists at different levels in different organizations or industries, the term is typically used to suggest a barrier to entry into top management positions.<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>86</sup> Powell & Butterfield (1994) cited in Klenke, Karin (1996), *Women and Leadership: A Contextual Perspective* (New York: Springer Publishing Company), p.171

For Cotter, the ‘popular notion of glass ceiling effects implies that gender (or other) disadvantages are stronger at the top of the hierarchy than at lower levels and that these disadvantages become worse later in a person's career’.<sup>87</sup> In relation to Kenyan universities, Chacha maintains that it ‘is true that a few women academics both in the public and private universities have risen to the positions of vice-chancellors through merit or through political connections, but they are exceptions to the rule, and their being at the top cannot be misconstrued as the non-existence of a glass ceiling’.<sup>88</sup> Phakeng highlights the importance of intersectionality in relation to the existence of a glass ceiling stating that while white women in HEIs in South Africa seem to have been the ‘beneficiaries of democracy more than black African women, rising to senior professorial positions and even executive management... there is a glass ceiling at vice-chancellor level for almost all women’.<sup>89</sup> In this sense, men can be perceived as the “gatekeepers” in relation to the attainment of leadership positions in HEIs for women. The glass ceiling thus reflects a male-dominated institutional hierarchy which poses a challenge to the advancement of women to positions of leadership in these spaces. However scholars such as Eagly and Carli have noted the glass ceiling metaphor may no longer apply as women’s advancements to leadership positions seem more “permeable”, now.<sup>90</sup> However while it important to note that women are now have more access to these positions, ‘it remains just that – access [as this] increase has not been equally reflected in female leadership of HEIs

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<sup>87</sup> Cotter, David A. et al (2001) ‘The Glass Ceiling Effect’, *Social Forces*, Vol. 80, No. 2, p. 658

<sup>88</sup> Chacha, Bhoke (2021) ‘Persistence of the Glass Ceiling in Academia Globally with a Focus on Women Academics in Kenyan Universities’, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 22, No.1,p. 222

<sup>89</sup> Phakeng, Mamokgethi (2015) ‘Leadership: The invisibility of African women and the masculinity of power’, *South African Journal of Science*, Vol. 111, No.11/12, p. 1

<sup>90</sup> See Maume, David J. Jr (1999) ‘Glass Ceilings and Glass Escalators’, *Work and Occupations*, Vol. 26, No.4, pp. 483-509 [and] Williams, Christine L. (1992) ‘The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the "Female" Professions’, *Social Problems*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 253-267

and decision-making bodies'.<sup>91</sup> Thus it is important to recognise the glass ceiling as a form of gendered hierarchy which shapes the advancement of women to leadership positions in HEIs.

### The Double Bind

In the higher education context, this 'double yardstick of gender appropriateness and managerial effectiveness often leaves women in an unbreakable, untenable double bind'.<sup>92</sup> The double bind refers to an inescapable and often negative dilemma where women in leadership are placed in a "damned if they do and damned if they don't" situation. This "double bind" gets its momentum from the inclination to think in terms of dichotomies ("masculine" or "feminine") which establish a hierarchical relationship to one another in which the masculine is superior while the feminine is inferior. The core of this double bind is that women are the "other" and therefore naturally defective for such a leadership position which requires competence. For this reason 'double bind' in terms of "femininity and competence" can be seen as 'sustained by a long history of sexual stereotyping that both male and females bring to their sense of self and relationship with others'.<sup>93</sup>

Arquisola *et al.* highlight the double bind as a source of conflict especially for female academic leaders in gendered, hierarchical structures like universities, with plenty of literature 'showing that women in faculty positions around the world are struggling to meet the expectations imposed by the male-dominated stereotypical role, leading to more negative evaluations'.<sup>94</sup> Aisenberg and Harrington note that in relation to HEIs and the double bind, academic careers which are directly engaged with intellectual power 'is particularly fraught with discriminatory

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<sup>91</sup> Mouzughi (2022), p. 126

<sup>92</sup> Nichols, Nancy A. (1993) "What happened to Rosie the Riveter?" Harvard Business Review, 60

<sup>93</sup> Jamieson, Kathleen H. (1995) *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, p.124

<sup>94</sup> Arquisola, Maria J. et al (2020) 'Academic leaders' double bind: challenges from an Indonesian perspective', *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 401

assumptions —tying women to the physical, denying the power of their minds [that] set up stumbling blocks for the advancement of women in any work dependent on the trained mind’.<sup>95</sup>

Perold’s work suggests that Black South Africans fall victim to the double bind imposed by the friction between the education system and by the former apartheid socio-economic policies, with black women, in particular, being the most impacted by this dilemma as they ‘have never had the luxury of simply focusing on women’s issues [as unlike] White females, they grapple not only with sexism but also racism, resulting in a double bind’.<sup>96</sup>

Women in leadership are often placed in this “damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation” the most common example of this is women who are seen as assertive leaders being labelled as too aggressive and in the same instance women who are deemed as passive being characterised as too incompetent and weak for leadership. The double bind creates a catch-22 for women leaders in HEIs. With women being criticised for being “too assertive” in their leadership it aligns with the notion of her being too masculine as to be “too aggressive” and thus deviate from ‘the norm of femininity while exceeding or falling short of the masculine norm competence’.<sup>97</sup> As the traditional norms of leadership align to masculine attributes this puts women leaders in HEIs in a “Damned if you do, Doomed if you don’t” predicament. This is supported by Omar and Davidson who acknowledge that women in leadership ‘in many contexts face a double bind because of the negative qualities attributed to female leaders who need to act and behave like men to rise above the stereotyped roles of being the “weaker gender” and not possessing the leadership traits of male leaders’.<sup>98</sup> This double bind can

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<sup>95</sup> Aisenberg, Nadya and Harrington, Mona (1988) *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts), p. 5

<sup>96</sup> Ford, Donna Y. et al. (2018) ‘Blacked Out and Whited Out The Double Bind of Gifted Black Females Who Are Often a Footnote in Educational Discourse’, *International Journal of Educational Reform*, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 258

<sup>97</sup> Jamieson (1995), p. 121

<sup>98</sup> Omar and Davidon (2001) cited in Arquisola et al. (2020) p. 401

provide a basis for a gendered hierarchy in HEIs as social descending in these institutions pit men over women in leadership roles due to the negative rhetoric women leaders find themselves faced with. Thus in HEIs, it is important to recognise that existing ‘gender hierarchies are reproduced in occupational hierarchies in part through the uncertainty that surrounds women as workers’.<sup>99</sup>

### Women’s leadership visibility in HEIs

According to Williams, there has been a ‘rapid shift towards female leadership in top-tier global universities has been hailed as a turning point that will help encourage more women into senior roles’.<sup>100</sup> While great strides have been made in various socio-economic spaces, when it comes to academic leadership, African women are still scarcely represented. The 2021 UNESCO report entitled *Women in Higher Education; has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities* noted that in sub-Saharan Africa ‘men are overrepresented, with 73 female students enrolled for every 100 males in 2018’.<sup>101</sup> While female entrants into higher education in Africa have increased to ‘about 45% as of 2011, they hold only about 10% of leadership positions in higher education’.<sup>102</sup> Waruru maintains that across the African continent of ‘the 97 top-ranked universities, 21% have women chancellors, 14% vice-chancellors, and 26% women registrars’.<sup>103</sup> While Otomoso highlights that there has been a marginal increase in female deans

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<sup>99</sup> Purcell, David et al. (2010) ‘Gender and the Glass Ceiling at Work’, *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 4, No. 9, p. 711

<sup>100</sup> Williams, Tom (2023) *Rise of female leaders ‘opens up a sense of what’s achievable’*, [online] Times Higher Education, Available from: <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/rise-female-leaders-opens-sense-whats-achievable>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>101</sup> UNESCO (2021) *Women in higher education: has the female advantage put an end to gender inequalities?* [online] Available from: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377182>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023], p. 11-12

<sup>102</sup> Abudu, Gbemisola (2021) *Paucity of leadership roles for African Women in higher education*, [online] Available from: <<https://businessday.ng/news/article/paucity-of-leadership-roles-for-african-women-in-higher-education/>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

<sup>103</sup> Waruru, Maina (2023) Women still ‘grossly’ under-represented as academic leaders, [online] University World News, Available from: <<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230809081939167>> [Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

between 2015-2017 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the deans of faculties were still overwhelmingly male with women being placed in ‘welfare roles, including chairing university convocation committees, as members of fund-raising committees, as deputy vice-chancellor with a portfolio of special duties, as representatives of the vice-chancellor at public functions, and, at worst, as occupants of specific offices to justify the institution’s gender sensitivity’.<sup>104</sup> Thus while women are clearly visible in the academic arena, they are underrepresented in the top HEI’s leadership positions. In relation to South Africa, the UNESCO report supported this notion stating that although women occupied 53.3% of lecturer and junior lecturer posts in 2016, only 27.5% of professorial staff were women, thus reaffirming that while ‘there are more women than men at lecturer levels, the same is not true for senior levels’.<sup>105</sup> This level of disparity can also be seen in the northern part of Africa especially in the Egyptian context where female academics ‘are poorly represented in universities, as the ratio of women faculty to their male counterparts is one to seven or one to eight in some faculties and/or departments’.<sup>106</sup> Respondents as part of Mousa’s study expressed that in this context the ‘scarcity of female rectors and/or university presidents not only contributes to such under-representation of women at junior and senior academic levels but also encourages a negative prejudice or sometimes discrimination against female academics’.<sup>107</sup> Thus women’s lack of leadership visibility especially in the African context can be seen to contribute to the gendered hierarchies which prevent women from reaching top leadership positions in this context.

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<sup>104</sup> Omotoso, Sharon A. (2020) ‘Barriers to Middle-level Academic Leadership for Female Academics in Nigerian Higher Education’, *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 84

<sup>105</sup> UNESCO (2011), p. 25

<sup>106</sup> Mousa, Mohamed (2022b) ‘Academia is Racist: Barriers Women Faculty Face in Academic Public Contexts’ *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No.4, p. 747

<sup>107</sup> Mousa, Mohamed (2022b) ‘Academia is Racist: Barriers Women Faculty Face in Academic Public Contexts’ *Higher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No.4, p. 749



### Influence, Power and Women in HEI's

In further exploring the relationship between gender and leadership in HEI's it is important to discuss the nature of influence in this context. Carli maintains that generally women 'have greater difficulty exerting influence than men do, particularly when they use influence that conveys competence and authority'.<sup>108</sup> While general literature on gender difference in social influence as well as literature which specifically focuses on higher education still remains largely an unexplored space, Carli notes that it 'does reveal that men and women do differ in their ability to influence others and that these differences correspond to gender differences in power'.<sup>109</sup> Carli's work indicates that women tend to possess more referent power than men as people 'generally evaluate women more favourably than men and like them more'.<sup>110</sup> Referent power as a personal form of power can be seen as a relational concept as it is based on a direct attraction or likability of a leader which conveys a 'feeling of oneness.. or a desire for such an identity'.<sup>111</sup> In relation to gender and leadership women have often been associated with referent power as it is based on more communal and transformational traits, which Eagly notes is often associated with women instead of men.<sup>112</sup> This is supported by Johnson who applies French and Ravens model to gender predicting that as referent power involves maintaining good relationships, women may prefer using this form of influence as it is 'more congruent with gender role expectations for women than for men [and], therefore, would be one source of power generally available to women'.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Carli, Linda L. (1999) 'Gender, Interpersonal Power, and Social Influence', *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 81

<sup>109</sup> Carli (1999), p. 82

<sup>110</sup> Carli (1999), p. 94

<sup>111</sup> French, John and Raven, Bertram (1959). 'The Bases of Social Power', in Dorwin Cartwright, ed., *Studies in Social Power* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research; University of Michigan), p. 161

<sup>112</sup> Carli (1999), p. 87

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, Paula (1976) cited in Carli (1999), p. 83

For Carli men can be seen to exercise positioned based power more, particularly legitimate power. Carli highlights that legitimate power can be defined as a form of entitlement whereby a ‘person who possesses legitimate power has the right to exert influence over others, command their respect, and expect their deference’.<sup>114</sup> In understanding legitimate power as a formal form of influence and one which stems from position, it can be argued that women do not exert legitimate power in the same way as men. Particularly as women do not hold senior positions of leadership in HEI’s where legitimate power can be seen as most effective. This is also highlighted by the works of Johnson who notes that women do not garner legitimate power in the same way as men, with ‘overt displays of competence and confidence by women can result in rejection, especially from men, whose legitimate power is threatened by such displays in women’.<sup>115</sup> As another personal form of power, expert power can also be seen as another tool of influence in HEIs utilised by both men and women. With expert power being based on perceived competence, the assumption stemming from gender stereotypes which maintain women are less competent than men would reiterate the narrative that women ‘possess lower levels of expert power and should, as a result, be less influential than men’.<sup>116</sup> The study by Sandlar and Hall comments on this assumption highlighting that in relation to their male colleagues, women professors are often presumed as less confident and thus are held to a ‘higher standards of achievement by their students’.<sup>117</sup> In the South African context Zulu articulates that in relation to higher education women do exercise power differently and have a different attitude towards power than men, as whereas ‘men are seen to concern themselves with the power vested in them in leadership positions, women do not concern themselves with

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<sup>114</sup> Carli (1999), p. 85

<sup>115</sup> See Johnson, Paula (1976) ‘Women and power: Toward a theory of effectiveness’. *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 99–110 [and] Carli (1999), p. 85

<sup>116</sup> Carli (1999), p. 84

<sup>117</sup> Sandlar and Hall (1993) cited in Carli (1999), p. 84

it to the same extent'.<sup>118</sup> This is also supported by Omar who highlights that women in leadership positions in HEIs know they have power and thus 'do not flaunt it. If they exercise it, then they do it subtly'.<sup>119</sup>

Overall it can be argued that in relation to women's leadership positions in higher education men 'still dominate positions of leadership and as such, hold positional power and influence in transformation towards a more equitable and diverse leadership profile'.<sup>120</sup> As such it is important to remember that leadership positions in HEIs 'continue to be male-dominated, and the message to society is still influenced by the voices of men, who hold positional power and who have the opportunity to not only influence institutional culture but also impact society at large'.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Zulu, Constance B. (2007), *A Comparative Study of Women in Management in Higher Education in South Africa and The United Kingdom*, PhD Thesis, [online] Available from: <<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=4706f1fc439353914f8599abbc6e8c00b6f36876>> [Accessed 18th September 2023], p. 53

<sup>119</sup> Omar, A.H (1996), *Women in academic leadership positions in higher education: A case study*. CHES Workshop: Women and Management in Higher Education- African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, 27-31 May, p. 26

<sup>120</sup> Moodly, Adèle L (2022) 'Exercising positional power to advance and support women in leadership – conversations with men in higher education', *Management in Education*, Vol. 0, No.0, p. 1

<sup>121</sup> Moodly (2022), p. 3

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender and leadership, examining this relationship within the context of HEI's. This paper has emphasized that leadership is a multifaceted concept in relation to how it is understood and practised in HEI's. By interrogating gender and leadership in the context of higher education this paper has highlighted that women experience a gendered context one where men still hold positional power and where women's lack of leadership visibility especially in the African context be seen to contribute to the gendered hierarchies which prevent women from reaching top leadership positions in this context. This interaction between leadership and gender not only has implications for HEIs but also broader implications for society as gender disparities in HEIs often mirrors the gender inequalities of wider society. HEIs play a vital part in providing role models for society, and with women occupying more leadership positions in academia, understanding interactions between gender and leadership can serve as a platform for addressing gender disparities, especially in the African context. Policies put in place by HEI set a precedent for gendered interactions in these spaces and contribute to, influencing societal norms and expectations. By understanding leadership as process and moving beyond the dominant position-based approach, leadership can be used as a tool for further understanding and transforming gendered dynamics in the HEIs, particularly in the African context.

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