

# “WORKFORCE INCLUSION AND THE GLASS CLIFF: WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIA”

## *Research Paper*

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### “Abstract”

*This paper draws on my doctoral research exploring the lived experiences of senior women leaders in Nigeria, particularly how they navigate the “glass cliff”—a phenomenon where women are appointed to senior leadership positions during periods of heightened risk—highlighting how gendered power structures and institutional inequities shape leadership trajectories. The study adopts a qualitative, critical theoretical approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with senior women leaders across public and corporate sectors. Thematic analysis was applied to capture lived experiences, leadership strategies, and institutional responses. Findings reveal that women leaders frequently face unstable mandates, limited structural support, and heightened scrutiny, yet deploy adaptive leadership, informal mentoring, and network-building to drive reform. These strategies challenge entrenched norms but remain constrained by systemic barriers. This research advances understanding of gendered leadership in high-stakes contexts and offers a framework for building equitable governance systems. Recommendations include reforming leadership appointment processes, embedding mentorship pipelines, and integrating gender equity into digital and green economy transition policies.*

*Keywords:* Glass cliff, gendered leadership, critical theory, institutional power, inclusive governance, Nigeria, digital transformation

### 1. Introduction

Gender leadership barriers to women in the workplace has been researched for over four (4) decades (Einarsdottir, Hoel and Lewis, 2018) with the advent of the first widely used metaphor, the ‘Glass Ceiling’ - transparent but real barriers, based on discriminatory attitudes or organizational bias and gender stereotypes, that impede qualified individuals, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled persons, from advancing into management positions (Ryan and Haslam, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). This phrase was coined in 1984 by Gay Bryant to describe the barriers women were facing in the workplace, this phrase or metaphor became the first in a series of metaphors that would be used to describe barriers faced by women in leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2006b).

According to the Wall Street Journal (1986) there exists a ‘glass ceiling’ barrier which prevents women and other minorities from advancing into leadership positions. It is described as an ‘invisible barrier’ encountered by women on their way to the top (Ryan and Haslam, 2006). This was coined when a lot of ‘...women were reaching positions in middle management but unable to obtain senior and executive positions.’ (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014).

There have been interventions from the government and corporate organizations following the identification and confirmation of the Glass Ceiling phenomenon, however, not all areas have felt this impact, there are less changes in some sectors like Engineering and Technology (Cohen, Ross and Bennet, 2023), Architecture in relation to sectors like Human Resources, (Kovaleva, Ryan and

Haslam, 2023). The ratio of women in top management is not growing as expected and it seems like these positions are made for men, (Einarsdottir et al., 2018).

Furthermore, little is known about the experiences of these women promoted to executive and senior positions. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). As Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam (2014, p.219) have argued “Gender Equality is not simply about the number of women and men in leadership roles, it is also about the types of leadership roles they attain....is not simply about increasing the quantity of women in certain positions, but also about their experiences within these roles...” This is the focus of this study.

The question is if the increased representation in leadership positions translate into resolution of the existence of these barriers women encounter or mean that men and women receive equal treatment in organizations? (Ellemers et al, 2012). Barreto, Ryan and Schmitt (2009) argue that the numbers [of women in leadership positions] are not enough simply because they do not provide enough information to assess the situation of women it is all statistics, no soul. These numbers do not inform us of the experiences of these women and if the efforts made to get women represented at the top has addressed the issue of gender inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Hence, though research shows women moved into management positions in a greater number than before (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), there is a perceived lack of acceptance and support by women in the management culture at the top (Simon, 1996; Chovwen, 2006).

In this study, the researcher will review the ‘Glass cliff phenomenon- a subtle and by implication not universally accepted form of gender discrimination (Ryan, Haslam and Postmes, 2007) seen as a ‘second wave’ of discrimination experienced by women who occupy senior roles in organizations, (Ryan et al, 2007).

The Glass Cliff term was coined by M.K. Ryan and S.A Haslam (Ryan and Haslam 2005a), in research carried out in response to the article in The Times (Judge, 2003) questioning if women were a help or hindrance to the organizations who had appointed women to their board. Judge (2003) in this article stated that women were having a negative impact on companies' performance, arguing that the companies' performance took a plummet after women were appointed on the board of certain companies when compared to the performance of other companies who maintained an all-male board ensemble. Ryan and Haslam (2005a), working with the same data used by Judge (2003), had a contrary view from Judge. They argued that a fall in company performance preceded the appointment of women and not the other way round. Hence, according to Ryan and Haslam (2005a, 2005b, 2007) the term ‘Glass Cliff’ was coined to depict the riskiness of the leadership positions offered to these women and with a further implication that women were more likely to be appointed to precarious leadership positions than men and such positions where Glass Cliff positions.

The glass cliff phenomenon has become quite robust and widespread (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014). Though not visible in every female leadership situation, its veracity has been argued to be established by various experimental studies showing that it exist in the IT sector (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006), legal field where hard to win cases are left for women, (Ashby, Ryan and Haslam, 2005), higher education (Peterson,2015), student leadership (Ryan and Haslam, 2008) , politics, where unwinnable seats are left to women, ( Ryan, Haslam and Kulich, 2010), youth leadership for a music festival with declining popularity (Ryan and Haslam, 2006b, 2006c) and in business (Ryan and Haslam, 2006a) .

Ryan, Haslam and Postmes (2007) however note that even though the robustness of the glass cliff phenomenon has been demonstrated it is likely to be seen as controversial as many organizations and the government have taken steps to correct this imbalance because as we have shown above. United states government set up the 21-member bipartisan team under the umbrella of the Federal Glass ceiling Commission to identify and mitigate glass ceiling barriers (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995), the African Union signed a declaration to reaffirm their support gender equality (Africa Union,

2004), as well as other management practices and policies, to promote gender diversity in the workplace. Furthermore, Nigeria [and other African countries] have been involved with issues of women empowerment following the Beijing conference 30 years ago in 1995, (Omoyibo, Obaro and Akpojivi, 2010).

This also throws more light as to why little is known about the experiences of women at the top of the ladder, (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). The reluctance to speak about their experiences and create any controversy necessitates the purpose of this study which is to contribute to the research of the glass cliff phenomenon particularly in Nigeria with a bid to gaining insight into women's experience in senior and executive management positions and its effect on their career choices subsequently. The glass cliff phenomenon has little or no research evidence in Nigeria. The outcome of this research is to provide a concerted report which will extend the knowledge on the barriers facing senior female executives especially in the Nigerian corporate world and is expected to aid women in making career selections in Nigeria, especially for potential female leaders who will have the benefit of more senior female leaders first hand and diverse experience, while for those women already occupying such senior positions, the experience of other women will facilitate their understanding of their own experiences and subsequent career decisions which may, in both cases, lead to an alternative route; Entrepreneurship, perhaps?

As Ryan and Haslam (2006b) argued, women working on the edge in glass cliff positions would exit the organisation at some point and discourage other women from such positions. Their experiences draw out feelings of a lot of hard work and being unappreciated, (Einarsdottir et al., 2018). So, the purpose is also aimed at benefiting organizations, contributing to the knowledge on the impact of the glass cliff effect on their talent pool. As diversity is one of the driving forces of organizational success and women's potentials should be valued and not ignored, (Chovwen, 2006; Danjuma et al, 2011; Cook and Glass, 2015). Research has demonstrated that an increase in female employees can impact positively the growth of SMEs especially if they are paid well, with job security, (Marconatto et al., 2022).

### **1.1 What explanations/ reasons are there for its existence? What underlying theories explain this situation?**

The lay and experimental explanations put forward (Chovwen, 2006; Bruckmuller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) include lack of support and information from immediate team, effective networks of support (Bruckmuller Ryan and Haslam, 2014; Williams and Foster, 2024), being set up to fail. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006, Ellemers et al, 2012), management practices and policies whereby gender stereotypes are created and acted upon (Chovwen, 2006)

Ryan and Haslam (2007, p.558) also argue that '...glass cliffs arise from a confluence of social-psychological and social-structural factors' ranging from deliberate actions to those arising from our belief system both benign and malignant, (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). However, like Ryan and Haslam (2007) stated care must be taken to avoid prioritizing or overemphasizing one explanation over the other.

Archival and experimental evidence indicate that women are appointed to management positions under different circumstances than men with women occupying supporting leadership roles like personnel, training, or marketing rather than the critical operating or commercial roles (Ryan and Haslam 2005a) due to their interpersonal traits (Hoyt and Burnette, 2013; Gartzia and Martinez, 2024). The service sectors are also included in this list. The price to be paid to occupy these critical operating and commercial roles is for women to take over companies with poor performance. (Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan and Haslam, 2006). Accepting these positions in companies with poor performance invariably leads to risky and precarious positions and thereby being exposed to a glass cliff situation (Ryan et al, 2011), consciously or unconsciously.

For further sense making of the reasons underlying the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon, the Social Role theory, Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice and Implicit theory of Gender and Leadership will be reviewed for this purpose. The Social Role theory (Eagly 1982) assumes that men are expected to be agentic and women communal, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014) because it is perceived that there exists a link between the activities that people carry out daily and their perceived social roles. So, women are traditionally perceived as the homemakers in the society and men as the bread winners and this supports the stereotypes in the mind of the perceivers (Eagly, 1982; 1987) with regards to the roles they play. There are by extension, specific roles men and women are expected to display and any deviations from this perception of gender stereotypes are frowned at and are followed with criticism (Vogel et al, 2003). Any display contrary to these gendered beliefs or stereotypical attitudes is not looked upon favourably.

Gender Stereotypes are in effect used to define successful stereotypical leadership qualities. When female leaders display these so-called agentic qualities, there is a feeling of disappointment and public crucifixion of the female gender describing her as being too harsh. In fact, this contrary behaviour is termed as 'gender violation,' (Eagly and Karau, 2002), hence the Role Incongruity Theory of prejudice (Eagly and Karau, 2002). The role incongruity theory of prejudice was developed by Eagly and Karau, (2002) and grounded in the social role theory, and it says there is a mismatch between the traits required by leaders and the traits displayed by women. This perceived incongruity/mismatch between the female gender role and leadership role leads to two forms of prejudice against women in leadership where the first instance, women are seen not to have the potential to be leaders and secondly women who are leaders, are expected to behave in line with the stereotypes which if any deviation is seen, is followed by criticism.

The first part of this prejudice is contradictory to the glass cliff phenomenon because in terms of riskiness and glass cliff positions this incongruity between the feminine traits and leadership roles seem to disappear and women are perceived more suitable for this role even though we cannot confidently say women are viewed more favourably than the men. The second instance of the prejudice against women, like the social role theory explain why organisational decision makers tend to hire women for risky and precarious leadership positions, as women are perceived to be communal in nature and expected to display these feminine qualities and traits, qualities that are regarded as similar to the transformation leadership style (Eagly and Carli, 2003).

Implicit theories about gender and leadership are also another important basis for sense making and reflection of women's experiences in the workplace, (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b, pg., 177). However, '.... there is no simple or universal implicit theory of what it means to be a leader that is likely to inform perception and action across all situations.' (pg. 179). Which is why the glass cliff phenomenon is not seen in every situation. 'These Gendered leadership beliefs create stereotypes about leadership (Ellemers et al, 2012) as people have priori implicit theories (Hoyt and Burnette, 2013), that guide this type of thinking, (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Ryan and Haslam, 2007). These gendered leadership beliefs (Ellemers et al 2012) can be traced to the social constructs which we are fed from when we are little which guides the way we tend to perceive what we term 'normal' and otherwise. We then create stereotypes of what we expect a manager to look like and act like (Ellemers et al,2012), where men are said to be agentic, and women are said to be communal (Eagly,1987). Furthermore, because of the implicit theories individuals have within them that determine what they believe to be the roles and characteristics of the male and female gender (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b) and so sees the congruity between the feminine trait (communal) and the leadership role of women who are leaders.

Gendered leadership stereotypes therefore influence women's appointment to high-risk leaderships roles even when their performance metrics are superior, (Lomas and Day, 2024). These communal characteristics are reported to include being affectionate, kind, sympathetic, gentle while the agentic

characteristics ascribed to the male gender comprises of being assertive, controlling, confident, aggressive and ambitious.

The Social Role Theory, Role Incongruity Theory and The Implicit theories of gender and leadership have similarities and thus all point to the fact that women are perceived as communal in nature due to gendered leadership beliefs arising from the link between the activities carried out on a daily basis and the social roles of the male or female gender (Eagly, 1982, 1987).

Research evidence also shows that in time of crisis, the communal traits are required especially to manage people and take the blame for failure (Ryan et al, 2011) so by implication women as communal leaders are preferred at the time of crisis as they are believed to have what it takes to pull this off, but this increases the likelihood of failure and can limit women's success, (Mendelson and Hung, 2023). So, when an organisation has successful times, men are the default leadership choice (Bruckmuller and Branscombe, 2010), hence we have what is called the 'Think Manager, Think Male' associations and for those times women are chosen as leaders we have what is called, 'Think Crisis, Think Female' (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Gartzia et al 2012, Bruckmuller et al, 2014).

Looking closely at the 'Think Manager, Think Male' association, there is a seemingly incompatibility between the beliefs of what it means to be a good leader and what it means to be a female. The earlier work by Schein over 50 years ago and the 92 descriptive attributes of male and females set the stage for what attributes were termed feminine or masculine and the similarity between the attributes of successful managers and those for the male gender. Fifty years on from this study, it continues to reflect on what determines a successful manager and supports why women are offered glass cliff positions.

Have we considered reviewing those ninety-two (92) descriptive terms in the light of the world we live in today? Where is the place of the transgender in all this? Do we review them as women or men, as they have noticeably switched from one gender to another? These questions must be considered by researchers in this field to ensure organisations are making well-informed decisions commensurate with the time and day we live in today.

Despite the argument for preference for women in times of crisis, the reality is that majority of the organizations are still being led by men, crisis and all, especially in Nigeria where men are expected to be successful and women are expected to be supportive (Chovwen, 2006). The explanation for this could be linked to the study by Gartzia et al (2012), which argues that in a company whose business is stereotypically masculine, that is, if the organization rests on the Male Leadership Role Model (MLRM) women or men who display largely interpersonal traits are not considered in crisis times. So, women are less likely to be recruited as leaders. This study was carried out in a bid to look at further evidence of the 'Think crisis, Think female' association.

This study expanded sexism as an explanation for the existence of the glass cliff situations that is the 'Think crisis, Think female' association (Ryan and Haslam, 2007; Ellemers et al., 2012). However, sexism alone cannot, as a standalone factor, explain why these positions exist as there are situational factors that affect the role of sexism in the selection of women in times of crisis. (Bruckmuller et al., 2014). In Gartzia et al (2012) study, Male Leadership Role Model (MLRM) states that if sexism is high or low, the organization will neither employ a female leader or require people-oriented leaders whether male or female. Gartzia et al (2012) have by this study assumed that all female leaders have interpersonal or communal leadership traits. Gartzia et al (2012), further argues that where MLRM does not exist and sexism is low, then women and people-oriented leaders (male or female) stood a chance of being recruited in times of crises. However, if sexism was high in this scenario, then the masculine agentic traits were highly desirable and sought after. In summary, MLRM hindered this stereotype, the 'Think crisis, Think female' association, with sexism laying a vital role, i.e., women and women-like leaders will only be recruited in crisis period as far as MLRM was not salient and sexism is low.

The main research question of this study is, 'How do women in Senior Leadership Positions in Nigeria perceive their leadership experience and its subsequent impact on their careers?'

The sub- research questions emanating from the Main Research Question of this study are.

- **What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?**

This explores the barriers women face as they access leadership especially senior leadership as well as those they face while navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria, if any. To uncover any existing gender imbalance in powers, exclusions by male dominated circles, that women experience as they access and navigate senior leadership.

- **How do women who have attained senior leadership roles in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?**

This question seeks to understand the post access experiences of women in senior leadership in Nigeria. How are the male dominated structures treating them as they navigate leadership. This would unearth the emotional and symbolic labour women in senior leaders are expected to display to fit into some preconceived mode set for women.

- **In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge, or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?**

This looks to highlight ways women have fought under the yoke of discrimination. How they resisted, challenged, reimagine, leadership and institutional power and structures for themselves and how they have advocated for others along the same lines. This will reveal the reforms, short and long terms, that would bring systemic changes and shift the leadership dynamics from gender representation to gender power sharing.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research philosophy and design

This research is underpinned by a critical theory philosophical framework, emphasizing the role of power, inequality, and social structures in shaping human experiences and societal outcomes. Critical theory is particularly concerned with challenging dominant ideologies, amplifying marginalized voices, and seeking transformative change (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2011) and therein lies the rationale for this choice.

Within this philosophical stance, a qualitative research design has been chosen. This is appropriate within this paradigm, as it allows for in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of women in senior leadership, especially as they relate to systemic barriers, organizational cultures, and gendered expectations. The intention was not only to understand these experiences but to critically interrogate the broader structures and practices that influence them. This approach aligns with the emancipatory aims of critical research, which seeks to uncover hidden power dynamics and contribute to social justice.

### 2.2 Population and sampling techniques

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify women who can offer rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. This technique is appropriate when the researcher seeks depth of information from a specific subset of the population (Palinkas et al., 2015). Diversity in sector,

industry, and leadership trajectory was considered during selection to enhance the transferability of the findings. Participants were recruited through professional networks, women's leadership forums, and even though easily identifiable, access to this population was also restricted due to the nature of their roles in the organisations, as with women in senior and executive management (Symon, Cassell and Saunders, 2012), there were time and availability constraints. To mitigate this risk, as a secondary measure, snowball sampling was also administered, wherein early participants recommended additional qualified individuals who fit the persona of the women required for this study. Participant selection for interviewing was stopped when themes collected were reoccurring and data saturation had been reached, (Symon, Cassel and Saunders, 2012)

### **2.3 Data collection methods**

Data was collected in two phases using a hybrid approach:

#### **Phase 1: Pre-Interview Questionnaire (Close-Ended)**

Participants will first complete a short questionnaire collecting demographic information (industry, years in leadership, role type), and Yes/No and multiple-choice responses about experiences related to leadership access, support, exclusion, and performance scrutiny.

#### **Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews (Open-Ended, Critical Questions)**

Participants engaged in a semi-structured 45–60-minute interviews using a guide that integrated thematic reflection (e.g., leadership journey, mentorship, crisis experiences), critical questions (e.g., symbolic roles, emotional labor, gatekeeping, institutional reform), narrative space to share personal accounts, disruptions, resistance, and redefinitions of leadership.

### **2.4 Data analysis methods**

Data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), with a critical theory orientation.

Themes generated from the literature review were compared with emergent themes from participant narratives, allowing for both confirmatory and exploratory insights. The aim was to represent a spectrum of leadership experiences without prioritising one over another, thus maintaining interpretive integrity. In line with critical theory, the analysis considered the structural and systemic conditions reflected in these themes, highlighting power asymmetries and institutional practices that may reinforce gender-based disparities.

### **2.5 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was sought from each participant.

- Provided with informed briefings with a consent proceeding indicating their acceptance by willingly and proactively filling a pre-interview questionnaire then booking a meeting for a virtual interview session,
- Assured of anonymity and confidentiality,
- Allowed to withdraw at any point without consequence,
- Protected in the storage and handling of sensitive data.
- All data was stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

### 3. Findings

The results from the responses to the pre-interview questionnaires and interviews conducted with ten women who are currently or were previously in leadership positions in Nigerian corporate world is presented along the three core research questions aligning and grouping the themes and sub-themes applicable to each research question under each question.

#### 3.1 Figure

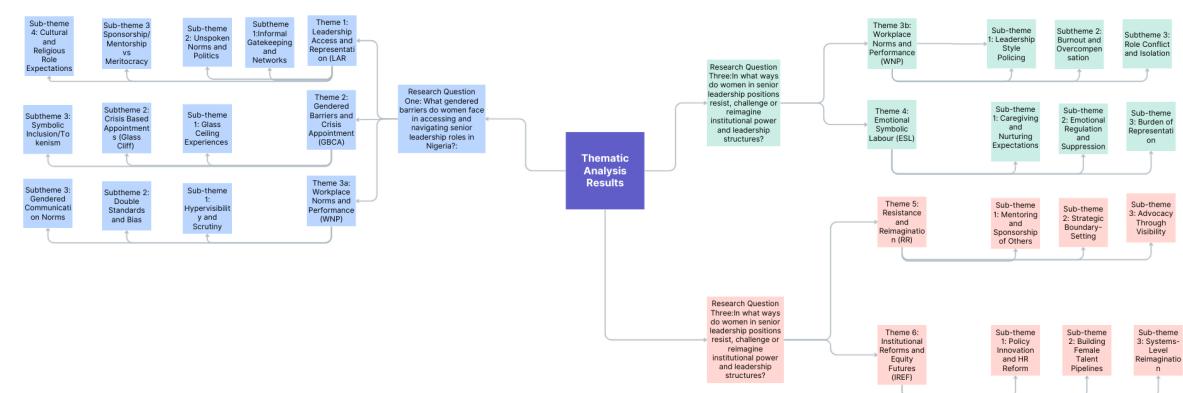


Figure 1. Deductive and Inductive Themes and Subthemes (Source: Author's own illustration from research findings).

#### 3.2 Summary of findings

The results of the study, draws directly from the narratives of ten women in senior leadership roles across various sectors in Nigeria. The analysis was structured around the three research questions, with six themes and twenty-two subthemes inductively and deductively developed through thematic analysis of interview data and pre-interview questionnaires.

For the first research question, findings revealed that gendered barriers remain deeply embedded in the structures and cultures that govern access to leadership. The data highlighted unspoken gatekeeping norms, male-dominated sponsorship circles, and sociocultural narratives that position leadership as a male domain. Women also described the presence of religious and regional biases, especially among Northern Muslim participants, which shaped both access to leadership roles and internalized expectations. The “glass cliff” phenomenon was identified across participants’ experiences, often emerging during organizational crises. Though meritocracy was emphasized, it often appeared to operate after endorsement or external validation.

The second research question illuminated the nuanced and often invisible challenges women face once they have entered senior leadership positions. Women described heightened scrutiny, emotional and relational labor, symbolic representation, and the constant negotiation between authenticity and survival. These accounts revealed the exhausting demand for hyper-performance, the psychological

toll of being a “representative” rather than an individual, and the emotional costs of navigating narrow behavioral expectations. The presence of leadership policing and gendered communication expectations reinforced how institutional cultures continue to exert symbolic control over women leaders.

The third research question showcased how participants exercised agency within and against these structures. Findings demonstrated that resistance was not always loud or confrontational; it often appeared as boundary-setting, mentorship, sponsorship, visibility, and internal advocacy. Participants spoke of intentionally redefining leadership styles, supporting female pipelines, influencing HR policy, and pursuing broader systemic reforms. These practices illustrated the emergence of transformational leadership rooted in justice, inclusion, and structural change.

Across all three research questions, participants' stories provided insight into the persistence of patriarchal norms, the resilience and resourcefulness of women in leadership, and the subtle ways in which power is maintained and challenged. The findings suggest that while barriers persist, women are both navigating and transforming the terrain of leadership in Nigeria. These insights lay the foundation for the critical interpretation and theoretical analysis presented in the next chapter.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Discussion of research question one: What gendered barriers do women face in accessing and navigating senior leadership roles in Nigeria?

The findings under RQ1 revealed that gendered barriers to leadership remain a strong undercurrent in the professional journeys of many women, even at the highest levels, confirming Ryan and Haslam's (2007) claim, that greater numbers of women have moved into leadership positions, however there is this a perceived lack of acceptance or support for women in the management culture at the top, (Simon, 1996; Chovwen, 2006) A key insight was the prevalence of informal gatekeeping mechanisms, where entry into senior leadership roles was often contingent upon endorsement or sponsorship from dominant male networks. Leadership itself was framed, either implicitly or explicitly, as a space for men, with culturally embedded assumptions shaping who is seen as legitimate, aligning with the 'Think Manager, Think Male' theory association where the attributes of the men is closely aligned with the attributes of a leader. The implicit theories about gender, though it also explains it does not mean it gives succor to the women. It justifies the fact that people have implicit theories within them that helps them decipher what is truth to them, in this case who fits the role of a leader, men or women, and the gender expectations of both genders.

Participants from Northern Nigeria especially highlighted the influence of religious and cultural norms on leadership access, with several describing the ways these external expectations became internalized. This aligns with the argument by Aliyu, N, (2014), that says that Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where men are more favoured than women, and division of labour is based on gender, with views about women based on their positions in the family, (Omoyibo et al, (2010). Many shared how early socializations created invisible boundaries around ambition, resulting in self-limiting beliefs or the need for external validation before aspiring to leadership roles. Aligning with the research evidence that shows that the oppression women face in the workforce do not come only from men or male managers but also from women themselves, (Bruckmüller et al, 2013). Furthermore the social role theory also provides insight into why these women had been socialized early in life that has resulted in this self-limiting positions and the need for external validation. The theory argues that women are expected to carry out feminine roles and results in a lack of acceptance if there is any deviation from the norm, (Eagly, 1982;1987).

Although meritocracy was frequently referenced, there was also a shared understanding that technical competence alone was rarely sufficient. While sponsorship was seen as important, none of the participants attributed their leadership appointments to tokenism or symbolic inclusion. Instead, they presented themselves as having earned their positions through visible performance and competence. This may reflect a form of internal distancing from narratives of symbolic representation, and just as research evidence says, downplay their experiences and adopt the queen bee disposition, (Ellermer et al, 2012). It could also be a filtering process whereby only those who resisted such roles progressed to the level of seniority included in this study.

Additionally, many women described being appointed during moments of crisis or organizational instability — though not always in overt terms. These crisis-based leadership transitions were sometimes normalized, with few participants identifying them as strategic placements or recognizing the additional risk burden they entailed. This subtle acknowledgement points to a wider pattern of leadership appointments being framed as opportunity, despite the hidden costs attached. The overt terms used by the participants to confirm or not, their appointment during unstable or crisis periods buttresses the findings in the literature that says that men and senior level women were seen not to acknowledge its existence or where they did, explained it away as a strategic or some positive move by the organisation. Ryan and Haslam, (2007), in their study of the reactions of men and women to the glass cliff, argue that junior and mid-level women were most likely to acknowledge its existence and attribute grave reasons for its existence.

Lastly, participants spoke about the pressure of being constantly watched, evaluated, and held to standards that differed from their male counterparts. This is aligned to existing literature that argues that the performance of women get to leadership is placed under remarkably scrutiny and questioned due to entrenched gender stereotypes (Ryan and Haslam, 2005b; Chung and Choi, 2023), even when they are executing the same leadership role as men (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). This hypervisibility was accompanied by rigid behavioral expectations, particularly around communication and emotional expression. Women were expected to be authoritative yet non-confrontational, assertive yet not aggressive — a balancing act that added a layer of emotional labor to their leadership roles.

Together, these insights suggest that while structural barriers to leadership may appear to have shifted, many gendered expectations and exclusions have simply taken more subtle forms. Access to leadership remains unevenly negotiated through networks, the dominant male circles, social conditioning, unspoken cultural and religious norms that create barriers for women as they access and navigate senior leadership positions in Nigeria. They are left with feelings of exploitation, repression and injustice as they are treated differently from men, fostering double standards and unfairness, hence there is the ongoing demand to prove legitimacy in spaces where women are still seen as the exception.

#### **4.2 Discussion of research question two: How do women who have attained senior leadership in Nigeria experience their positions within male dominated structures?**

The findings under RQ2 show that women in senior leadership roles continue to encounter male-dominated environments that impose heightened visibility, performance expectations, and identity-based pressures. Their lived experiences reveal that reaching the top does not remove gendered dynamics — instead, it reshapes them into more covert but equally demanding forms. The oppression continues even post access to senior leadership.

A key aspect of their experience was the constant need to justify their presence, competence, and leadership style. Many participants spoke of a form of “leadership policing,” where their behaviors, tone, and even personality were subject to ongoing scrutiny. Unlike their male counterparts, they were

expected to maintain composure, balance assertiveness with warmth, and navigate a narrow band of acceptable leadership expression.

These women also described a sense of living on the edge — knowing that any deviation from these unspoken expectations could result in marginalization or professional consequences. The stakes of nonconformity were high, and in some cases, women described job loss, burnout, or the decision to self-silence to survive in their roles.

A recurring theme was the emotional and relational labor expected of them — a burden that extended beyond formal responsibilities. They were expected to mentor, nurture, and emotionally support others in the workplace, especially because of their gender. These demands were rarely made of male leaders and added to the invisible weight they carried. Buttressing again the social role theory and implicit theories of gendered leadership. Women are perceived as communal and traditional homemakers (Eagly, 1982; 1987) and men agentic and breadwinners, (Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, 2014). This explains why the women had the experience of being expected to carry the emotional and relational burden in addition to their jobs.

For women perceived as “strong,” an additional symbolic burden emerged: they were viewed not just as individuals, but as representatives of all women in leadership. Their success or failure was interpreted as a signal of women’s general capability, placing added pressure on their performance. While some embraced this role as a form of purpose or strength, others found it limiting and emotionally draining. This is indicative of the high stress and strain Bruckmüller, Ryan and Haslam, (2014) spoke about, that comes from working on the edge. ‘this is not only detrimental to the women experiencing this but create a narrative of acceptance of this imbalance in power and double standards for the women yet to get into senior leadership.

These experiences suggest that women in male-dominated leadership spaces face a complex negotiation between authenticity and conformity. Some chose to resist, redefine, or reframe the expectations placed upon them. Others established boundaries to protect their well-being. Regardless of approach, their leadership journeys were marked by a continual balancing act — navigating between expectations, power structures, and their own values.

#### **4.3 Discussion of research question three: In what ways do women in senior leadership positions resist, challenge or reimagine institutional power and leadership structures?**

The findings under RQ3 reveal that women in senior leadership are not merely navigating existing power structures — they are actively reshaping them. Through intentional acts of resistance, strategic positioning, and long-term reform efforts, these women are creating alternative leadership pathways and expanding what leadership can look like within male-dominated institutions.

One of the most immediate forms of resistance observed was the effort to redefine leadership **on their own terms**. Many participants described choosing to lead authentically, setting clear boundaries, and modeling a leadership style rooted in empathy, collaboration, and values — even when this deviated from institutional norms. This form of quiet defiance allowed them to maintain their integrity while asserting new possibilities for what effective leadership could be.

Another critical mode of challenging power came through mentorship and sponsorship. These women deliberately created support systems for younger or mid-career women, not just to guide them professionally, but to shield them from the very systemic biases they had encountered. By opening doors for others, they shifted the culture from within — expanding the leadership pipeline and embedding a sense of continuity in gender equity efforts.

Participants also engaged in advocacy through visibility — consciously using their positions to spotlight systemic injustices, speak on behalf of underrepresented groups, and make space for other women's voices. For many, visibility was a strategy, not a reward — a tool to normalize women's presence in powerful roles and challenge stereotypes of what leadership should look like.

Beyond individual strategies, several participants pushed for institutional reforms. This included championing fairer promotion systems, revising gender-biased performance evaluations, and advocating for policy reforms within their organizations. The right framing and gender sensitivity focused, (Okafor, Okafor and Chukwuemeka, 2011; Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011). These actions were not framed as acts of rebellion, but as **strategic interventions** to transform how leadership operates — making it more equitable and inclusive. Embracing diversity as research has implied that effective managers are androgynous, a combination of agentic and communal traits (Hardaker, Woods and Fields, 2023). With a diversity-based HR policy, it makes is easier to onboard both traits on your team than look for individuals with a good combination of both types of traits.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of ecosystem-level changes, such as justice sector reform or educational policy shifts, indicating that their advocacy extended beyond the walls of their institutions. These leaders were not only shaping internal cultures but also working to dismantle broader systemic inequities affecting women's leadership journeys in Nigeria.

Altogether, the findings show that resistance is not always loud or confrontational — it can be strategic, quiet, and embedded in everyday decisions. These women are both surviving and subverting the status quo, using their leadership not just to occupy space but to **transform it**.

## 5. Conclusion

The glass ceiling has been researched for over four (4) decades since the term was coined in 1984, measures have been deployed by governments and organisations, over the years to 'fix' this problem of invisible barriers preventing women from getting into leadership positions and for some time it worked, or so it seemed. Research evidence showed that women had now been 'allowed' to get into leadership positions, in larger numbers than before, but therein was the problem. Little or nothing was known about the experiences of the women who had accessed the leadership position to ascertain if the barriers had disappear following the interventions. What was their experience in navigating senior leadership. Why there was radio silence in the literature of how they fared or if they were constrained to speak, as a coping and defense mechanism.

Self-silencing themselves and adopting the persona of a 'strong' woman bearing the burden of representing other women. This was the purpose of this research, to find out how women in senior leadership positions, current and past, had accessed and navigated their way through. How the second wave of the glass ceiling, that is, the glass cliff phenomenon- a position that claims that women were most likely to be appointed into precarious positions especially during crisis or unstable times in an organisation or establishment- was applicable to the experiences these women went through in Nigeria. The glass cliff theory has not been seen to manifest in all situations of crisis and instability and has little or no research in the Nigerian context.

The research methodological was based on a qualitative research design underpinned by a critical theorist philosophical perspective, with a firm believe that this approach was suitable to not only interpret the experiences faced by the participants but to delve deeper and unearth the underlining power imbalance, oppressions and unfairness by way of symbolic representation, gender barriers, hyper scrutiny and double standards which women go through which is not experienced by their male colleagues, both executing same job.

Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method in the first instance to identify the women in senior leadership positions in Nigeria, who had risen through the ranks with the Nigerian corporate workforce and considering the levels of these women and the time/availability constraints they have at this level of leadership, the snowball sampling method was also applied. Women who had been selected through the purposive method recommended a candidate who also had to fit the criteria required to partake in the study.

Pre-interview questionnaires and semi structured interview guides were both used to collect data, and these were analyzed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method, generating six (6) themes and twenty-two (22) subthemes, aligned with the initial six (6) themes deductive generated from the literature earlier.

The major findings in response to research question 1 is that gendered barriers to leadership still existed as women accessed and navigated leadership, they had only changed their forms grounded in unspoken norms, symbolic representation and informal gatekeeping where even if you were technically sound as a women, there was still a need to have male endorsements to be given access to leadership – though not overtly executed but there nonetheless.

With reference to research question two, the result of the data collection and analysis unearthed themes of emotional and symbolic labour as well as workplace norms and performance standards that did not favour women, rather they burdened and left women burnout, subjected to leadership policing and role conflict. Most times the research evidence showed the women lost their jobs, promotion of just voluntarily exited the organisation.

The results of research question three showed that some women had decided to resist the pressure and redefine what leadership meant for them and those around them. Acting as catalyst to reforming the systemic issues underlying this disparity in leadership experience for both genders. Mentoring and sponsoring other women to not only create opportunities for more women, but to dismantle the bias they met on their way and ensure the younger women do not have same experience.

These experiences show that structural power imbalance and institutionalised gender exclusions are still evidence in the workplace. Double performance standards applied to women different from the men and the emotional labour women must carry in addition contribute to many women working on the edge. Torn in between staying true to themselves or conforming to the pressure of the dominant male circles.

## **5.1 Implications and recommendations for future research**

The implications of this research and major contribution the knowledge and practice are to provide insight into the major contributor to women attrition from the workplace, the implication or not to the organization's performance or opportunity cost lost from not embracing diversity and ensuring there is gender equality and representation across an organization.

The other implication is to enable other women draw inspiration other women's experience and their journey to and in senior leadership, understand they are not alone and make better career decisions.

In terms of future research, this study had unanswered questions which emanated from the data gathering and supported by the limitations of this study. In this study only 10 women participated in this study as participants, even though they were from all regions of Nigeria from different industries, there is a need to expand the study to include more industries and women in senior leadership in Nigeria to continue to investigate its applicability to the experience women go through at that level.

Secondly, there is an opportunity to carry out this study for women in the early stage of their career to understand their current experience and their perception of what lies ahead of the. A comparative and

longitudinal analysis across levels of leadership, across industries and a study men's perspective on the institutionalized reforms ongoing and recommended.

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