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EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN MALE-DOMINATED ORGANIZATIONS

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Purpose: The objective of the study is to deepen understanding of women's leadership trajectories by examining both the conditions surrounding entry into leadership positions and the post-promotion experiences of women leaders operating across different organizational levels.
Design/methodology/approach: This article uses a critical literature review to identify research gaps and semi-structured interviews with 16 female leaders to explore their experiences before and after being promoted to leadership positions. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data.
Findings: The study's findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the context of women's advancement in male-dominated environments. However, this study broadens the perspective to include women's experiences after achieving advancement, and the key factors that support them in senior positions.
Research limitations/implications: The results cannot be generalized to the entire population due to the qualitative approach.
Practical implications: The research results provide a basis for creating employee management policies and procedures, particularly regarding promotion paths and support for leaders, especially women.
Social implications: This article contributes to the existing body of knowledge concerning women's experiences in leadership roles. The results of the study could improve organizational support for women in leadership roles, potentially increasing their representation in Poland.
Originality/value: While the subject of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is frequently addressed in literature, research on women's perspectives regarding promotion to leadership roles is lacking.
Keywords: Women in Leadership Positions, Male-Dominated Organizations, Promotions of Women to Leadership Positions, Post-Promotion Experiences.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Despite women constituting approximately 35% of managerial positions worldwide (ILO, 2025), their representation declines markedly at higher hierarchical levels. In Poland, women accounted for 48.1% of the workforce in 2024 but held only 31.5% of senior leadership roles, compared with 47.5% at entry-level management positions (Lara, Baird, 2025). A similar pattern is visible across the European Union, where women occupy a mere 30% of corporate board seats. While women comprise about 60% of public-sector employees, they hold fewer than half of the managerial positions (OECD, 2025). Consequently, vertical gender inequality is not confined to the private sector.

Importantly, the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions cannot be attributed to a lack of ambition. In fact, most women aspire to advance in their careers, particularly those under 30 in entry-level positions (McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025). The persistence of gender disparities therefore suggests the influence of structural and contextual mechanisms embedded within organizational systems and career pathways. This underscores the need for research that moves beyond questions of access to leadership positions and instead examines women's experiences following promotion.

Thus, this study aims to deepen the understanding of women's leadership trajectories by examining the conditions surrounding their entry into leadership positions and post-promotion experiences. The research focuses on male-dominated organizational contexts where masculine leadership norms are particularly salient and may significantly impact women's leadership experiences. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study is guided by the following main research question: What experiences do women have in relation to promotion to leadership positions?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The Literature Review outlines the theoretical background on women's leadership, followed by a section presenting the research questions. The Methodology describes the research design and data collection, while the Results and Discussion present and interpret the empirical findings. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the findings.

2. Women in Today's Leadership: A Literature Review

In response to increasingly complex and volatile organizational environments, contemporary leadership scholarship conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic process of influence, rather than as a formal position. Consistently, leadership models emphasize empathy, adaptability, resilience, and authenticity as key foundations of effective leadership (Harvard Business Impact, 2025).

Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations argues that organizations reproduce gender inequalities through structures, practices, and norms that privilege masculine traits, shaping leadership outcomes through role congruity dynamics (Eagly, Karau, 2002). These mechanisms contribute to persistent occupational segregation, with women concentrated in roles culturally associated with femininity and underrepresented in masculine-defined occupations (Herrera et al., 2012). Entry into male-dominated[i] fields does not necessarily eliminate this segregation; instead, internal differentiation often emerges, clustering women in relational or communal subfields (Levanon, Grusky, 2016; Eagly, 2020).

Women who attain leadership roles typically demonstrate strong professional competence, socio-emotional skills, ambition, perseverance, and resilience, often developing high levels of expertise in response to competence-related stereotypes (Wentling, 2003; Chugh, Sahgal, 2007; Cimirotić et al., 2017; Bonesso, Cortellazzo, 2025; McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025).

Despite strong evidence that women are equally effective and committed to leadership, their progression into senior roles remains systematically constrained. Rather than reflecting deficits in ability, education, or ambition, persistent inequality is linked to structural barriers, including unequal access to developmental opportunities, gendered organizational norms, and bias embedded in promotion systems (Northouse, 2019). Women more frequently experience caregiving-related career interruptions within leadership models emphasizing constant availability, while also facing reduced access to high-visibility assignments, leadership development, mentoring, and sponsorship—active career advocacy by senior leaders providing access to networks and opportunities (Bowles, McGinn, 2005; Cimirotić et al., 2017; Northouse, 2019). Lower self-promotion and negotiation practices among women further reinforces the early-career "broken rung," whereby women are less likely than men to obtain their first managerial promotion, generating cumulative disadvantage over time (Small et al., 2007; McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025).

Organizational practices such as early identification of high-potential women, succession planning, and stretch assignments significantly increase advancement likelihood (Beeson, Valerio, 2012; Gierke, Schlamp, Gerpott, 2025).

Promotion to leadership roles is typically associated with increased authority, influence, and responsibility, alongside material and symbolic rewards such as higher compensation, status, and short-term gains in job satisfaction and performance (Reke, 2025; Kosteas, 2009; Nepal et al., 2020). However, unlike men, women do not consistently report sustained increases in job satisfaction following promotion (Lup, 2018; Otto et al., 2022).

2.1. Research Questions

Despite the growing body of scholarship on women's leadership, there is limited research on women's experiences after being promoted to senior roles, especially in the Polish context. To address this gap, this research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1.A: In what contextual conditions are women promoted to leadership positions?

- RQ1.B: How do women leaders compare their pre-promotion expectations with their lived post-promotion realities?
- RQ1.C: What narratives do women leaders have about functioning in male-dominated organizations?

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design as an applied empirical inquiry with a normative orientation, aiming both to understand post-promotion experiences and to derive implications for leadership practice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing openness to participants' perspectives while maintaining sufficient structure for systematic comparison across cases.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed. Inclusion criteria required participants to be women leaders with at least one year of managerial experience in male-dominated organizations. Although this approach limits statistical generalizability (Knott et al., 2022), the objective was analytical insight rather than representativeness. The final sample comprised 16 women leaders with one to ten years of managerial experience, representing medium-sized (50-249 employees) and large (250+ employees) organizations (see Table 1). Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews, consistent with qualitative research standards (Hennink, Kaiser, 2022).

The interview protocol was informed by the reviewed literature and identified research gaps (Knott et al., 2022) and addressed organizational context, promotion pathways, expectations prior to promotion, and post-promotion experiences. Interviews were conducted online in Polish via Google Meet (40–100 minutes). To mitigate limitations of online interviewing, video calls were used to capture participants' facial expressions and gestures. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and securely stored in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software (Kuckartz, Rädiker, 2019). Analysis involved open coding followed by thematic analysis guided by the research questions and cross-case comparison to identify dominant and contrasting patterns and ensure interpretive coherence (Williams, Moser, 2019).

Table 1.
Respondents' characteristics

Code	Role	Organizational Level	Organization Size	Sector (Public/Private)
R1	Project Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	Space (private)
R2	Engineering Team Leader	Operational (frontline)	Medium	IT (private)
R3	Project Manager, Chief Technology Officer	Middle (tactical), top (strategic)	Large, medium	Space, Manufacturing (private)
R4	Rector's Plenipotentiary	Top (strategic)	Large	Higher Education (public)
R5	Data Scientist Manager	Operational (frontline)	Large	Banking/IT (private)
R6	Accounting Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	IT (private)
R7	Lead Product Owner	Middle (tactical)	Large	Banking/IT (private)
R8	Engineering Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	IT (private)
R9	Project Manager	Operational (frontline)	Medium	IT (private)
R10	Head of Department	Middle (tactical)	Large	Science (public)
R11	Project Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	IT (private)
R12	Project Manager	Operational (frontline)	Large	Space (private)
R13	Project Manager	Operational (frontline)	Large	IT (private)
R14	Innovation Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	Manufacturing (private)
R15	Chief Engineer	Top (strategic)	Large	Metallurgy (public)
R16	Engineering Manager	Middle (tactical)	Large	IT (private)

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Research Results and Discussions

4.1. Becoming a Leader (RQ1.A)

The data reveal two dominant, sector-differentiated pathways into leadership among women: being selected versus actively aiming for the role—a distinction largely absent from prior research. In the public sector, appointments more often followed top-down nomination ("being noticed") or formal progression rather than proactive self-positioning (R4, R10, R15), a pattern also observed in a respondent who later transitioned to the private sector (R5). In academia, advancement depended on formal credentials (e.g., habilitation) and long-term institutional experience, often contingent on vacancy availability.

And the professor […] asked me during that meeting whether I would like to become the Rector's Plenipotentiary [...]. I completely didn't expect such a nomination… I simply felt almost anointed, chosen — truly chosen (R4).

By contrast, private-sector leadership trajectories were more often shaped by deliberate career behavior. Respondents openly articulated leadership ambitions and integrated them into long-term plans, with such visibility described as instrumental when opportunities emerged (R1, R2, R7, R9, R11, R13, R14, R16), consistent with research highlighting the role of proactive career planning in women's advancement (Beeson, Valerio, 2012).

I was very open about it — I said, 'Listen, I want to take on a director-level role in this company, so start preparing that position for me,' and I repeated this consistently at every stage (R9).

Participants attributed their promotion to a recurring set of competencies, including reliability and consistent delivery, proactive initiative—often extending beyond formal job descriptions—strong relational skills, and, in technical and scientific contexts, substantive expertise supported by continuous professional development, consistent with prior research (Bonesso, Cortellazzo, 2025). However, paradox exists: once individuals assume leadership roles, the same initiative and drive are not always welcomed by the organization.

Courage under uncertainty also emerged as a key promotional factor in general, manifested in challenging decisions, demanding meritocratic justification, and negotiating conditions (R7, R9, R14, R15, R16), aligning with findings that women reaching senior leadership demonstrate high resilience and readiness to challenge the status quo (McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025).

Participants from various sectors also emphasized the importance of sponsorship from male leaders who actively advocated for their advancement (R2, R4, R6, R7, R8, R11, R15), contrasting with research suggesting that women have limited access to sponsors (McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025). This discrepancy may reflect the study's focus on women who have successfully attained leadership positions.

4.2. Expectations vs. Reality of Leadership (RQ1.B)

Promotion revealed a substantial gap between anticipated leadership influence and organizational reality. In scientific environments, administrative responsibilities frequently dominated daily work, pushing research into after-hours activity:

Unfortunately, there are days when I have to devote 80% of my time during the day to organizational work, management, and administration, and after 3 p.m., when the administrative staff finish and go home, I begin - I open up my scientific work (R10).

In corporate contexts, leadership proved far more communication- and negotiation-intensive than expected for all respondents, shaped by internal politics, stakeholder alignment, and meeting-heavy schedules:

So I would say that about 80% of the time it's actually meetings of various kinds (R13).

Extensive working time emerged as a recurring theme, with leaders reporting long hours, late-night availability, and constant connectivity. Cross-continental coordination in business intensified expectations of accessibility, while in academia such availability was framed as a mission-driven responsibility toward students and colleagues, consistent with research indicating that women leaders often prioritize responsibility toward others (Schwartz, Rubel, 2005).

I believe that I have to be available to my employees if they need me. And that often creates tension — at my own expense, of course — because for me, that's what being a manager is about: being available to people (R6).

Respondents described insomnia, insufficient onboarding, and isolation after transitioning from peer to manager, aligning with research showing higher post-promotion stress and emotional strain among women (Taylor et al., 2022). Almost all respondents attributed their challenges to organizational constraints, including limited decision-making authority, limited budgets, the need to execute decisions they did not support, blocked initiatives, and bureaucratic processes overshadowing professional expertise.

Following the promotion, a significant proportion of respondents from both the private and public sectors reported a lack of feedback, and when it was actively sought, it was often vague—such as "you know what you're doing well" (R3)—rather than actionable, consistent with prior research (McKinsey, LeanIn, 2025). At the same time, participants who received specific, high-quality feedback from supervisors and teams, significantly accelerated their development (R3, R10, R12, R14).

Several respondents initially struggled with delegation, believing they could complete tasks more efficiently themselves, which often led to exhaustion (R2, R3, R15). Over time, however, their leadership shifted from operational execution toward developing people and enabling team performance:

I was very involved in operational work… in fact, I spent less time on developing the people themselves and more on developing the team in terms of what was supposed to be within the scope (R2).

Alongside these challenges, promotion also generated positive experiences. Respondents emphasized the symbolic power of formal authority despite feeling personally unchanged, increased autonomy, freedom from micromanagement, and opportunities to shape management styles. Fulfillment was derived from developing people, influencing broader communities, protecting teams from organizational pressure, and—particularly in technical and industrial contexts—observing tangible outcomes.

Contrary to common assumptions, participants rarely reported explicit workplace penalties related to parenthood, consistent with Cimirotić et al. (2017). Motherhood was frequently framed as developmental rather than limiting:

I have two small children, so I joke that if I'm able to handle two little kids, then managing people can't be harder than that. And in a way, that's true (R5).

Respondents emphasized enabling practices such as remote work, flexible schedules, reduced working hours, and supportive reintegration after maternity leave, with several women in IT sector promoted shortly after returning from leave (R2, R5, R11). Partner support—such as shared childcare or alternating remote and on-site work—was repeatedly described as crucial for sustaining leadership roles, aligning with evidence on the importance of private-life support (Cimirotić et al., 2017).

However, participants also noted less visible spillover effects of leadership into private life. Work-related stress frequently transferred into home environments, affecting tone, patience, and emotional availability. Some respondents observed that managerial habits extended into their personal relationships, for example through structuring household responsibilities in a task-oriented manner. In several cases, tensions between leadership demands and family responsibilities led respondents to reconsider or temporarily step back from leadership roles.

4.3. Women in Male-Dominated Environments (RQ1.C)

Although experiences differed across sectors, respondents described a recurring ambivalence in male-dominated environments. Several preferred working with men (R2, R4, R12), associating these contexts with more direct, task-oriented communication and faster, less personalized conflict resolution. In engineering teams, direct instruction was perceived as efficient, and one respondent reported greater respect within a predominantly male leadership board compared with experiences of rivalry among female peers.

Very honestly, I find it much easier to work with men than with women. I'm a very straightforward person… I don't like that kind of chit-chat… and with women, it often happens that they prefer to talk about various other things (R2).

In heavy industry, manufacturing, and space-sector environments involving military collaboration, younger female leaders encountered resistance from subordinates—particularly older male employees who questioned their authority and perceived them as less competent or too young (R1, R3, R12, R14, R15), consistent with Lup (2018). In engineering settings, respondents felt compelled to demonstrate greater certainty and preparation before speaking, noting that male peers often shared strong opinions despite incomplete information. In some contexts, overt sexism was also reported, including sexualized comments, romantic advances, being treated as a "mascot" rather than an expert, and explicit statements that certain departments "do not hire women" (R3, R12, R14). Over time, such reactions diminished as competence was demonstrated, leading to greater recognition, legitimacy, and confidence.

You come in as a young, attractive woman and they immediately think they can hit on you. As if that's all you're there for (R14).

It aligns with empirical evidence showing that women in leadership positions experience more gendered treatment than women in non-leadership roles, including being taken less seriously, judged more on appearance, addressed in infantilizing ways, and exposed to humor (Clarissa, Motivaction, nd.).

In scientific and academic institutions, bias appeared in subtler yet structural forms. Respondents described being forgiven less easily for mistakes, having achievements framed as routine duties rather than excellence, and encountering rigid, male-dominated hierarchies (R4, R5, R10), patterns consistent with findings on the under-recognition of women's contributions (Alshdiefat et al., 2024).

I remember when I submitted an application for the award, and the professor who was on the committee said that what I had described in the application was simply my duty and that I shouldn't receive an award for it (R4).

5. Conclusion

This study explores women's post-promotion experiences in male-dominated organizations and highlights how leadership trajectories are shaped by both individual agency and organizational context. A summary of the main findings in relation to the research questions is presented in Table 2.

Two sector-dependent promotion pathways emerged: proactive, self-directed advancement in the private sector and nomination-based progression in public institutions. Contrary to common assumptions, maternity was not perceived as a direct barrier to promotion, although leadership roles intensified work–life boundary pressures, making social and organizational support crucial for sustainability.

The respondents' experiences revealed an ambivalence within male-dominated environments, where efficient collaboration often coexisted with gendered bias and legitimacy testing. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership development requires not only an increase in representation but also an examination of organizational norms, feedback practices, and access to sponsorship. In practice, organizations should implement clearer promotion processes, structured transition support following advancement, and leadership models that allow for sustainable performance.

While constrained by its qualitative scope, the study shifts the focus from access to leadership toward the lived realities of leadership after promotion and indicates directions for future research. Therefore, it is advisable to explore the support that women receive when they are promoted, as well as their perspective on reward inequalities among leaders and their consequences, e.g., the impact on performance.

Table 2.
Summary of the main findings

Research Question	Main Findings
RQ1.A: In what contextual conditions are women promoted to leadership positions?	Two dominant promotion pathways emerged: (1) nomination-based advancement (in public sectors), driven by formal structures and senior recognition; and (2) self-directed advancement (in private sector), based on explicit career ambition and proactive positioning.
RQ1.B: How do women leaders compare their pre-promotion expectations with their lived post-promotion realities?	A substantial expectation–reality gap was identified. Leadership roles involved less strategic influence than expected and more administrative burden, communication, and organizational constraints. Participants reported long working hours, constant availability, limited autonomy, and insufficient onboarding and feedback. Psychological strain (e.g., stress, isolation) was common. Positive aspects included increased autonomy, symbolic authority, and fulfillment from team impact.

Cont. table 2.

RQ1.C: What narratives do women leaders have about functioning in male-dominated organizations?	Experiences were characterized by ambivalence. On one hand, male-dominated environments were perceived as efficient, direct, and task-oriented. On the other hand, respondents reported gender bias, including legitimacy challenges, higher performance expectations, and in some cases overt sexism. Younger women faced authority resistance, especially in space and manufacturing sectors. In academia, bias was more structural (e.g., under-recognition). Over time, credibility increased with demonstrated competence but required sustained effort.

Source: Own elaboration.

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Footnotes

[i] Organizations may be considered masculinized when men constitute a clear majority of employees (approximately 60-70%), a pattern evident in sectors such as IT, heavy engineering, and transportation, and particularly pronounced in industries such as mining, construction, and special operations, where male representation may reach 90%.