

# Challenges faced by women assuming senior leadership positions at Namibian higher education institutions

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## Abstract

Gender preconceptions, biases, and notions have prevented women from advancing into top leadership roles, with males traditionally holding these positions. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in the context of a Namibian higher education institution. The study adopted a qualitative design and phenomenological case study approach underpinned by a critical paradigm to capture the lived experiences and stories of women leaders in senior leadership positions. The data obtained via semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically by identifying patterns, themes and key issues that emerged. Women leaders faced biases and stereotypes that undermined their credibility and effectiveness as leaders. These biases led to discriminatory treatment and limited opportunities for advancement. The existing male-dominated networks and informal channels of influence exclude women, making it challenging for them to build relationships with key decision-makers and access professional development opportunities. The study recommends support such as induction, mentorship and training and designing deliberate strategies to attract more women to senior leadership. The institutions can use these findings to create better inclusion standards in their policies and to promote women's leadership in higher education institution (HEIs). The study contributes to the body of literature in the field of leadership nationally and internationally. The narrative experiences of women leaders may be helpful to the body of knowledge on the topic and may motivate aspiring young women to seek senior leadership positions in HEIs.

**Keywords:** *women leaders; higher education; gender inequality; gender bias; challenges faced by women; gender preconceptions*

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## 1. Introduction

Although women have made great strides in enhancing their educational capacity and ventures into traditional roles long dominated by men in the workplace, it is evident that inequality persists within higher education institutions (Aiston & Fo, 2021). Hence, scholars from both developed and developing nations have paid close attention to the position of women in educational leadership (Bush et al., 2022; Dzingirai & Chauraya, 2022; Gülser, 2018; Lumby & Moorosi, 2022; Nkosi & Moyo, 2023). A report by Education sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA, 2021) reveals that women who hold leadership positions in higher education face a number of obstacles, including cultural or social expectations, a lack of networking and mentoring opportunities, gender stereotypes, a lack of career guidance, a lack of leadership training and development opportunities, sexual harassment, organisation policies that discriminate against women, a lack of confidence in women's leadership abilities, a lack of flexibility in the workplace, resistance from male coworkers, unfair promotion policies, a lack of leadership skills, an unhealthy work-life balance, and a lack of role models and mentors for women. Furthermore, studies from around the world have shown that women are insufficiently represented in leadership roles (i.e. Bush et al., 2022; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Maheshwari, 2023; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Moyo, 2024b; O'Connor, 2019; Singh & Prasad, 2014). While the percentage of women in industrialised nations is higher than in underdeveloped nations, several studies that have looked at women's access to leadership have discovered that obstacles still exist for them (Grogan, 2015; Gülser, 2018; O'Connor, 2019; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). Despite the obstacles faced in obtaining senior leadership roles in higher education institutions (HEIs), research from around the world shows that the proportion of women in these roles is rising (Krause, 2017; Poltera, 2019).

After achieving democracy, the Namibian government worked hard to eliminate the majority of gender discrimination laws and policies, ensuring that women's obstacles and struggles are no longer faced. By ratifying international agreements like the 1995 United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it reacted to the need for gender equity and equality (Waruru, 2021). Shortly after independence, the government created the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) as a focal point under the presidency to coordinate and address gender-related issues in the nation, with the goal of ensuring equality for men and women in the workplace (Waruru, 2021). However, despite all these government

interventions to address the difficulties and challenges experienced by women in their leadership positions, the challenges persist.

There is a notable paucity of literature on women in senior leadership positions within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Namibia, with no existing studies directly addressing the challenges they face in these roles. Most research in Namibia has focused on other sectors, such as health (Aiston & Fo, 2021), politics (Amupanda & Tomas, 2015), and education at school levels (Kauaria, 2002; Kawana, 2004; Mwingi, 1999; Udjombala, 2002). According to the studies, challenges faced by women after gaining these senior positions are more severe and surpass those faced throughout the process of obtaining them, as women have begun to occupy roles that were previously held by men (Pasque, 2013). Evidence indicates that men continue to dominate women in HEIs' decision-making bodies, despite numerous governments' attempts to enact laws that would encourage equal representation and participation of men and women in senior leadership roles (Waruru, 2021). Some of the studies' findings established that women in senior positions do not receive the same support as their male counterparts, despite holding similar positions (Sheyavali, 2016). It was also alluded that there is a shortage of role models and mentors for women in the institutions owing to the minimal representation of women in leadership positions, imbalance of social and cultural roles and academic roles, and homosociality, men recruiting and willingness to work with the same gender (Toni & Moodly, 2019). Although these studies highlight challenges faced by women in educational leadership more broadly, they reflect global patterns rather than context-specific issues within Namibian HEIs. Consequently, the empirical literature on higher education leadership draws predominantly from international contexts, which may not be entirely applicable or adaptable to Namibia's unique sociocultural and institutional dynamics. This gap underscores the need to explore how women who have succeeded in gaining senior leadership positions that were previously reserved for men and are currently dominated by men are doing.

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in the context of a Namibian higher education institution. The study will contribute to the body of literature in the field of leadership nationally and internationally. Sharing findings with the participants will expose them to the experience of other women in senior leadership positions. The narrative experiences of women leaders in senior leadership positions may be helpful to the body of knowledge on the topic and may motivate aspiring young women to seek senior leadership positions in HEIs.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Theoretical Framework*

This study was framed by two theories, namely, the Feminist Theory (FT) and the Motivational Theory of Role Modelling. The integration of these theoretical perspectives laid the foundation for the study. Viewing the study from these theoretical perspectives provided a better understanding of the experiences of women in senior leadership positions in HEIs. Feminist theory (FT) illuminates the social problems, trends and issues that are more often ignored by the traditionally dominant male perspective (Guy-Evans, 2023). These social problems are based on the inequality of power between women and men. Feminism explains that gender issues include gender discrimination, women's position in society and patriarchy. The FT emphasises the value of women's freedom by advocating women's political and legal rights and the oppression of women by men in both private and political institutions (Guy-Evans, 2023).

The theory postulates that women's lived experiences provide valuable resources for critiquing and evaluating prevailing knowledge about the state of women in senior leadership of HE. Since knowledge is grounded in human experience and women are represented in every race, class and culture, feminist research must emanate from all women's lives. Individuals have unique perspectives relative to the way they experience the world. The FT requires the researcher to place women at the centre of the research process (Shobana, 2019). Placing women at the centre of analysis positions the researcher in the unique situations where women live their lives. Moreover, the theory helps to construct knowledge and understand the historical misrepresentation of women. It provides a framework that helps describe and theorise the construction and maintenance of social order in HEIs (Harding, 2004). Finally, applying FT would add to the theoretical value of this research, which is why this theoretical perspective was chosen, given the paucity of evidence on its application in African contexts and the lack of evidence regarding its application in Namibian contexts.

In the Motivational Theory of Role Modelling, the focus is on the influence of role models in the achievement of desired goals by role aspirants. The theory can be used to explain the rise of women to leadership positions in the face of women's oppression as explained by feminism by observing both the positive and negative role models in HEIs. Accordingly, positive role models can inspire one by illustrating an ideal, desired self, highlighting possible achievements that one can strive for and demonstrating the route for achieving them. Negative

role models can inspire one by illustrating a feared, to-be-avoided self, pointing to possible future disasters and highlighting mistakes that must be avoided to prevent them (Vieira et al., 2022).

## ***2.2. Challenges Experienced by Women Leaders in Senior Leadership Positions in HEIs***

The challenges experienced by women in accessing senior leadership positions in HEIs are recognised and well documented across the globe (Nayak & Maheshwari, 2020). In agreement with this claim, Kuzhabekova (2023) in their study on women in higher education leadership in South Asia found that many of the perceived challenges experienced by women leaders are similar across countries, cultures and geographic locations. However, only a few studies have been conducted on the challenges experienced by women who occupy senior leadership positions in HEIs globally. Shepherd (2017) challenges the assumption that women's underrepresentation in higher education leadership is due to a lack of confidence, ambition, or willingness to pursue top positions. Instead, the study emphasises structural barriers in the selection process, such as mobility and external career capital, conservatism, and homosociability, which limit women's opportunities. Similarly, McNae and Vali (2016) underscore the impact of sociocultural, historical, economic, and political contexts on women's leadership globally. Leadership in higher education has traditionally been structured hierarchically, perpetuated by bureaucratic systems rooted in liberal political theories that prioritise individual merit, further entrenching systemic challenges for women leaders. Women education leaders in higher education face significant challenges, as highlighted by various studies. Reding (2020) found a paradox where women are praised for their effective leadership skills yet often lack mutual support from other women, creating an additional barrier. Interviews with 20 women in higher education leadership revealed struggles in leading and being led by other women. Similarly, Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2016) identified a lack of institutional career guidance and support, compounded by low confidence levels among women and exclusion from critical networks due to a male-dominated culture. This culture not only limits career advancement opportunities but also fosters feelings of intimidation among women leaders. Wang et al. (2013) further emphasized that in China, female leaders in higher education remain underrepresented, with insufficient attention given to their status and the challenges they face. Together, these studies underscore the systemic and cultural obstacles

hindering women's progress in higher education leadership. Therefore, it is beyond doubt that challenges experienced by women who serve in senior leadership positions are more difficult than those encountered in the journey of accessing the senior positions. Their assertion caught the researchers' attention and motivated them to start this investigation on the challenges faced by women in top leadership roles.

In many countries around the world, researchers have used the “glass ceiling” to describe the challenges experienced by women in accessing senior leadership positions in HEIs (Peterson, 2016), whereas other researchers have used a similar concept to refer to the challenges experienced by women who have advanced to the senior positions (Aiston & Fo, 2021), which was the focus of this study. A glass ceiling is attributed to institutional, cultural, social and personal barriers that are exercised against women who attempt to access leadership positions and women who have advanced in their careers to block them from advancing beyond a socially acceptable point (Aiston & Fo, 2021). The challenges faced by women education leaders in higher education, such as exclusion from networks, lack of institutional support, and male-dominated cultures, are akin to the “glass ceiling” experienced by women in Namibia, where systemic barriers hinder their advancement to leadership roles. Like the global context, Namibian women encounter invisible yet rigid obstacles that limit their opportunities for career growth and leadership recognition. Several researchers across the globe have established some of the challenges experienced by women serving in senior leadership positions in HEIs (see for example, del Carmen Meza-Mejia et al., 2023; Kuzhabekova, 2023; Moyo, 2024a, Mpofu & Mamba, 2024; Vieira et al., 2022; Verbooy & Moyo, 2024; Waheenda & Nishan, 2018).

These are the challenges faced by women in the Namibian context.

***Sociocultural expectations.*** Sociocultural impediments emerge due to the cultural beliefs and perceptions that society holds towards women (Moyo, 2022). The literature reveals that women in senior leadership positions have higher workloads because they must carry out the multiple roles of providing care to elderly parents, bearing and homeschooling their children and running household chores (Vieira et al., 2022), along with their career roles of coordinating academic courses, lecturing, developing programmes, research and administrative work. Both roles are demanding; as a result, women tend to be faced with the challenge of balancing their roles of being working women, daughters, mothers and wives at the same time (Waheenda & Nishan, 2018). This challenge is reflected in the findings of the studies conducted by Toni and Moodly (2019) and Kuzhabekova, (2023); both studies

disclosed that the imbalance between workloads and family life does not only affect women leaders' physical and psychological beings but also harms women's performance at their workplace.

***Masculine dimension of leadership.*** Scholarly work on leadership, both inside and outside the academy, has been male-centric, in that it has most often been conducted by men. As a result, male behaviours and characteristics in leadership roles have been the standard against which women leaders are being assessed (Kuzhabekova, 2023). Many studies have found that women who occupy senior leadership positions are encouraged to think and act like men for them to succeed in the advancement of their leadership roles (see for example, Alqahatani, 2019). In line with these findings, Aiston and Fo, (2021) found that when women are selected for leadership positions, they are expected to act, lead and perform like men to prove their leadership qualities and abilities. Another study revealed that the 'think manager-think male' syndrome was emphasised (Lee, 2021) in a male-dominated institution. If a woman lacks the masculine characteristics of a great leader, she is viewed as incompetent and unsuitable the role of a leader (Moyo, 2024a). Kuzhabekova (2023) asserts that a leader needs strong decision-making power to implement and change various policies and practices within the institution which is lacking in most women. On the other hand, some women suppress their natural feminist behaviours to adopt male leadership traits and fit in their arenas (Vieira et al., 2022).

***Institutional challenges.*** Institutional barriers manifest in the workplace, which could be due to the existing institutional policies, laws and regulations, leadership practices and culture of the institution. These include lack of institutional support, voices not being heard, institutional culture, glass cliff, queen bee syndrome and sexual harassment. A supportive working environment enables both men and women leaders in HEIs to flourish, foster positive attitudes and stay motivated (ESSA, 2021). However, some studies disclose that there are some institutions that lack support for women leaders (Nkambule, & Perumal, 2024). The issue of the underrepresentation of women in senior positions challenges women when it comes to finding female mentors and role models (del Carmen Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). Although many women have male supportive mentors, they still feel that men might not understand them as well as women, especially regarding the challenges of meeting the demands of both career and

family roles (Verbooy & Moyo, 2024). It is for this reason that many women prefer to have other women as mentors because they feel that other women would understand them better and give them adequate support as they are likely to have gone through the same experiences (Toni & Moodly, 2019).

***Glass cliff.*** The glass cliff is the concept that describes the situation whereby women are promoted to leadership positions in institutions when there is a greater risk of failure (Goyena, 2019). When the situation deteriorates, the blame is shifted onto women and they are regarded as incompetent to perform at the position (Vieira et al., 2022). As a result, women are more likely to be selected as candidates for risky positions; in contrast, men are more likely to be appointed to safe seats. The findings also revealed that when women lead an institution and fail, the common perception of their failure is because they are a woman. As indicated earlier, women are more likely than men to be promoted to positions that have a higher risk of failure, but they are also less likely to be given second chances after a failure (Goyena, 2019). These female leaders experience risky positions lack the support, resources and networks and are more likely to struggle from stress. As a result of their failing experiences, many pull away from their institutions and voluntarily resign from their positions (Nkambule & Perumal, 2024).

***The queen bee syndrome.*** Another barrier to the advancement of women leadership in HEIs that is acknowledged is the queen bee syndrome. These women assume that if they were to reach the top, other women could do it. Thus, to prevent other women from reaching the top of the ladder, they push away the ladder for women who try to advance in leadership to fall. This is often done by frequently challenging their views and ideas, opposing their involvement in professional learning, criticising their leadership efforts and being reluctant to support or mentor them (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Mpofu & Mamba, 2024). As a result, these queen bees identify themselves with men more than their gender. These women reject other women who fail to demonstrate male-like behaviours like assertiveness and intellectuality. Moreover, these women leaders fear that since they have made it to leadership positions, other women could also succeed and become their competitors; therefore, they try to block the career progression of aspiring women (Dear, 2016). Kuzhabekova (2023) affirms that women who do have professional mentoring or see a clear path to obtaining leadership experience and jobs are



jealous of other women in the same positions, and as a result, they rarely mentor other women on similar paths as they are viewed more as competition rather than a source of inspiration.

***Balancing of family and career roles.*** Family and career roles are both societal and personal challenges. No matter how high a woman climbs up the leadership ladder or pursues their career, the sociocultural belief binds them, that women are obligated to fulfil their family responsibilities and therefore are expected to put their families first (Cahyati et al., 2021). It does not matter how good women are in the workplace or what position they hold; house chores remain their primary tasks. Therefore, for women who want both a career and a family, balancing these two priorities becomes the biggest personal challenge (Toni & Moodly, 2019). Women who take up senior positions in leadership have to meet the demands of being a mother and a career woman by employing strategies to ensure that their career responsibilities do not interfere with their families' responsibilities and that their absence from home does not become conspicuous (Verbooy & Moyo, 2024). Most women leaders in HEIs opt not to pursue promotions that would require more time away from their families.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study crafted with a qualitative research approach was underpinned by the critical paradigm which is concerned with the issue of power relations within society (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The paradigm aims to change women leaders' status quo and promote women's empowerment through social justice in HEIs. A phenomenological case study design helped to capture the lived experiences and stories of women in senior leadership roles. The exploratory case study was employed to answer why, who, where and when questions with a relatively full understanding of the nature of the study (Lichtman, 2023). Adding to these points of view, a case study offers multi-perspectives of analysis in which the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of one or two participants in a situation, but also the views of other relevant groups of actors and the interactions between them (Nasri, 2023).

Twelve participants were purposefully sampled from an institution comprising 12 campuses, four schools, four departments and eight faculties. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on specific criteria (Lichtman, 2023). The sampling criteria focused on individuals serving in roles such as assistant pro-vice-chancellors, directors, deputy directors, deans of faculties, and heads of departments. These positions were chosen as

they represent key senior leadership roles within higher education institutions (HEIs), reflecting significant decision-making authority and influence in academic and administrative domains. Therefore, the sample included five heads of departments, three directors, one deputy director, two deans, and one assistant pro-vice chancellor.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Semi-structured interviews gave the participants the freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time (Hense, 2023). Individual interviews were conducted with the participants, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, following their provision of written consent. Out of the 12 participants, two were interviewed face-to-face in the comfort of their offices, while the remaining participants were interviewed telephonically due to COVID-19 protocols. All interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The data was thematically analysed using an inductive approach which allowed the data to determine and generate the themes. The thematic approach is suitable for analysing qualitative data, usually applied to a set of texts such as interviews transcripts. Six steps were followed: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up a report (Caulfield, 2019).

The quality of this research was ensured through credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Participants were made accessible to participate in the study upon official written request to the university following institutional ethical approval. A password-protected laptop was used and only the researcher had access to the computer. The interviews were audio-recorded and handwritten notes were taken during the interviews.

## **4. Findings**

Participants were asked about the challenges they have experienced in senior leadership positions in the NHEI. The challenges are presented in line with the three categories of Nguyen's framework. In his study, Nguyen (2012) categorised the challenges into sociocultural, institutional and personal challenges and present the challenges experienced by women leaders in the NHEI under these three categories. To comply with ethical protocols of anonymity, the 12 participants were assigned codes P1, P2, P3, and so on, regardless of their specific leadership positions. This ensured that their identities remained confidential throughout the study.

#### **4.1. Sociocultural Challenges**

The sub-themes associated with sociocultural challenges experienced by women in senior leadership positions are balancing family and work roles and gender stereotypes.

***Juggling duties at work and at home.*** One of the biggest and significant challenges that each participant faced was juggling leadership and family responsibilities. All respondents had a lot to say about the challenge of striking a balance between their jobs in the home and at work because of this. P.1 spelt it out:

*The responsibilities of leadership and family life are incompatible. In addition to my leadership responsibilities of administration, research, publishing, attending meetings, seminars, and conferences, I also must fulfil the tasks of wife, mother, and daughter.*

P.3 also expressed the following:

*I have a full-time nanny, but as a wife, there are some things I must do. Despite my credentials, title, the food and cash I put on the table, workloads, and other factors. My spouse still expects me to handle the family's dinner preparation, laundry, and supervision of the nanny's housekeeping.*

Another participant, R.5 also indicated that.

*In addition to taking care of my family, I also have the duty of picking up and dropping off my kids at school. I must get up early, pack their lunches, and drop them off at school. To drop the kids off at the creche for my afternoon lessons and pick them up when I get off work, I use my lunch break.*

P.10 further expressed:

*I must balance my time between being a leader and a family member as a women leader. My family wants me to be there at all family-related occasions, including weddings and funerals.*

P.9 felt this way:

*It can be difficult to strike a balance between your leadership responsibilities and your family obligations because, on occasion, activities take place over the weekend, and your family expects you to participate completely in them no matter what position you hold.*

P.5 expressed that

*In addition to my studies and household duties, I have leadership responsibilities. That taught me, for instance, to set aside a certain time for my family members while I'm at home on the weekend. I set up a routine that I adhere to, but I also give my body the downtime it requires.*

Balancing their jobs at home and at work emerged as another difficulty from the participants' comments.

***Stereotypical perceptions about gender.*** Based on this challenge, P.11 believed that

*Society still does not accept women's leadership, it still feels that women are supposed to be at home in the kitchens, bear children and take care of the family whereas men are supposed to be at the top, bosses and leaders.*

P.1 felt that

*People still believe that women are not good leader because they are too emotional and cannot make independent decisions as opposed to their male counterparts. More so, the society believes that men are hardworking, therefore they got the positions because of being hard workers while women are believed to gain the positions through other means.*

In line with the above view, P.11 expressed the following:

*Since my husband is working for the institution and he is also in leadership position, people think that I got the position because my husband is working there, not because I qualified to be there.*

P.1 stated that another stereotype about women in leadership is that “*women earned positions not because they met the requirements, but because of their gender as a means to satisfy diversity requirements of the policies, such as Affirmative Action Policy*”. In relation to the claim, P.3 emphasised that,

*I will be very much disappointed if I must learn that I got this position because I am a woman. I do not even want to put it in that compartment of a woman. I want to be in this position because I qualify to be in this position, not because I am a woman.*

Contrary to the findings, P.7 indicated that,

*There are so many women in the institutions who are given senior positions due to Affirmative Action Policy to meet the requirements of Employment Equity Commission. Of course, these women will fail and when they fail people will say that is why we prefer men in leadership positions.*

#### **4.2. Institutional challenges**

It was evident from the participants' responses that there were various structural challenges prevailing at the institutional level. The participants cited challenges such as lack of early induction programmes and mentoring programmes, increased workloads, bureaucratic structure, resistance from other women, male dominance, women leaders are treated and evaluated differently, women leaders' voices are not being heard.

***The rejection from other women.*** It transpired from most of the participants that women leaders were faced with the challenge of overcoming resistance from fellow women in the institution. P.11 recounted that

*Women are not supportive to other women leaders and have negative attitudes towards other women leaders. In most cases fellow women are the one that are fighting us, they are the one resisting. Majority of men are supportive compared to women, anytime I asked them for instance to drive me out to attend to an emergency meeting, they are always ready.*

In agreement with the findings, P.6 gave the following details:

*Women do not like seeing each other growing or progressing. Women are always unavailable simply because they want to see you failing. They want to see you fall from the wagon and they will celebrate.*

Recounting another experience, P.6 stated that,

*Women resisted, only men who assisted. I could literally tell there is an element of jealousy in women. In meetings, women's contribution is minimal. Most of the valuable contributions come from men, women are quiet.*

Another participant added that “majority of women resist authority in the hands of other women. You find a fellow woman bringing another woman down because of the mentality that

women supposed to be at the ground levels and men should be up” (P.11). In the same vein, P.1 recounted her experience:

*In board meetings, majority of women vote for men, instead of voting for fellow women. The act of enmity in women has helped men to keep us down, because fellow women are not voting other women on power, they are voting men instead.*

**Male supremacy.** According to several participants, men still hold most senior leadership roles, even though laws and policies have made it easier for women to do so. In contrast to the results showing that women were hesitant to assist other women, P.1 believed that,

*Women can be excellent mentors to other women because they are more likely to have similar life experiences, emotions, and difficulties. As a result, they can better understand one another and provide effective and efficient support for one another.*

P. 3 felt that,

*It can be quite difficult to work at a male-dominated institution since there are certain men who are very harsh, especially when you ask for help. When someone is that rigorous and harsh with you, you won't want to go back to ask for aid from them again.*

P.5 added that,

*some men may even refuse to give you the information you need, but if you go to your supervisor and ask him for the same data, they will be able to provide it to you right away.*

P.2 also shared the same sentiment:

*Sometimes you just need something done for the students' benefit, but this person will either say no or make it tough for the request to be approved. deliberately to harm you or to predict your thoughts or behaviour.*

The results also showed that women are frequently appointed to prominent roles but are subsequently neglected or do not receive support, which causes them to fail and sets up other women for failure.

P.10 expressed:

*Male leaders typically receive less respect from the public than do female leaders. Furthermore, a male leader is seen as strong if he raises his voice and stands up; a woman leader is regarded as aggressive and impolite if she does so.*

The same views were shared by P.11:

*Speaking up is not expected of women. You'll understand that these are intended to cause me pain. Therefore, a woman who wants to contribute should stand up and say what she thinks, but she should also be prepared for a lot of opponents.*

All participants mentioned the dearth of mentors and role models for female leaders in the organisation, because there are so few women in senior leadership roles in the HEI.

#### **4.3. Personal challenges**

Under this category, participants cited the following challenges: self-doubt and personal choice, fear of failure, stress, loss of friends/loneliness, lack of personal and family time, career, marriage and children, the menstrual process, and childbearing.

***Fear of failure.*** Another challenge manifested in the data was the fear of failure. P.3 had this to say:

*There are some people who deliberately make my work difficult just to see me fail. For instance, when I was looking for certain information, there were people who deliberately denied me the information I was looking for. So, I felt that these people have set me a trap of failure.*

P.11 added:

*Women fear failure because they are appointed at certain position, and they are not given adequate support or sometimes not supported at all, and they are judged harshly compared to their male counterparts.*

***Constraints related to children, marriage, and careers.*** Most of the respondents revealed that marriage and children conflict with leadership roles. P.4 expressed that,

*When you are married, and you also have children, and you are in leadership positions it is too challenging to thrive in both. One said must suffer and, in many cases, it is home because you would not want to fail at work.*

P.9 noted that

*It stresses me so much that now you have pending work and you want to stay behind complete your work for the day, home my spouse is waiting for me to prepare the meal. These multi-tasks affect my performance because I cannot perform the way I supposed to perform.*

P. 5 explained:

*I cannot always bring my office or leadership issues home; it can disturb my marriage and bring arguments. So, I had to stop and cut off staying at the office until late, going to the office during the weekends, going to bed late or waking up early like at 02 or 03 o'clock and so on for the sake of my marriage.*

P.6 explained that

*I am single, I have all the choices. I can manage my time well, it is up to me to decide when to leave my office, when to go to bed and when to wake up. There are times I could stay at the office until late. I have only one child who is at a higher school and it is a boarding school.*

In addition, P.8 asserted that,

*If you take family first, you will not have enough time to go through all the steps to reach the leadership positions. Again, if you go for a career first, sometimes you will be late to start a family and meet the ideals of your family.*

At the institutional level, the participants cited that they are faced with challenges such as lack of early induction programmes and mentoring programmes, increased workloads, bureaucratic structure, resistance from other women, male dominance, different evaluation of women leaders, women leaders' voices not being heard, fear of failure, career, marriage and children constraints.



## 5. Discussion

The study sought to explore challenges experienced by women leaders in senior leadership positions in the NHEI. This section thematically discusses the data of the study in relation to the literature reviewed that illuminate the findings.

### 5.1. Sociocultural challenges

At this level, gender stereotypes and work-family conflict were highlighted as the societal difficulties.

*Conflict between work and family life.* The women leaders in this study stated that, in addition to their professional responsibilities of organising academic programmes, giving lectures, creating programmes, doing research, and handling administrative tasks, they continued to be answerable to the cultural and biological obligations associated with their gender. The responsibilities of childrearing, marriage, elder care, and household chores are fulfilled by women leaders. The responsibilities of family and job are equally taxing and occasionally conflict (Aiston & Fo, 2021). For example, a woman may be expected to attend a meeting at 13:00, but she may also be expected to drop her children off at home and pick them up from school at the same time (del Carmen Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). Given that women in this situation put their families before their careers, males believe that women shouldn't be promoted to top leadership roles since they are more likely to choose their families over their careers (Toni & Moodly, 2019).

It is difficult for them to perform both tasks since they do not want to be missed at work or at home. After the knock-off hour, women executives have two options: they can leave the office or take some work home. But according to the literature, women who bring work home are seen as workaholics—people who value their jobs over their families—while those who put their families first are seen as uncommitted to their jobs (Verbooy & Moyo, 2024). Similarly, research found that males who stayed late at work were seen as hardworking and dedicated, whereas women who did the same were perceived as being unworthy of being a good wife, mother, or daughter.

The results are consistent with Moyo's (2024b) assertion that women who encounter extreme adversity and an imbalance in their roles choose to leave their employment freely and seek out alternative occupations that allow them to manage their work and family obligations.

Research on work-life conflict reveals that it is a prevalent issue for women in leadership roles, and it is supported by the literature that women, particularly in African contexts, bear the brunt of the responsibility for balancing work and family obligations, which impedes their ability to pursue aspirations in leadership (Waruru, 2021).

***Stereotypes surrounding gender.*** Gender stereotype is described as a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that ought to be possessed by women or men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women (Kuzhabekova, 2023). The study found that although laws have paved the way for women to access senior leadership positions in the NHEI, women are not yet accepted in the male-dominated realm due to gender stereotypes rooted in cultural beliefs. It emerged from the findings that women were not strong leaders, they are fragile, timid, and indecisive. As a result, society believes that a woman cannot be a good leader because of a lack of masculine traits.

Another widespread perception is that society believes that women get positions because of their gender to gratify the diversity requirements of the national policies, such as the Affirmative Action Policy and EEC, which aim to uplift and promote gender parity in a democratic government. The same finding transpired in Moyo (2022) study that gender equality was one of the policies most of the colonised countries were required to implement to get monetary funds from the World Bank; therefore, many women were appointed in senior positions for the country to meet the requirements for this aid.

### ***5.2. Institutional challenges***

The study found that although some women had succeeded in breaking through the glass ceiling, they were still confronted by a labyrinth which was tougher than the glass ceiling. In literature, a glass ceiling is described as the challenges faced by women trying to access senior leadership positions, whereas the labyrinth describes the challenges experienced by women throughout their leadership careers.

***Institutional culture.*** Women leaders of this study felt that the culture of the institution was made for men to support men. These women expressed that the institutional culture was still shaped by men's views of what an effective leader should be like, "a think manager - a think man" (Lee, 2021). Therefore, women were expected to adopt masculine traits of being

strong, confident, aggressive and assertive which form the standard against which women are assessed as leaders (Guy-Evans, 2023). On the other hand, women leaders expressed that, women who adopted the masculine traits of being straight forward, decisive, arrogant, assertive, direct and firm in their values and the principles they believed in were regarded as manly, bossy, harsh and difficult. But, when a man portrayed the same qualities, he was regarded as a strong, direct leader. These women are perceived as competent, but not likeable, whereas women who conform to the feminine traits, such as being understanding, empathetic and compromising are likeable, but seen as incompetent. The institutional culture perceives masculinity as the norm while femininity falls outside of normality (Alqahatani, 2019).

***Gender biasness towards women leadership.*** Another challenge experienced by women in senior leadership positions is biasness towards women leadership – women leaders of this study alluded that their expectations were different from their men counterparts. They indicated that when they were appointed to senior positions, they were expected to perform to prove their competencies. This was contrary to the men – when a man was appointed to the position, it was expected that he could already perform. So, women were expected to perform beyond what men could perform. A similar finding was reflected in a study on factors hindering the progression of women to top leadership positions; it discovered that women were required to prove their abilities double than their male counterparts (del Carmen Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). In addition, when women perform well it is a surprise to people because it is not expected and they receive much praise, but when a man does the same job, he does not get the same praise because it is expected. More so, when a woman fails to perform, she is regarded as a failure and this failure is well announced. These women set up other women for failure because it will be noted over many years that women were given a chance in leadership positions but failed to perform, whereas, if a man fails, it is noted that he did not meet the expectations and his failure is not announced as that of the women.

The study further surfaced that women who spoke up, put up arguments and fought for the values and principles they believed in were hated as women are not expected to speak up or fight even for what is right. The findings correlate with what Mayya et al. (2021) found, that women are expected to be submissive and women who speak their minds were considered not to be normal. This is because the men in the office expect women to be silent and submissive as they expect their wives to be at home.

### ***5.3. Personal challenges***

This sub-section discusses the challenges that confront women at the personal level such as lack of confidence, opting for a leadership career over marriage and children, and menstrual and menopause constraints.

***Lack of confidence.*** Due to the status quo which does not seem to favour women in senior leadership positions, gender role stereotypes were found to be evident in the form of a lack of self-confidence among the women. Women leaders of this study argued that the expectations for women leaders to depict masculine traits and corresponding leadership styles which were normally different from theirs served as a major cause for the lack of confidence of women leaders. This is because, if women leaders fail to portray those traits, then they are considered as not meeting the leadership standards of HEIs. Furthermore, women leaders expressed that a lack of confidence was rooted within women themselves because there were women who believed that being a woman, means one was inferior and unable to lead. This shows that some women were not courageous enough to take up big roles. Furthermore, because of social influences that stereotyped female, women felt that leadership was for men and that they should be in the lower positions playing supportive roles. Although evidence showed that lack of confidence emerged from within the women themselves, the literature opposes that it is rooted in sociocultural beliefs and institutional culture instituted by men for men (Madsen & Longman, 2020). Lack of confidence places limitations on women's abilities to perform and advance in their leadership careers.

***Opting for a leadership career over marriage and children.*** Women leaders voiced that as much as it is within women's biological role to give birth, their childbearing role conflicted with their leadership roles, because after giving birth they were expected to resume their work with the same workload and with no flexibility to allow them time to breastfeed their babies. Consequently, these women became reluctant to take up additional roles, attend meetings after work or travel to attend conferences. In line with this finding, the literature reveals that once a woman has children, she becomes more hesitant to travel and work long hours because of her commitment to her children at home. Therefore, women leaders felt that it was better for women to start seeking senior positions when they knew they were done having children to mitigate the challenges that came with dealing with both roles. The women leaders

had missed out some stages of their children's growth because of the demands of their work (Mayya et. al., 2021). Nkambule and Perumal (2024) found that males were insensitive to the special needs of women, for instance, male who were deputised by women were not happy when females went on maternity leave because it affected their work. Thus, they felt that women should not be appointed to senior positions because they left work to go and have children. Owing to this challenge, after giving birth some women opt to quit leadership positions and look for a job that would allow them to balance their workloads and family responsibilities (Mayya et al., 2021). The literature concurs that the pressures of balancing work and family has led some professional women to decide to take fewer challenging positions or seek alternative career option following childbearing (Nayak & Maheshwari, 2020).

Similarly, the weight a woman must bear as a mother, married woman and leader conflict with each other; therefore, it is postulated that if a woman wants to thrive in a leadership career it is better to be single and childless. This is also supported by literature, that women in senior leadership roles are more likely to be single or married with no children compared to their male counterparts (Vieira, Mara & Júlio, 2022). This implies that family roles remain the primary task while work is secondary.

## 6. Conclusion

Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in various sectors, including higher education leadership positions. In Namibia, despite notable progress in promoting gender equality and women empowerment, women leaders continue to face numerous obstacles in attaining and thriving in senior leadership roles within the NHEI. Namibian society is influenced by traditional gender roles and stereotypes which impact women's access to leadership positions. The study found that the traditional gender expectations often place women in domestic roles, limiting their opportunities for career advancement. Such societal norms contribute to the challenges faced by women aspiring to senior leadership positions. Moreover, cultural barriers and societal expectations regarding gender roles create additional challenges for women, including biases and assumptions about their leadership capabilities and commitment. Concerning work-family balance challenges, the study found that balancing work and family responsibilities is a significant challenge for women leaders in senior leadership positions. Women leaders of this study found no balance between work and family

roles and had to juggle between these roles which sometimes were in conflict. The lack of family-friendly policies, such as flexible work arrangements and adequate support for childcare, places additional strain on women, making it harder to sustain leadership roles while fulfilling personal and caregiving responsibilities.

It can be deduced from the above findings that institutional challenges are dominant. This means that much needs to be done to alleviate these challenges for the dream of achieving gender parity to be realised in the NHEI. The study recommends an establishment of gender mainstreaming policies that integrate gender perspectives into all aspects of institutional practices, including decision-making processes, curriculum development and research. The policy makers should set up gender-specific policies for women in senior leadership positions to make the institutions women friendly and alleviate the challenges that confront women leaders in senior leadership positions. Further, the study recommends the improvement of institutional practices, such as putting in place effective formal mentoring, training and coaching programmes designed to meet the needs of women in senior positions and providing opportunities to enhance their skills, confidence and visibility. This was an interpretive study focused on exploring and understanding the challenges of women in senior leadership positions in a NHEI. Thus, future research should expand the scope of this study into an interventionist study to find solutions to the underlying causes of the power dynamics that exist within the leadership structures. Future researchers should consider collecting data from aspiring women leaders in non-leadership positions such as lecturers, so that there would be informed comparisons of their experiences.

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