


Cause and Cure: Women's Perceptions of Responsibility in Gendered Leadership Inequity

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Abstract

Despite evidence that women are effective leaders, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Drawing on a phenomenological analysis of interviews with 15 women in the United States who were working in or aspiring to leadership roles, this study examines how responsibility for gender inequity in leadership is internalized. Findings reveal a paradox in which participants recognized organizational and societal barriers while simultaneously viewing both leadership attainment and solutions to the gender leadership gap as contingent on personal confidence, determination, self-promotion, and other forms of individual effort, rather than systemic change. Viewed through a broader historical lens, participants' perceived responsibility reflects internalized oppression shaped by cultural narratives of inherited culpability. Although participants acknowledged systemic discrimination and structural barriers, they positioned themselves as both the cause of and cure for gender inequities in leadership. These findings indicate that the responsibilities assigned to womanhood function as a mechanism of cultural reproduction, redirecting attention away from institutional accountability and allowing systemic inequities to persist.

Keywords

Leadership Gender Gap, Internalized Oppression, Women in Leadership, Inherited Gendered Guilt, Systemic Discrimination

1. Introduction

The persistent gender leadership gap in the United States has been extensively documented. Women have consistently demonstrated strong leadership effectiveness (Kubu, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2022; Wang et al., 2018; Zenger &

Folkman, 2019); however, they remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles. Research indicates that women CEOs engage in appropriate and effective risk-taking, with organizational performance comparable to that of male-led organizations (Wang et al., 2018), directly challenging persistent stereotypes that portray women leaders as risk-averse. Additionally, evidence suggests that women tend to assess risk more thoroughly and act decisively, often achieving highly successful outcomes through this approach (King, 2021; Korn Ferry, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Women's representation in government remains limited in the United States and globally, despite increased political engagement in recent years (National Women's History Alliance, 2021; United Nations Women, 2019). As of 2020, women in the United States occupied just 12% of gubernatorial positions, 19.4% of seats in Congress, 24.5% of state legislative roles, and no woman has ever served as President of the United States (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Globally, women hold approximately 24.3% of national government positions, reflecting a persistent pattern of underrepresentation across political systems (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020). This imbalance persists despite evidence that women legislators are often more effective than their male counterparts, as they demonstrate greater legislative productivity, bipartisan collaboration, and coalition-building (Volden et al., 2013).

Regardless of demonstrated capabilities, structural and cultural barriers continue to shape women's leadership development and advancement (Ibarra et al., 2013; Stephenson et al., 2022; Vaughn-Pollard, 2022). Women currently hold only 29.3% of senior executive positions in the United States, and progress has slowed markedly, with just a 1.4% increase between 2015 and 2020 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Gender-based assumptions persist even as women's workforce participation has increased, and these assumptions are held by both men and women (David & Derthick, 2017; Vaughn-Pollard, 2022; Wang et al., 2018). Notably, a large-scale study of over 10,000 top management candidates found that women were less likely to pursue leadership roles over time, despite beginning their careers with leadership aspirations similar to those of men (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2016).

Furthermore, women have historically been assigned responsibility for perceived wrongdoings while simultaneously tasked with the burden of adaptation, correction, and emotional regulation (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). In contemporary contexts, these expectations are often internalized as personal responsibility for overcoming structural inequities. For example, women's leadership awareness campaigns and empowerment rhetoric instruct women to fix inequity through personal improvement rather than institutional reform (Desgrosseilliers & Stinson, 2023). A woman's lack of advancement is frequently labeled as evidence of individual inadequacy or the need for self-promotion, reinforcing the expectation that the responsibility rests with women to correct the imbalance.

Leadership development discourse frequently reiterates this dynamic by em-

phasizing individual transformation while leaving organizational norms, power hierarchies, and gendered expectations largely unexamined (Bierema et al., 2022; Ibarra et al., 2013). As a result, women's perceptions of their own leadership potential are shaped not only by external barriers but also by deeply internalized gender norms that promote male-dominated leadership (Northouse, 2018). Women, unlike men, struggle to assume leadership as a legitimate role.

The purpose of this study was to explore how internalized gender norms influence women's perceptions of their leadership potential within contemporary workplace contexts in the United States.

Specifically, the following question guided the study:

1) How have internalized gender norms shaped participants' perceptions of their leadership potential?

By focusing on women's lived experiences, this study sought to explore the ways in which responsibility for navigating and correcting gender inequity is internalized, often shaping leadership identity formation and expectations.

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Critical theory was utilized as the theoretical framework in this study, which considers the social structures and assumptions that reproduce inequality and constrain human agency. Rather than locating inequity solely within individual behavior, Critical theory emphasizes the interaction between social systems, historical conditions, and institutional practices in shaping lived experience (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1993; Thompson, 2017). From this perspective, inequities are understood as socially produced and maintained through cultural norms, organizational expectations, and power relations.

Social theorists argue that individual beliefs and behaviors cannot be disentangled from the environments in which they develop (Bronner, 2017; Butler, 2011). Critical theory, in particular, emphasizes how dominant social narratives become internalized over time, shaping perceptions of competence, legitimacy, and belonging (Butler, 2011; Horkheimer, 1982). By focusing on the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of power, this framework helps explain how leadership norms are formed and how responsibility for inequity is subtly assigned and maintained.

2.1. Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression refers to the process by which members of marginalized groups come to accept and reproduce beliefs that privilege dominant groups while devaluing themselves (Clark & Clark, 1950; David & Derthick, 2014, 2017). Rather than being imposed externally, these beliefs are enacted internally through automatic thoughts, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns that are self-limiting or self-punitive (Crosby, 1984; David & Derthick, 2017; Vaughn-Pollard, 2022). Such internalized narratives can contribute to patterns of self-blame and self-restriction that undermine both personal confidence and professional ad-

vancement (David & Derthick, 2017; James-McCarthy et al., 2021). Importantly, internalized oppression develops gradually through sustained exposure to subjugation and exclusion, becoming embedded in identity formation and role expectations over time (Clark & Clark, 1950; Crosby, 1984; David & Derthick, 2014, 2017).

Associated with diminished self-regard and persistent self-questioning, internalized oppression can shape how individuals interpret their roles, responsibilities, and perceived shortcomings within social and professional contexts (Liebow, 2016). When individuals absorb dominant narratives that position them as less capable or less deserving, they may come to view obstacles not as systemic failures but as personal deficiencies. This internalization fosters a heightened sense of self-surveillance and responsibility, in which individuals feel compelled to compensate for perceived inadequacies through increased effort, vigilance, or self-correction (Bellis et al., 2024; Brown, 2023). Over time, this dynamic can intensify feelings of isolation and reinforce the psychological consequences of internalized oppression.

Within professional settings, internalized gender norms play a significant role in maintaining women's underrepresentation in senior leadership positions. When women absorb culturally reinforced beliefs about appropriate gender roles, they may limit their own aspirations, hesitate to pursue advancement, or feel compelled to exceed expectations in order to justify their presence in leadership spaces (James-McCarthy et al., 2021). These beliefs often manifest as heightened self-doubt, role incongruence, and an ongoing need to prove legitimacy, contributing to a disproportionate internalized burden of responsibility.

The broader sociopolitical context of the United States further reinforces these dynamics. As a society historically structured around patriarchal norms, institutional power remains unevenly distributed, with men occupying a disproportionate share of authority across political, economic, religious, and cultural domains (Ruggles, 2015). Patriarchy is sustained through ideologies that frame gendered differences as natural or biological, positioning women as inherently less suited for power and leadership (Facio, 2013; Lerner, 1986). These beliefs are not merely abstract; they shape organizational norms, leadership expectations, and workplace cultures in ways that disadvantage women (Adisa et al., 2019; Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020).

Systemic oppression functions by normalizing these inequities while obscuring their structural origins (Asare, 2022). One mechanism through which this occurs is scarcity mentality, the belief that opportunities and resources are limited and must be competed for rather than equitably distributed (Del-Villar, 2021). In organizational contexts where leadership roles for women are perceived as few, scarcity mentality can foster internal competition, discourage solidarity, and reinforce hierarchical norms that mirror broader systems of exclusion (Asare, 2022; Chen et al., 2022). As women expend cognitive and emotional energy navigating these constraints, performance may be impacted, inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes that question their effectiveness or suitability for leadership (Novotney, 2014). In-

ternalized oppression operates as a powerful mechanism through which systemic gender inequities are reproduced from within, shifting responsibility from the oppressor to the oppressed.

2.2. Inherited Culpability

Narratives of female culpability are foundational cultural myths that place responsibility for collective suffering in women's actions (Maurice et al., 2022). For example, Eve's bite of the apple renders womanhood responsible for sin and death, while Pandora's curiosity releases pain and punishment into the world. These stories do not merely depict individual decisions; they establish a moral pattern in which women are directly responsible for the world's suffering (Glenn, 1977). Responsibility is not confined to the individual woman but extends across generations, transforming womanhood itself into the embodiment of moral risk and instability (Maurice et al., 2022; Nielsen, 2017).

These narratives are woven into religious doctrine, legal systems, and cultural norms, and function as mechanisms for regulating women's behavior (Klingorová & Havlíček, 2015). Institutional responses follow predictably through surveillance, restriction, and discipline. Over time, inherited culpability shifted from explicit accusation to include internalized obligation (Alagarsami et al., 2024). In addition to being openly blamed for social disorder, women are held responsible for its prevention. Emotional regulation, moral stewardship, and relational harmony are expected of women, with failure interpreted as personal and gendered deficiency rather than institutional breakdown (Ragins & Winkel, 2011; Stephenson et al., 2022).

In the context of leadership, inherited culpability and responsibility are not always named yet are pervasive. Women are frequently expected to anticipate conflict, manage emotional climates, and compensate for structural inequities through personal adaptability and effort, extending historical patterns of gendered responsibility into modern leadership and organizational settings (Acker, 1990; Hochschild, 1983; Kark et al., 2012). Leadership discourse often reinforces these expectations by promoting the idea that inequity is an individual challenge rather than a condition requiring institutional change (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Sandberg, 2013). Ultimately, responsibility for systemic failure ends up being assigned to those most affected by the inequities (Brescoll, 2016).

Inherited culpability also shapes women's perceptions of authority and legitimacy. When leadership norms reflect historically masculine standards, female authority is questioned and viewed with suspicion (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). In response, women may increase self-surveillance, over-prepare, or assume responsibility for outcomes beyond their control (Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Ridgeway, 2011). These behaviors represent rational adaptations to a system where women are held accountable for unfairly attributed consequences (Beauvoir, 2011; Manne, 2018).

Understanding inherited culpability as a form of internalized oppression clari-

fies how gendered responsibility persists even in settings that explicitly promote equity (Bearman et al., 2009; David & Derthick, 2014). The burden women carry reflects not only current expectations but also the enduring influence of historical narratives that continue to shape understandings of blame, legitimacy, and responsibility (Lerner, 1986; Manne, 2018).

2.3. Responsibility Reframed as Empowerment

Women are frequently encouraged to address gender inequity through personal change rather than institutional reform. Organizational behavior and leadership studies emphasize confidence development, self-efficacy, assertive communication, and personal resilience as key strategies for women's advancement (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Even when systemic barriers such as biased evaluation practices, gendered role expectations, and exclusionary organizational cultures are acknowledged, recommended interventions often remain focused on individual adaptation, reinforcing the expectation that women must adjust themselves to inequitable systems (Acker, 1990; Ridgeway, 2011).

Popularized leadership frameworks further reinforce this perspective. Women's leadership development programs encourage women to lean in, self-promote, negotiate assertively, and mentor other women as primary strategies for addressing leadership gaps (Sandberg, 2013). These narratives promote the idea that inequality is a problem of motivation, confidence, or visibility rather than the outcome of entrenched organizational practices and power dynamics. This emphasis on individual adaptation is further complicated by evidence that women who enact agentic behaviors associated with leadership often face social and evaluative penalties for violating gender norms (Brescoll, 2016; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Rudman, 1998), producing a double bind in which encouraged behaviors may actually hinder advancement.

When gender leadership gaps remain, the implicit conclusion is not organizational or systemic failure, but personal inadequacy. This narrative obscures the role of structural power while normalizing unequal outcomes as the result of individual choice, effort, or ability (Kelan, 2009). In this way, women's leadership programs preserve existing hierarchies while presenting themselves as progressive and empowering.

Assigning responsibility for systemic inequity to individuals perpetuates oppression by requiring those most affected to carry the burden of change (Ahmed, 2017). Rather than challenging exclusionary norms, women are expected to compensate through heightened self-monitoring, emotional labor, and adaptability, reinforcing internalized responsibility while institutional accountability remains largely unexamined (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hochschild, 1983; Vial & Cowgill, 2022).

2.4. Literature Review Summary

While gendered barriers to leadership are well documented, dominant solutions

continue to emphasize personal adjustment rather than organizational transformation. The persistent focus on individual responsibility shapes this study, which examines how women come to perceive themselves as responsible for addressing gender inequities they did not create, reflecting processes of internalized oppression and inherited culpability. Understanding these perceptions is critical when examining the persistence of leadership inequities despite widespread recognition of structural barriers.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine women's perceptions of leadership responsibility. Qualitative approaches are well-suited for exploring complex, socially embedded phenomena and for generating insight into how individuals interpret their experiences within broader cultural and institutional contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research prioritizes depth, meaning, and the identification of patterns that illuminate how social realities are constructed and sustained.

Given the nuanced and deeply personal nature of women's leadership perceptions, a qualitative design allowed for close attention to participants' beliefs, experiences, and meaning-making processes. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit rich, detailed accounts, which were analyzed thematically to identify shared patterns across narratives. This format supported an in-depth exploration of how gender norms, internalized expectations, and leadership beliefs are understood and negotiated by participants.

The study was guided by a phenomenological approach, which centers on individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate when the goal is to understand how people perceive and interpret social phenomena rather than to measure predefined variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Qutoshi, 2018). More specifically, the study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach, which seeks to capture and articulate the essence of participants' experiences as they are lived and understood, without imposing interpretive frameworks external to their accounts (Giorgi, 2009). Consistent with this approach, bracketing was employed to minimize the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions and to allow participants' descriptions to remain central to the analysis. Bracketing also enabled systematic examination of shared meanings across individual narratives while preserving the integrity of participants' perspectives.

The methodological orientation of this study is also consistent with a feminist epistemological perspective, which values women's lived experiences as legitimate and essential sources of knowledge (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Kiguwa, 2019). Feminist epistemology challenges claims of objectivity that overlook the influence of power, gender, and social positioning on knowledge production. By centering women's voices, this approach supports a more inclusive understanding of leadership and responsibility while acknowledging the structural contexts that shape

individual experience.

Critical theory served as a sensitizing framework guiding attention to power relations, institutional structures, and historical narratives shaping participants' experiences, rather than functioning as a predetermined coding schema. The phenomenological analysis prioritized participants' descriptions of lived experience, with critical theory informing contextual interpretation in later analytic stages. Additionally, the researcher's background in leadership roles provided familiarity with organizational contexts but required ongoing reflexive attention to avoid pre-conceived interpretations.

3.1. Participants and Research Setting

Participants were 15 adult women residing in the United States. Ages ranged from 25 to 54 years, representing early-career through late-career stages. Most participants (80%) were actively engaged in leadership positions at the time of the study, while the remainder expressed intentions to pursue leadership roles in the future. Participants represented diverse professional sectors, including education, healthcare, business, nonprofit organizations, and public service, and were drawn from multiple geographic regions. This diversity supported exploration of leadership perceptions across organizational contexts rather than within a single industry.

All interviews were conducted using Zoom videoconferencing, allowing participants to join from private locations of their choosing across the United States. Remote interviews enabled participation from individuals in diverse geographic regions while maintaining a consistent interview format. Participants were encouraged to select quiet, comfortable environments to support open discussion of personal perceptions and experiences. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording function and later transcribed for analysis. The virtual format provided flexibility and accessibility, which was particularly important for participants balancing professional and personal responsibilities.

3.2. Sampling Procedures and Data Collection

The recruitment process utilized purposive and snowball sampling to identify women aged 18 and older who resided in the United States and were either currently employed in leadership roles or aspiring to leadership positions. Participants were invited to share their perceptions of women's leadership, including the gender leadership gap, in the United States. Recruitment occurred through a public Facebook group titled *Dissertation Survey Exchange*. Initial contacts were encouraged to share the opportunity with other eligible women.

Individuals who expressed interest received an invitation to participate, along with an explanation of the study and the Informed Consent form. Upon agreeing to participate, each woman completed a brief screening to confirm eligibility, after which a one-on-one interview was scheduled. Participants were assigned a unique identifier to maintain confidentiality and ensure anonymity throughout the research process. Semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions

were conducted to explore participants' perceptions regarding the gender leadership gap, qualities associated with leadership, and the societal and structural factors shaping leadership opportunities for women.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed the stages of qualitative phenomenological research as outlined by Moustakas (1994), ensuring that the findings reflected the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants rather than preconceived interpretations. The process began with phenomenological reduction, a bracketing procedure in which preexisting assumptions and biases were intentionally suspended to allow participants' voices and meanings to emerge authentically. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analytic process to monitor potential bias and support faithful representation of participants' lived experiences. Although grounded theory terminology is used to describe procedural steps, the overall analytic orientation remained phenomenological and focused on identifying the essence of participants' lived experiences.

Table 1. Coding schema.

Initial Codes	Emergent Patterns
<p>Structural Context of Gender Inequity:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gender discrimination. 2. Gender inequality. 3. Occupational segregation. 4. Traditional family structure. 5. Gender roles and stereotypes. 6. Societal expectations. 	Structural gender inequality is acknowledged.
<p>Internalized Interpretations of Inequity:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internalized oppression. 2. Imposter syndrome. 3. Lack of confidence. 4. Reluctance to claim authority. 5. Minimizing achievements. 	Responsibility for gender inequality is internalized.
<p>Conditional Leadership Legitimacy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need for self-promotion. 2. Perceived need for self-improvement. 3. Need for self-awareness. 	Leadership legitimacy is constructed as conditional and earned through self-modification.
<p>Self-Regulating Behavioral Responses:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Behavioral vigilance. 2. Efforts to meet gendered expectations. 	Internalized responsibility produces self-regulating behaviors.
<p>Relational and Collective Coping Strategies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Role models/female mentors. 2. Societal expectations. 3. Sisterhood. 	Responsibility for change is distributed horizontally among women.

After interviews were transcribed, an initial round of open coding was conducted, involving line-by-line analysis and assignment of short, descriptive codes to capture essential concepts and recurring ideas expressed by participants. Once open codes were established, selective coding was conducted, during which related codes were identified and collapsed into broader categories reflecting emerging core concepts. These categories were reviewed and compared across interviews to determine relationships and patterns within participants' perceptions.

This iterative process continued until theoretical coding was employed to examine relationships among categories and identify underlying structures and themes. Throughout the coding process, constant comparison was used, including continual review of new data against previously coded material, to ensure analytic consistency. Data saturation was considered achieved when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the identified themes sufficiently reflected participants' shared experiences. These systematic procedures aligned with established qualitative research standards and reinforced the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Table 1 presents the qualitative coding schema, illustrating the relationship between initial codes derived from participant narratives and the emergent patterns that shaped the study's analytic findings.

Reliability in qualitative research is demonstrated through consistent and transparent research practices that allow others to understand how conclusions were reached (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, reliability was established by following a clearly articulated research design, utilizing a standardized semi-structured interview protocol, and applying systematic coding strategies to analyze the data. Each participant was asked the same primary interview questions, and the same interviewer conducted every interview to reduce inconsistencies attributable to variations in interviewer style or interpretation. Additionally, the study was reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure compliance with ethical standards, including the safeguarding of participants' confidentiality and the responsible reporting of findings.

Documented procedures further contributed to the dependability of the research process. Detailed notes were kept of each phase of data collection and analysis, including the coding steps, theme development, and decision-making processes, creating an audit trail that allowed the study's methodological choices to be traced and verified. Member checking was also incorporated as a reliability measure, providing participants the opportunity to review and amend their interview responses to confirm that their perceptions were accurately represented and to reduce the likelihood of researcher misinterpretation.

Finally, trustworthiness was reinforced through the study's attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Rather than prioritizing statistical validity, Lincoln and Guba's framework centers transparency, reflexivity, and methodological coherence as the foundations of trustworthy qualitative inquiry. Incorporating these established

qualitative research standards ensured that the findings were not only grounded in participants' lived experiences but also derived from a methodological process that was consistent and transparent.

4. Findings

Across the majority of participant narratives (12 of 15 participants), responsibility for addressing gender inequity was expressed as an individual obligation rather than an institutional one. Drawing on [David and Derthick's \(2014\)](#) conceptualization of internalized oppression as the adoption of dominant narratives that frame marginalized groups as deficient or lacking, participants frequently positioned themselves as the primary, and at times sole, agents responsible for correcting the gender leadership gap. While participants readily named discrimination as a significant barrier, responsibility for change was overwhelmingly located within women themselves. Explicit references to institutional accountability were notably rare. Rather than identifying systemic structures as the locus of responsibility, women described inequity in leadership as a problem requiring individual correction.

4.1. Internalized Responsibility for Gender Inequity

Responsibility for correcting the leadership gender gap was most commonly described as beginning with women's own awareness and self-understanding. A majority of participants (11 of 15) emphasized education, rights awareness, and personal insight as prerequisites for leadership advancement. As one participant explained, "Women must be aware of their rights", when asked about reducing the leadership gender gap. Participants' emphasis on women's actions as the primary driver of change suggests that participants perceived that leadership inequity is rooted in women's deficiencies, including a lack of insight and action.

Awareness was not considered inherently empowering, but as a requirement women must fulfill to move up in leadership. Seven participants suggested that gender inequity could not be addressed systemically until women first addressed perceived shortcomings. While communicated as empowerment, awareness campaigns may inadvertently function as a gatekeeping mechanism, reinforcing deficit-based assumptions about women. Although participants did not explicitly use the language of blame or guilt, their accounts reflected an underlying assumption that women bear responsibility for preventing or resolving inequity. This pattern aligns with the concept of inherited culpability, in which responsibility is transferred across generations and internalized as a normative expectation.

4.2. Leadership Legitimacy as Incongruent with Womanhood

Leadership legitimacy was consistently perceived as conditional rather than assumed. Across participant narratives (10 of 15 participants), leadership was described as something women must earn through self-improvement, vigilance, and personal transformation, in contrast with the perception that men are in-

herently leaders. Participants contrasted their own experiences with those of male colleagues, describing leadership as presumed for men but conditional for women.

Participants perceived stalled leadership progression as personal failure. Internal barriers such as imposter syndrome, lack of confidence, fear of visibility, and reluctance to claim authority were shared by nine participants. One woman stated, “I could be in the job for ten years and still feel like I don’t belong there”. Another participant shared, “I didn’t have the courage. I just wasn’t confident enough to take up the role”. Even participants with extensive work experience described ongoing self-doubt, reflecting the perception that they were not suited for leadership roles. These self-limiting beliefs reflect broader organizational and cultural messages that question women’s authority and legitimacy in leadership roles.

4.3. Individual Versus Systemic Solutions

Participants frequently emphasized individual grit, perseverance, and determination as primary mechanisms for overcoming inequity. A majority of participants (11 of 15) perceived leadership advancement as effort-based rather than structure-dependent. Statements emphasizing persistence, such as “It’s all about determination”, shared by one participant, reflected a belief that individual resolve was sufficient to counter discrimination and systemic barriers.

Although structural constraints were acknowledged by eight participants, solutions were overwhelmingly located in individual effort rather than organizational change. Confidence and self-advocacy were similarly perceived as essential solutions. Nine participants emphasized the need for women to speak up, self-promote, and assert competence. However, these narratives also revealed awareness of risk. Six participants described fear of judgment, concern about backlash, or reluctance to claim authority due to potential social penalties. One participant captured this tension by explaining, “You have to be confident, but not too confident”. There was recognition by participants of the constant work women have to undertake in order to navigate barriers, and at the same time, the solutions for reducing the leadership gender gap all rested on women’s responsibility to compensate for institutionalized inequities.

4.4. Horizontal Responsibility

Collective responsibility for addressing inequity was acknowledged primarily in relation to other women. Eight participants emphasized mentoring, supporting, or serving as role models for women and girls as pathways toward greater equity. When asked about what it would take to improve gender equity in leadership, one participant stated, “It will take women standing up for other women. We need to be good role models for young women”. Responsibility for change was distributed horizontally among women rather than vertically. Notably, only two participants explicitly identified organizational leadership or institutions as primarily responsible for correcting leadership gender inequity. Changes or expectations directed

toward senior leadership and formal power structures were largely absent from participants' proposed solutions, even when discrimination was explicitly described. This absence of vertical accountability suggests that women believe they are expected to drive change within systems that do not grant them the necessary power and authority.

4.5. Findings Summary

The findings reveal that responsibility for gender inequity is internalized among women in ways that reflect inherited culpability, a culturally transmitted sense of moral obligation that precedes personal action. Participants' emphasis on self-correction, vigilance, and responsibility demonstrates experiences of internalized oppression through which externally imposed expectations become self-regulating beliefs. Solutions to the leadership gender gap were overwhelmingly expressed in terms of personal transformation, including self-awareness, perseverance, confidence, and self-improvement, rather than institutional accountability or systemic reform. Leadership legitimacy was perceived as conditional, not inherent, requiring women to remediate perceived deficiencies before claiming authority. Even collective responsibility was articulated horizontally through mentoring and supporting other women, rather than vertically toward those with formal authority or control. Inequity was perceived not as a failure of systems but as something women are obligated to remedy, reproducing inherited patterns of responsibility that sustain rather than disrupt existing power structures.

5. Implications and Potential Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study relied on self-reported data collected through interviews, which may be subject to social desirability, recall, and self-selection biases. Participants who chose to engage may have held particularly salient views about gender and leadership responsibility, potentially limiting representativeness. Recruitment through a public Facebook group may have further introduced selection bias, constraining the generalizability of the findings.

Methodologically, the use of virtual interviews may have shaped participant responses, as the absence of in-person interaction and nonverbal cues can influence disclosure and conversational dynamics. Although qualitative analysis software supported systematic coding, interpretation necessarily involved researcher judgment, introducing the possibility of analytic subjectivity. Finally, the broad participant requirements may have limited the study's ability to capture more nuanced variations in women's experiences across specific organizational or demographic contexts.

Despite these limitations, the findings demonstrate the importance of examining women's internalized sense of responsibility within leadership contexts influenced by enduring gendered expectations. Future research could further investigate how socialized gender roles and messages from the family of origin influence

women's perceptions of leadership suitability, responsibility, and self-evaluation, particularly as these perceptions relate to leadership aspirations and persistence. This research focus could also provide valuable insights into inherited culpability and how this is communicated through generations. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable for examining how internalized beliefs evolve over time and how they shape career decision-making across life stages.

Additional research is encouraged to examine how organizational cultures reinforce or disrupt gendered responsibility norms. The findings indicate that structural barriers are recognized, but women internalize responsibility to overcome systemic inequities. Addressing the leadership gender gap therefore requires attention not only to institutionalized discrimination but also to the processes through which responsibility becomes personalized and self-regulating. Organizational reforms may help disrupt patterns of internalized oppression and inherited culpability, subsequently reducing the expectation that women must compensate for inequity through individual effort.

Finally, future studies should consider intersectional approaches that examine how gendered responsibility interacts with other social identities, understanding women's leadership experiences across diverse contexts. Women from marginalized racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and disability backgrounds may encounter distinct expectations regarding responsibility, authority, and moral conduct, which can intensify or alter patterns of internalized obligation. Intersectional analyses could clarify how inherited narratives of culpability are differentially transmitted, reinforced, or resisted. Such work would deepen understanding of how responsibility for inequity is not only gendered but also shaped by overlapping systems of power that affect access to leadership and perceptions of legitimacy.

6. Summary

Findings from this study suggest that women navigate leadership within a cultural context shaped by enduring narratives that associate womanhood with blame, responsibility, and moral obligation. This inheritance positions women as both accountable for the persistence of gender inequity and responsible for its resolution, often requiring continual self-correction and adaptation. When inequity is interpreted as a problem women must address through personal effort, institutional systems remain insulated from accountability, allowing patterns of oppression to be reproduced rather than dismantled. The findings indicate that until responsibility is redirected from individual women to the institutional structures that promote and sustain oppression and discrimination, gender inequity will continue to operate as a self-perpetuating paradox in which women are positioned as both its cause and its cure.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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