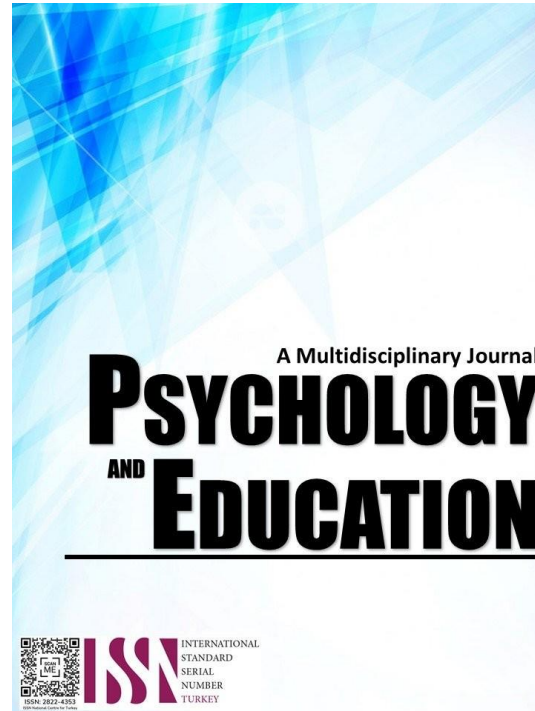


# KEY FACTORS ENABLING WOMEN IN ADVANCED LEADERSHIP POSITIONS TO CREATE AND ACCELERATE CAREER OPPORTUNITIES



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## Key Factors Enabling Women in Advanced Leadership Positions to Create and Accelerate Career Opportunities

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### Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the key factors enabling women in advanced leadership positions at Central Mindanao University (CMU) to create and accelerate career opportunities. It investigates the elements shaping their career trajectories, emphasizing the pivotal role of educational attainment, particularly doctoral degrees, in advancing women into leadership roles. The research highlights the importance of academic distinctions and a strong commitment to service as critical motivators for women to embrace leadership roles despite initial hesitations. The study delves into the expected behaviors and qualities of leaders in higher education, emphasizing attributes vital for fostering academic excellence and inclusivity. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research examines the lived experiences of women leaders at CMU. Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected women in leadership roles provide in-depth insights into their experiences, perspectives, and challenges. Thematic analysis reveals recurring patterns, themes, and nuances, offering a comprehensive understanding of women's leadership trajectories. Leadership roles present opportunities for both professional and personal development, yet biases and systemic barriers persist, perpetuating gender disparities. Environmental factors, such as organizational culture, significantly influence leadership behaviors, necessitating adaptive strategies. Institutional support systems, including mentorship initiatives, foster effective leadership. The diverse experiences of participants underscore the complexity of women's leadership journeys, offering valuable insights for aspiring leaders. Addressing biases, promoting equitable opportunities, and creating supportive environments can pave the way for gender equality at CMU and similar institutions. Embracing inclusive practices can empower CMU to champion gender diversity and equity in higher education.

**Keywords:** *women's leadership, women in higher education, gender equality, academician women, women's empowerment*

### Introduction

Leadership in higher education is a complex and multifaceted issue requiring careful attention to the needs and interests of all stakeholders. The role of women in leadership positions has become an increasingly important topic, especially within developing countries like the Philippines. Despite significant progress toward gender equality over recent decades, women still face unique challenges and obstacles in achieving leadership roles within higher education.

While there has been some initial optimism regarding gender equality progress in Philippine society, significant disparities persist in access to power and authority within higher education contexts (Magsanoc-Alikpala & Salazar-Clemena, 2015). These issues arise from both explicit discrimination and subtle biases against female candidates for leadership positions. For instance, research suggests that well-intentioned hiring committees may unconsciously favor male applicants over equally qualified females when deciding on promotions or job offers (de la Cruz et al., 2020). Additionally, many hold ingrained stereotypes about effective leadership behavior, often equating such traits with traditionally masculine qualities like assertiveness or competitiveness (De los Reyes & Wong, 2019). These biases are difficult for individual women to overcome without concerted efforts from society.

This study explores the key factors enabling women in advanced leadership positions within higher education to create and accelerate career opportunities. It focuses on contemporary colleges and universities where women advance their careers more than in traditional settings. It investigates how these women define and measure leadership skills within modern higher education institutions. The literature review analyzes environmental factors and beliefs associated with successful leadership, aiming to reshape the definition of effective leadership and the role of women leaders in this domain. Furthermore, it examines how their progress can be bolstered beyond current educational settings, pinpointing academic environments that facilitate advanced leadership prospects and professional development for women. Such settings provide equal opportunities for career advancement, prompting an investigation into why these institutions are more successful in promoting female leaders.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

Phenomenological research is a type of qualitative research that focuses on identifying the common elements of an experience within a specific group. This research design aims to provide a detailed description or illustration of the nature of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2017) and an in-depth account of participants' personal experiences of an event or phenomenon.

Phenomenological approaches have gained significant attention and usage in qualitative research, reflecting their relevance in exploring the essence of human experiences. Scholars have embraced the phenomenological framework, drawing on its philosophical underpinnings to investigate various phenomena across disciplines. For example, psychologists have used phenomenological methods to explore individuals' experiences of mental health disorders, therapeutic interventions, and personal growth (Jones et al., 2017). These studies emphasize the subjective realities of individuals, highlighting the nuances and complexities of psychological phenomena.

In healthcare, phenomenological research has informed patient-centered care approaches by exploring patients' illness experiences, treatment preferences, and healthcare interactions (Smith et al., 2019). By adopting a phenomenological lens, healthcare practitioners gain insights into the unique perspectives of patients, leading to more empathetic and effective care delivery. Furthermore, phenomenological studies in education have explored students' learning experiences, teacher-student interactions, and educational practices (Brown & Thomas, 2018). These inquiries shed light on the subjective aspects of the educational process, informing pedagogical approaches and curriculum development.

Phenomenological research has also illuminated social phenomena, cultural practices, and identity formation processes across sociology and anthropology (Garcia & Martinez, 2020). By focusing on individuals' lived experiences within sociocultural contexts, these studies deepen our understanding of societal dynamics and cultural phenomena. Additionally, phenomenological approaches have been instrumental in exploring existential themes, spirituality, and the human condition (Smith & Johnson, 2016). Such inquiries delve into fundamental aspects of human existence, offering profound insights into the subjective dimensions of life.

Methodologically, phenomenological studies between 2015 and 2021 have used various techniques to capture and analyze lived experiences. Interviews, participant observation, and reflective journaling are standard methods to explore participants' subjective realities (Lee & Park, 2017). Data analysis in phenomenological research involves iterative coding, clustering themes, and identifying patterns to elucidate the phenomenon's essence under investigation (Chen & Boore, 2018). As phenomenological inquiry has developed, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of methodological rigor, employing strategies such as bracketing preconceptions, triangulating data sources, and member checking to enhance the reliability of their findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2019).

Despite phenomenological research's strengths, scholars have also faced methodological challenges and ethical considerations. Some challenges encountered in phenomenological inquiry include subjectivity of interpretation, researcher bias, and participant self-reflection (Brown & Thomas, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to methodological transparency, reflexivity, and ethical conduct throughout the research process. Ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participant vulnerability is essential in conducting ethical phenomenological research (Garcia & Martinez, 2020).

The qualitative research approach allows us to explore subjective experiences and perspectives, providing new interpretations and meanings that inform our understanding of experiences and the contexts in which they occur. The study employed the phenomenological research approach to comprehend the professional experiences of leaders in online higher education, both familiar and divergent. This approach facilitated the identification of the underlying factors contributing to these experiences and the shared beliefs among the participants. It also enabled the researchers to scrutinize and interpret these shared experiences while addressing the research questions stated in the study.

## Participants

This study involved interviews with female leaders at CMU, including deans, associate deans, academic program chairs, and directors who hold middle to upper-level leadership positions. The initial research identified twenty (20) potential female leaders at CMU, from which the participants were purposively sampled. These interviews occurred in CMU, University Town, Musuan, Maramag, and Bukidnon. They included a diverse representation of female leaders who have held the Dean, program chair, or director position for at least five years. Potential participants were personally approached to identify their interest in participating in the interviews. During the interviews, questions were asked regarding mentoring, coaching, career advancement opportunities, and the number of women currently in advanced leadership positions at their current educational institution to examine the scope of this issue and its significance. Additionally, focused group discussions (FGD) were conducted in this study to ensure validity and reliability by cross-referencing the participants' responses.

## Instrument

The participants in the research study were approached personally with a description of the study and a brief questionnaire. Once 20 eligible participants were identified and consented to participate in the survey, interviews were scheduled. The research questions were sent to the participants two days before the interview. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded with the participants' permission.

All data collected were kept confidential, transcribed, and coded for analysis. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Have biases and stereotypes affected your definition of leadership?
2. Can you give me an example of how male leaders' career trajectory differs from female leaders?
3. Considering your career experience, do you believe environment and setting influence leadership definitions?

## Procedure

The researcher began the process by obtaining permission from the Dean of the School of Teacher Education, Dr. Ma. Fe D. Opina, at Liceo de Cagayan University. After receiving approval from the Dean, the necessary documents were submitted to the Liceo de Cagayan University Research Ethics Board Committee (LREB) for research ethical review. Then, a formal request letter was sent to the University President of Central Mindanao University, Dr. Rolito G. Eballe, in Musuan, Dologon, Maramag, Bukidnon, seeking authorization for the study to proceed. Once the necessary approvals were obtained, the researcher obtained consent from the participants by providing them with a consent form, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose, procedures, and rights before their involvement.

The data collection process for this study was carefully designed to ensure efficiency, accuracy, and ethical integrity. It began with the initial contact of potential participants through email and Facebook Messenger, where a study description and a brief questionnaire were provided to assess eligibility and interest. Once participants responded and were confirmed eligible, their consent was obtained before scheduling the interviews. Participants received the research questions beforehand to prepare adequately, facilitating productive discussions during the in-person interviews, expected to last between 30 and 40 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded to capture responses while maintaining confidentiality accurately.

After the interviews, all recorded data were transcribed, converting spoken language into written text to facilitate systematic analysis. This transcribed content underwent coding, categorizing, and organizing responses based on emerging themes or patterns. To achieve the research objectives, interview questions were designed to gain in-depth insight into participants' career paths, leadership experiences, and perspectives on higher education leadership.

This study focused on women who hold leadership positions in higher education. The study aimed to gain valuable perspectives into the challenges and triumphs experienced by women in leadership roles in this sector. Participants were free to withdraw from the study without providing a reason, ensuring the ethical principle was upheld throughout the study.

Transparency was maintained throughout the research process by disclosing the researcher's background, objectives, and potential conflicts of interest. Privacy and confidentiality were strictly protected, with all data anonymized, securely stored, and accessible only to the research team. Participants' pseudonyms were used to safeguard privacy further and encourage the authentic sharing of experiences.

The recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling, which targeted women in prominent leadership positions in higher education. During the initial contact, the study's purpose, potential benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. Participants were informed about the available support services, and initiatives were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The study aimed to positively contribute to the academic community and beyond, with the recognition of its broader community and societal impact.

Finally, research findings will be disseminated responsibly through academic publications, conferences, and other relevant platforms, with due consideration for privacy and confidentiality. Open access to the research will be considered to maximize the impact and accessibility of the findings, ensuring the ethical conduct and integrity of the study.

## Data Analysis

This research study utilized interviews to explore the problem of practice and answer research questions. The study involved recording interviews with twenty female leaders to investigate the prevalence of leadership opportunities for women in higher education environments in Northern Mindanao. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify common themes and environmental characteristics.

A phenomenological qualitative research design was used to incorporate various perspectives and provide insight into the evolution of the problem of practice. The design also included a diverse selection of participants representing numerous higher education environments and similar professional leadership levels within the field. After analyzing the participants' responses, the study produced comprehensive findings on the barriers and opportunities women face when striving for advanced leadership positions at both macro and micro levels.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was also employed to cross-reference the participants' responses. This approach, coupled with a multitiered coding system of data, led to comprehensive findings that supported the significance of the study and highlighted the alternative practices, policies, and institutional structures of contemporary higher education institutions. If initiated and adopted, these practices may eventually create and support many more advanced leadership career trajectories for female administrators.

## Ethical Considerations

Participants' consents were obtained before interviews were conducted, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher ensured they avoided deceptive practices and managed their biases during interviews. They also took care to code and analyze transcripts objectively. The researcher and adviser addressed these issues through ongoing review and

dialogue.

All recordings, transcriptions, coding notes, and participants' information were kept confidential on a password-protected computer. The researcher used language that was easy for participants to understand and gave each participant an overview of the study's purpose. We obtained consent forms from all participants before the interviews to ensure voluntary participation. The interviews were recorded individually for accuracy. Participants could opt out at any point, and no questions were mandatory. An informed consent form was developed that stated participants' rights and agreement to participate, along with an acknowledgment that their rights are protected. The researcher informed participants that the study posed no harm to them. Individual participants were notified that they would not receive any direct benefits from the study.

## Results and Discussion

The study's results are presented, examined, and interpreted in this chapter, along with a discussion. The presentation of the findings was founded on the ordered presentation of the study's problem statement and was evaluated and analyzed using the procedures that were determined to be necessary.

The first part narrates trailblazing women's leadership development and opportunities at contemporary higher education institutions. The second part identifies the factors that accelerated the career trajectory of women in advanced leadership positions. The third part describes trailblazing women's institutional culture and norms and their advancement opportunities in their current academic institutions.

### Sampling Framework

The study involved 20 participants chosen using a purposive sampling procedure. They were all women leaders holding different designations in Central Mindanao University. They are also selected based on the abovementioned inclusion criteria: having at least five years of leadership experience in higher education. Table 1 represents a summary of the participants' demographic profiles. Code names were given for confidentiality and anonymity purposes.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Profile*

<i>Code Name</i>	<i>Leadership Roles</i>	<i>Years of Higher Education Leadership Experience</i>
Participant 1	Chairperson	15
Participant 2	Director	27
Participant 3	Chairperson	28
Participant 4	Chairperson	29
Participant 5	Chairperson	28
Participant 6	Director	27
Participant 7	Dean	24
Participant 8	Director	25
Participant 9	Director	20
Participant 10	Dean	29
Participant 11	Chairperson	20
Participant 12	Dean	28
Participant 13	Chairperson	17
Participant 14	Director	28
Participant 15	Dean	19
Participant 16	Director	20
Participant 17	Dean	18
Participant 18	Director	20
Participant 19	Director	26
Participant 20	Chairperson	29

One-on-one interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted to comprehensively extrapolate the essence of their challenges and triumphs. This was done by identifying common themes and trends from the participants' narratives. The succeeding paragraphs illustrate the gathered answers to the statement of the problems identified in the study.

**Biases and Stereotypes Impacting Women Leaders:** Table 2 presents the core theme, sub-themes, and codes of biases and stereotypes that changed how participants define leadership in CMU. Some women leaders in CMU are perceived as deficient due to certain biases and stereotypes, such as maternal roles and less efficient leadership capacities. Even the former Director of the University Center of Gender and Development, Participant 7, attested that despite their relentless efforts to raise awareness of gender equality, stereotypes about women seemed to remain persistent. Although she did not directly experience these gender biases, she reported based on her observation that there are still some people who perceive women as deficient due to what she calls 'maternal roles,' which in one way or another obstruct their career advancement and leadership development. This perfectly illustrates the narratives of Participant 6, Director of the International Relations Office, who posits that:

Table 2. *Biases and Stereotypes that Changed How Participants Define Leadership*

<i>Core Theme</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>
1. Biases and Stereotypes Impacting Women Leaders in Central Mindanao University	1. Perceived Deficiency Due to Maternal Roles 2. Negative Assumptions Regarding Leadership Abilities 3. Preference for Male Leadership 4. Campus Politics and Unfair Treatment 5. Backer System and Traditional Leadership 6. Positive Experiences and Efforts for Inclusion	1. Perceived Deficiency Due to Maternal Roles 2. Negative Assumptions Regarding Leadership Abilities 3. Preference for Male Leadership 4. Campus Politics and Unfair Treatment 5. Backer System and Traditional Leadership 6. Positive Experiences and Efforts for Inclusion

“Because I am a woman, the topmost leaders sometimes limited my access to significant opportunities fundamental for my career growth. For example, they would rather not choose me to be sent to certain training and seminars because they think my maternal responsibilities at home may impede my performance.”

Participant 6 went on by restating the exact presumptions of her superiors, such as the line, “Ay, dili nato ni siya mapadala kay naa na siya’y bana, mananghid pa na, naa pa pud na siyay mga anak.” (We can’t send her [to trainings and seminars] because she has a husband. She still has to ask permission. She also has children.). This illustrates the emerging biases and stereotypes that limit women’s professional development. Some leaders assume that maternal roles restrain women from their leadership functions, perceiving them as deficient leaders. She also reported that several female faculty members from different universities, not just in CMU, cannot pursue higher degrees or leadership roles at an early age due to maternal expectations as a mother and a wife. “Women tend to have delayed career trajectories compared to men,” she argued.

Other stereotypes the participants encounter include negative assumptions regarding their decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership abilities. Participant 6 admitted that she was insulted when others would say she is a fickle-minded leader, akin to what Participant 7 calls “papaling-paling ang desisyon,” which means being indecisive and uncertain. Reminiscing her past, Participant 10 said, “They don’t believe in my abilities,” which is in stark resemblance with Participant 13, Chairperson of the PE Department, who illustrated that:

“During evaluations like ISO, they don’t want someone from our department to be picked because they think our department is not that competent. However, when the evaluations were done, our papers were complete, the evaluators did not ask anything, and the information we prepared was enough. That was the only time that we were appreciated. We were able to show that we could do what they could.”

Contrarily, Participant 10 slightly disagreed with Participant 13 because, in her case, they did not receive any appreciation even if she and her subordinates performed well. “They won’t even say anything. They will keep silent if you have accomplishments,” she said. She went on by saying, “Once they know that you are from our department, they underestimate your abilities; they have so many negative things to say.” Participant 14 also ascertained that:

“Some activities are relegated to men because they are believed to be equipped with certain skills and capabilities in doing a particular function, which women do not possess. And women are relegated to something that most probably fits their gender.”

Participant 9 expounded on Participant 14’s argument that these perceived skills and capabilities of men engulf biases such as men being more authoritative than women. She said, “I can see that they would prefer males to females for higher positions probably because they see males as more authoritative. People would listen to them more than females in terms of commands.” This could be evident in the number of women presidents in CMU, for Participant 12. She stated, “If you count the number of male and female presidents of the university, of course, we only have one so far the rest are men,” supporting Participant 9’s observation on the preference of men to lead in the university rather than women.

Another common concern based on the participants’ narratives is the notion they call “campus politics,” especially in terms of office assignments, promotions, and issuance of items. Participant 9, Participant 2, and Participant 10 to mention but a few admitted that they have encountered unfair distribution of opportunities. “There are biases in the positions assigned to people in the university,” said Participant 14. As Participant 9 stated:

“When I had just started as a teacher, I was so blind with this campus politics, but lately I have realized it really exists. Some leaders do not stick to the rules, and some use their power to gain their interests. For example, they want to issue a certain position without due process.”

Participant 2 also admitted that she was twice a victim of this bias promotion issuance. As she said:

“Supposedly, I should have reached a much higher level with my item earlier if they had properly issued out the position. There were still so many tears and heartaches before I got my item. There are cases when your superiors get jealous of you. They are afraid that



you will outperform them.”

Moreover, Participant 9 also shared that there was an incident when someone from the higher office attempted to defame her, spreading rumors that affected her professional reputation. She goes on by saying:

“I really experienced dirty campus politics. They intend to obtain a higher position just to defame or destroy my name. Fortunately, those higher agencies don’t have this dirty politics, only here in CMU. They may have destroyed somebody else’s name, but they did not succeed in my case.”

Participant 10 also asserted that most SUCs are political. There is biased manipulation of power by some higher officials due to their greed and self-interests. As she stated:

“Actually, there are so many faculty who have great potential. However, the higher-ups would only promote and designate those people close to them. So, the bias there is not solely on the basis of gender but on the relationship between parties.”

Participant 10’s narrative boils down to Participant 3’s argument regarding the “backer system” as a form of traditional leadership. As she put it:

“There is this so-called traditional kind of leadership, like the backer system, where there are streamlines, so many crossing the system. Traditional leaders are not being fair because they just follow what they’re used to; they only adhere to the usual ones without necessarily considering who qualifies and who deserves the most.”

On a positive note, other participants acclaimed that they did not encounter any bias or stereotypes in the workplace. Participant 1 justified that this can be attributed to her confrontational personality, admonishing others from stepping on her professional rights and personal values. With regards to Participant 12’s argument on having only one female university president as a subtle sign of bias preference of men leaders, Participant 8 threw her humble justification that:

“It seems to me that there is always a fairground. Both men and women have equal chances of holding leadership positions. Yes, there’s very few women leaders in the higher levels like the president, but if you check the directors and the deans, there seem to be an equal number. Both genders are represented equally.”

Participant 1 also reiterated that although they have not been personally affected by emerging biases and stereotypes like their co-participants did, it is crucial to recognize that these can still influence organizational cultures and perceptions of leadership. Awareness of these potential influences and actively promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive environment for all individuals in leadership roles.

In conclusion, the narratives presented in Table 5 highlight the significant and pervasive impact of biases and stereotypes on women leaders within Central Mindanao University (CMU). Despite ongoing initiatives to promote gender equality and diversity, participants continue to experience biases that undermine the advancement and recognition of women in leadership roles.

These findings align with the study by Carola, Leicht, Georgina, Randsley de Moura, Richard J., and Crisp (2014), titled *Contesting Gender Stereotypes Stimulates Generalized Fairness in the Selection of Leaders*. Their research demonstrated that exposure to counter-stereotypic gender role models diminishes reliance on stereotypes when selecting leaders, ultimately promoting fairness and challenging preconceived biases regarding leadership abilities.

Thus, CMU’s context reflects broader academic challenges, reinforcing the need for continuous efforts to counter stereotypes. The insights from the study suggest that by actively contesting and showcasing alternative gender leadership models, institutions like CMU can foster a fairer, more equitable selection process that values women leaders’ contributions based on merit rather than biased perceptions.

Table 3. *Difference between Men and Women Leaders’ Career Trajectories*

<i>Core Theme</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>
1. Gender Disparities in Career Trajectories and Leadership Development	1. Gendered Career Trajectories 2. Work-Life Balance Challenges 3. Domestic Responsibilities	1. Career Development Disparity 2. Holistic life struggles 3. Domestic Responsibilities Impact 4. Systemic Barriers and Biases

Gender Disparities in Career Trajectories and Leadership Development: Table 3 presents the core theme, sub-themes, and codes of difference between men and women leaders’ career trajectories. Participants believed that there is a difference in career trajectories between men and women leaders. In-depth extrapolation of emerging themes- based on their narratives revealed that according to their personal experience and observations in the workplace, most women tend to have a relatively slower pace of development in comparison with men leaders. Participant 1 suggested that female leaders often face greater challenges in achieving work-life balance compared to male leaders, particularly due to societal expectations around caregiving responsibilities and gender norms. Balancing career advancement with family responsibilities can be particularly challenging for women, impacting their ability to pursue leadership

roles or advance in their careers at the same pace as their male counterparts. As Participant 6 put it:

“Most female leaders have late development in their careers and leadership roles because they get married after graduation, bear children, and focus on their families. It would never be easy for them to advance their careers and handle bigger leadership responsibilities at the expense of setting aside their families and children. Unlike women, men can start their career and leadership development at an early age because they are not the ones running the household. Women can only start advancing when their children can be left at home already. Thus, at the very beginning of their professional journeys, men and women really differ in terms of development pace. But we cannot blame women who chose their family over career because family matters the most after all.”

Recapitulating Participant 6’s lines, Participant 7 highlighted the so-called domestic responsibilities of women as the stark reason for women’s delayed career trajectories. She said:

“As you can see, many of our leaders are men, and primarily because they are spared from domestic responsibilities. Although we recognize that there are women leaders who are going straight with their career trajectory, in general, they can continue only when they are spared from household concerns and responsibilities. In other words, while men continue to grow up, women tend to get delayed.”

Participant 7 also noted that according to their previous study regarding women leaders, women with outstanding leadership journeys were mostly widowed and separated, which directly implies that lesser domestic roles are a factor of their career development. In the same token, Participant 9 also said that:

“For males with full-time wives, it’s easy for them to continue their leadership career and pursue higher positions. But for women with children, we have to think twice, unless your children are already grown-ups, because women are more hands-on with the children, while males depend on the women. So, they have no limit as to what position they will get. But for me, I have to think of my children. Sometimes, not just my children but my own health. Probably, males could withstand more stress with females because we also think of our homes and our children.”

On the other hand, Participant 14 has a different take on women’s slower development. She firmly believes that the principal reason is not only women’s domestic responsibilities but also emerging gender-based biases and inequalities. She went on by pointing out that:

“I think it has something to do with the way leaders treat their female subordinates. When we say career trajectory, males are most voted or favored in terms of occupation and salary. Since women have other personal circumstances like giving birth and tending their children, their roles are different from men’s. They have limited opportunities in the workplace and the salary they receive compared to men. There are biases in assigning duties and responsibilities.”

This goes hand in hand with Participant 1’s contention that male leaders are often overrepresented in senior leadership positions across various industries compared to female leaders. This imbalance can be attributed to systemic barriers, gender biases in hiring and promotion processes, and societal expectations about gender roles in leadership.

The narratives presented in Table 6 highlight the gender disparities in career trajectories and leadership development experienced by women leaders in Central Mindanao University (CMU). Participants unanimously recognized that women often face slower career advancement compared to their male counterparts, primarily due to societal expectations and gender norms surrounding caregiving responsibilities.

One of the key factors contributing to women’s delayed career trajectories is the burden of domestic responsibilities, particularly around caregiving and familial duties. Women leaders often find themselves having to balance career advancement with family commitments, such as raising children and managing household tasks. As Participant 6 eloquently described, women may delay their career development to prioritize their families, which can hinder their ability to pursue leadership roles at the same pace as men.

Moreover, participants highlighted the differential treatment of men and women in the workplace, particularly in terms of opportunities for career advancement and salary considerations. Women leaders expressed concerns about biases and inequalities in assigning duties and responsibilities and disparities in occupational roles and compensation compared to their male counterparts. Participant 14 emphasized that gender-based biases and systemic barriers contribute to women’s slower development in leadership roles, perpetuating disparities in career trajectories.

Furthermore, participants noted that men are often overrepresented in senior leadership positions across various industries, reflecting systemic biases in hiring and promotion processes. This imbalance underscores the need for proactive measures to address gender disparities and promote equity in leadership development. Participant 1 highlighted the importance of recognizing and challenging gender biases in organizational cultures and advocating for equal opportunities for women in leadership positions.

In conclusion, the narratives provided by participants underscore the intricate interaction between societal expectations, gender norms, and systemic biases that influence women’s career paths and leadership development. These findings highlight women’s ongoing challenges in higher education leadership, emphasizing the need to challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and cultivate environments that actively support women’s advancement.

Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive and proactive strategies, fostering institutional changes that empower women to

succeed in leadership roles. Central Mindanao University (CMU) must continue to play a vital role in creating an equitable and inclusive academic environment.

This research aligns with the findings of Liuwei, Bao, and Boya Yuan (2024), in their study titled *The Narratives of Chinese Women Academics: Exploring Gendered Career Trajectories for Those Who Are Not Leaders*. They similarly found that men in academia tend to hold more administrative roles, advancing their careers. At the same time, women often face the dual burden of professional obligations and family responsibilities, which hinders their leadership progression in Chinese universities.

Thus, both studies illustrate the shared global challenge of gender inequity in academia, calling for sustained efforts to dismantle barriers to women's leadership.

Table 4. *Environment and Setting Factors Influencing Leadership Definitions*

<i>Core Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>
1. The Influence of Work Environment and Setting on Leadership Definitions	1. Organizational Culture and Academic Norms 2. Academic Standards and Expectations 3. Assessment of Organizational Culture	1. Adaptation to Varied Environments 2. Challenges and Opportunities 3. Institutional Support Systems

The Influence of Work Environment and Setting on Leadership Definitions: Table 4 presents the core theme, sub-themes, and codes of Environment and Work Setting Factors Influencing Leadership Definitions. Leadership definitions are directly and indirectly sculpted by work environment and setting factors. The study revealed that the participants' leadership styles, approaches, and behaviors are shaped by other organizational cultures, working values, and academic norms of their institution. "When the environment requires you to become strict, do not tolerate people. If it requires you to be productive, then be productive as a leader," said Participant 14. As Participant 1 explained:

"As the Language Education Department Chairperson, I believe that environment and setting can significantly influence how leadership is defined and perceived. The culture, values, and norms of the academic department and the broader institutional context shape expectations and behaviors associated with leadership roles."

The academic standards and the ideals of excellence that the institution upholds configure how leaders should deliver their functions effectively. For instance, Participant 12 stated that there should also be promptness in the delivery of the leaders' function to meet the university's work requirements. Conforming to the academic demands of CMU, Participant 4 admitted that leaders are bound to cover and perform four key areas: instruction, research, extension, and production. "It is one of the mandates of CMU that you should do research and extension studies as a leader. I never expected that I would be able to immerse myself in these areas because I want to become a plain teacher," said Participant 4. "An excellent leader has performed those key four areas in the university," she added.

Furthermore, leadership is not something that exists in a vacuum, as there are few variables that affect its definitions, according to Participant 7. She pointed out that a leader is not alone in leading him/herself. S/he has to assess the organizational culture because it is fundamental in determining how to lead people with diverse backgrounds and personalities. She added that:

"Leading is like an onstage performance. You should know your audience first. Here in the College of Arts and Sciences, I have noticed that people here are vocal and intelligent. As the dean, I execute my leadership by always considering them as individuals, their goals, aspirations, and concerns. So, it's very important that leaders have been part of the organization for quite some time before they take office so that they know the kind of social environment there is."

Participant 5 agreed with Participant 7 on the heterogeneous backgrounds of the workforce behind the College of Arts and Sciences. She said, "Know your clientele. As a leader, I have diverse kinds of subordinates. Some have higher units. Most are faculty members, there are staff, etc. You must adjust your leadership to cater to them all based on their needs. My leadership style depends on whom I was exposed to." For Participant 9, leadership is about being able to cope with any environment; it is more on how they would adjust to the situation. On the same token, Participant 10 illustrated how she modifies her approach to people with varying backgrounds by drawing on generational differences. She went on by saying:

"I always examine the environment before I exercise my leadership. I lead the younger ones differently from the older generation because there is a huge gap between them. The younger ones do not have much process in doing things; they don't think as much as the older members. Now, if you treat them all similarly, conflicts and misunderstandings will likely arise. So, you have to cater to this difference and be able to deal with it effectively."

Participant 13 also ascertained that adjusting to the work setting prevents barriers between the leader and her subordinates, creating a harmonious relationship between workmates.

Moreover, challenges and opportunities also shape the leadership skills and strategies of the participants. Participant 1 mentioned that as the Language Education Department chair, matters like diverse student populations, interdisciplinary collaborations, or budget constraints may require different leadership skills and approaches. "As such, effective leadership in the LED must be contextually responsive, adaptable, and reflective of the unique dynamics and needs of the departmental environment," she said. Challenges like

conflicting perspectives between parties or offices also made Participant 8 realize that leadership is not always on top. Subordination is necessary to avoid clamors. As she put it:

“As a middle manager, I also have my own perspectives and opinions. But it would always be subordinate to who is holding the highest power. They would always have the final decision. If you are a middle manager, one thing that you should possess is subordination to your higher leaders. But subordination doesn’t mean we always say yes. We can also decline and disagree. So, suppose ever things would go wrong because our perspective was not followed, which is supposed to be the right one. In that case, I believe that I am no longer responsible and accountable with it because I have warned them already that there are repercussions. As long as I have already stated my cause and my case, I am already cleared out from the accountability and responsibility, they have no right to blame me. They would now fall on the higher leader who made the final decision.”

On the other hand, Participant 3 emphasized how institutional support systems impact leadership definitions. She believed that prolific leadership is directly influenced by the contributions and assistance of the administration. As she conveyed it:

“Leadership is something that becomes prolific and productive when the environment, the administration in general, is also being generous to its middle administrators just like me. Leadership might be weakened if the environment is not giving many opportunities for the betterment of the many. If the environment is supportive, generous, and concerned about the advancement of a certain unit, and also for the leader, I think, that would be of great influence.”

The narratives presented in Table 7 illuminate the profound influence of work environment and setting factors on the definitions and perceptions of leadership among participants in Central Mindanao University (CMU). Participants shared insights into how organizational culture, academic norms, and institutional contexts shape leadership styles, approaches, and behaviors.

One of the key themes that emerged from the narratives is the significance of the academic environment in defining leadership expectations and roles. Participants highlighted the importance of adhering to academic standards and institutional mandates, such as the emphasis on excellence in instruction, research, extension, and production. The academic demands of CMU influence how leaders are expected to fulfill their responsibilities and contribute to the institution's goals, underscoring the role of the broader organizational culture in shaping leadership definitions.

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of understanding and adapting to the specific dynamics of the work environment, including the diverse backgrounds and personalities of colleagues and subordinates. Effective leadership requires a nuanced understanding of the organizational culture and the needs of individuals within it. Leaders must be able to adjust their leadership styles and approaches based on the unique characteristics of their workforce, fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment.

Additionally, challenges and opportunities within the work setting play a significant role in shaping leadership skills and strategies. Participants highlighted the importance of contextually responsive leadership, which involves adapting to challenges such as diverse student populations, budget constraints, and conflicting perspectives. Leaders must be able to navigate complex situations and make informed decisions that reflect the unique dynamics of their department or unit.

Furthermore, institutional support systems were identified as crucial factors influencing leadership definitions. Participants emphasized the importance of supportive environments and generous opportunities for professional development and advancement. Institutional support enables leaders to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the organization, reinforcing that effective leadership is contingent upon a conducive work environment.

In conclusion, the participants' narratives highlight the multifaceted nature of leadership and how work environments shape its definition. Leaders must skillfully navigate complex organizational cultures, adapt to diverse workforce dynamics, and respond effectively to challenges and opportunities within their institutions. Recognizing these factors enables leaders to cultivate environments that promote effective leadership and organizational success.

This finding aligns with the study by Robyn Gulliver, Kelly S. Fielding, and Winnifred R. Louis (2022) titled *An Investigation of Factors Influencing Environmental Volunteering Leadership and Participation Behaviors*. Their research identified that self-efficacy beliefs, past participation, and organizational support significantly impact leadership behaviors. They emphasized the importance of training opportunities and group appreciation to build self-efficacy in leaders.

Both studies reinforce the idea that leadership development is influenced by individual and environmental factors, underscoring the importance of fostering supportive environments to enhance leadership capacity.

## Conclusions

Several factors contribute to women in advanced leadership positions creating career opportunities and accelerating their career trajectories. These factors include institutional support, networking, resilience, and continuous learning. Participants emphasized the significance of institutional support through mentorship programs, training opportunities, and flexible work policies, which enabled them to pursue leadership roles and advance their careers within higher education institutions. Networking was also highlighted as a crucial factor, as it provided women leaders access to valuable resources, opportunities for collaboration, and professional development.

Moreover, resilience emerged as a critical attribute that enabled women leaders to navigate challenges and setbacks in their careers, demonstrating their ability to overcome challenges and persevere in connection to their goals. Finally, a dedication to continuous learning and professional development was emphasized as essential for women leaders to stay abreast of current trends, expand their knowledge and skills, and seize opportunities for career advancement. The significance of these findings lies in recognizing the multifaceted nature of factors contributing to women's career advancement in higher education, which can inform strategies to support and empower women leaders in their professional journeys.

Based on the challenges identified in the study regarding trailblazing women in higher education, several recommendations may be considered to address these issues effectively, benefiting not only Central Mindanao University (CMU) but also the Commission on Higher Education, women, future researchers, and higher education institutions at large:

CHED should work with universities like CMU to promote gender diversity, setting targets for women in leadership and implementing policies to reduce biases and stereotypes.

CHED and universities can hold training sessions to raise awareness about gender biases, creating a more inclusive campus that supports women in leadership roles.

CHED and universities can establish mentorship and sponsorship programs to guide aspiring women leaders and provide networking opportunities, supporting their career growth.

CHED can push for flexible work policies in higher education to meet the diverse needs of women leaders, promoting work-life balance and leadership retention.

CHED and universities should invest in leadership training for women through workshops, conferences, and professional growth opportunities.

CHED and universities should foster inclusive leadership practices that value diverse perspectives and encourage empathy and respect across academic communities.

CHED should advocate for national policy changes, including transparent hiring and promotion processes, to address barriers to women's academic advancement.

CHED can support research on women's experiences in higher education leadership, using the data to guide gender equity initiatives and policies.

CHED and researchers should implement awareness campaigns and diversity training to challenge biases and stereotypes against women leaders.

CHED, universities, women, and researchers must collaborate to create an inclusive academic environment and address the challenges facing women leaders in higher education.

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