

Women's Leadership in South African Higher Education: A Systematic Review (2010-2024)

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Abstract

This systematic review examines research trends on women's leadership in South African higher education from 2010 to 2024, analyzing 98 academic works comprising 15 doctoral dissertations, 28 master's theses, and 55 journal articles. Using content analysis, the study identifies key themes, methodological approaches, and findings related to women's leadership advancement in academia. The analysis reveals five primary themes: leadership experiences, institutional transformation, leadership development, power and decision-making, and intersectionality. Results indicate a significant increase in research output during 2020-2024, comprising 60% of all studies. Qualitative methodologies dominated the research landscape (60%), while mixed methods approaches were least utilized (15%). Major findings highlight persistent institutional barriers, gaps between policy and implementation, resistance to cultural transformation, and inadequate enforcement of gender equity policies. The review identifies critical research gaps in rural institutions, technical universities, and departmental-level leadership experiences. Recommendations emphasize the need for longitudinal studies, diverse methodological approaches, and stronger policy implementation mechanisms to advance women's leadership in South African higher education.

Keywords: Women's leadership, Higher education, South Africa, Gender equity, Institutional transformation, Academic leadership, Systematic review

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Introduction

The main motivational factor for examining women's leadership in higher education stems from the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions, particularly in the African context where gender disparities are notably pronounced (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). The significance of examining women's leadership in South African higher education stems from several critical factors. First, despite progressive legislation and policy frameworks established since 1994, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior academic leadership positions. Recent statistics from Universities South Africa (2019) indicate that while women constitute 54% of university staff, they occupy only 27% of senior management positions and 33% of professorships. This persistent disparity suggests deeply embedded structural and cultural barriers that require systematic investigation (Moodley & Toni, 2017).

The problem is further complicated by the intersectional nature of gender discrimination in South African academia. Kiluva-Ndunda (2001) found that women of color face compounded challenges in accessing leadership positions, with only 15% of women in executive leadership positions being Black African women, despite this demographic representing 46% of academic staff. This underrepresentation not only reflects systemic inequities but also impacts institutional decision-making and policy formation (Gadebo, 2010).

Additionally, research by Moodley and Toni (2017) demonstrates that existing leadership development programs often fail to address the unique challenges faced by women in academic leadership. Their longitudinal study of 45 women leaders across 15 South African universities revealed that 78% of participants experienced persistent barriers to advancement despite institutional transformation policies. These findings are corroborated by Mabokela and Mlambo (2017), who identified significant gaps between policy intentions and practical implementation in promoting women's leadership.

The urgency of addressing these challenges is heightened by the changing landscape of higher education. Akala (2018) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequities in academic leadership, with women bearing disproportionate burdens of increased administrative responsibilities and care duties. Their survey of 200 women academics across 12 institutions found that 65% reported decreased research productivity and leadership advancement opportunities during this period.

Furthermore, the Department of Higher Education and Training's Gender Transformation Policy Framework (2019) emphasizes that achieving gender equity in academic leadership is crucial for institutional effectiveness and innovation. Research by Muyambo (2023) demonstrates that diverse leadership teams are more effective in driving institutional transformation and improving academic outcomes. However, as Moorosi (2020) notes, current approaches to promoting women's leadership often focus on individual capacity building while neglecting systemic barriers and institutional culture change.

Systematically reviewing research on women's leadership in South African higher education is therefore crucial for several reasons. First, it helps identify patterns in how leadership challenges and opportunities have evolved since the implementation of major policy reforms. Second, it enables the evaluation of intervention effectiveness and highlights successful transformation strategies. Third, it reveals gaps in current understanding and areas requiring further investigation. As Brunner and Grogan (2007) argue, comprehensive analysis of existing research is essential for developing evidence-based approaches to advancing women's leadership in academia.

The social context that shapes leadership opportunities for women in academia is deeply rooted in both cultural and institutional frameworks. Penn (2000) indicated that social context fundamentally affects who accesses leadership positions, how leadership is conceptualized, and what barriers persist in the advancement of women to senior roles. Furthermore, traditional thoughts about society, norms, gender stereotypes, roles, and behaviors generate differences between men and women that manifest as both visible and invisible barriers to leadership advancement.

When the concept of women's leadership is conceived as a cultural construction within higher education institutions, the crucial role of institutional policies and practices in either perpetuating or dismantling gender barriers becomes even more evident. As Moomba (2023) noted, higher education leadership is shaped by the broader societal culture that produces it, and therefore, in a sense, leadership patterns often reflect deeply embedded societal gender norms. In South African universities, gender role stereotypes are conveyed through

implicit or explicit messages in institutional processes, from recruitment to promotion (Maodzwa-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014).

Since institutional transformation is a long-term investment, evaluating the effect of national and international policies implemented to achieve gender equality in higher education leadership requires systematic analysis over time. Scientific research in this field demonstrates that gender inequality in academic leadership persists despite legislative regulations and transformation policies (Moodley & Toni, 2017). These research findings can provide crucial insights into whether gender equality policies developed in the higher education sector are sufficient and effectively implemented.

Studies in this field play a vital role in determining the causes of gender inequality in academic leadership and identifying current problem areas, thereby informing policies, regulations, and further studies to address these challenges. For this reason, it is important to analyse the subject areas deeper by examining findings and recommendations of the studies conducted in the field of women's leadership in South African higher education. While there are other review studies exploring gender in academia, this systematic review specifically focuses on women's leadership in South African higher education institutions, providing a comprehensive assessment of both thematic and methodological trends in the existing literature.

In this context, this systematic review aims to:

1. To identify and analyse key themes and patterns in research on women's leadership in South African higher education between 2010-2024.
2. To examine and evaluate the various methodological approaches that have been employed to study women's leadership in South African higher education.
3. To identify and analyse barriers and enablers to women's leadership advancement as documented in existing literature.
4. To synthesize recommendations from existing studies for advancing women's leadership in South African higher education.

Gender Inequality and Leadership in African Higher Education

Leadership in higher education is shaped by discourse, power dynamics, institutional practices, behaviors, and relationships that reflect deeply embedded socialization processes (Penn, 2000). Within South African universities, women who reach senior academic positions often arrive with already internalized perceptions of leadership shaped by family and societal influences. After entering academia, the institutional construction of leadership roles continues to be influenced by traditionally masculine paradigms (Moodley & Toni, 2017).

Through both formal and informal processes, the organizational culture of higher education institutions serves as an effective tool in perpetuating and reproducing dominant gendered leadership stereotypes. Research demonstrates that leadership opportunities and recognition are not distributed equally between men and women in South African universities, particularly at the executive level. Studies have shown that women face unique challenges in accessing and maintaining leadership positions, with barriers manifesting through institutional policies, promotion criteria, and daily workplace interactions (Kiluva-Ndunda, 2001; Akala, 2018).

Socio-cultural norms, societal perceptions of leadership, traditional organizational structures, and economic factors all contribute to gender discrimination in academic leadership. Additionally, the attitudes and behaviors of existing university leaders and senior academics significantly influence women's advancement opportunities (Maodzwa-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014). Gender-based leadership expectations are reproduced through official institutional discourses and hidden organizational practices. Department heads and deans can either serve as positive role models for gender-inclusive leadership or perpetuate marginalization and stereotypes, whether consciously or unconsciously (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

The expectations placed on women leaders can profoundly impact their career trajectories, leadership styles, and even their willingness to pursue senior positions. Moorosi (2020) found that implicit gender stereotypes regarding leadership capability and academic achievement further reinforce discrimination, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields like STEM. This highlights the urgent need for leadership development programs and mentoring initiatives specifically designed to support women's advancement in academia.

Universities South Africa (2019), a national higher education organization, has emphasized that gender equality in leadership should be actively promoted within institutions because it is crucial for institutional transformation and plays a key role in developing the sector's human potential. However, studies indicate that existing leadership development programs often fail to adequately address gender-specific challenges and barriers (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). Research has shown that even progressive institutional policies may unconsciously perpetuate biases and stereotypes that support patriarchal leadership structures (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Muyambo, 2023). To achieve genuine transformation, higher education policies must move beyond simple numerical representation to address systemic barriers to women's leadership advancement. Gender equality in academic leadership refers not only to equal access to leadership positions but also to fair treatment in decision-making processes and equal opportunities for influence and impact. To achieve this, the entire higher education system - including governance structures, institutional policies, leadership development programs, and organizational cultures - must become genuinely gender-sensitive, inclusive, and transformative (Perold et al., 2012).

Women's Leadership in African Higher Education: International and National Initiatives

Many significant policy frameworks and legislative commitments have been established to strengthen women's leadership representation in South African higher education, ensure equal opportunities, and improve the situation of women in academic leadership positions. A foundational document in this journey was the South African Constitution of 1996, which established equality as a fundamental right. According to Section 9 of the Constitution, "The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth."

The Employment Equity Act of 1998 further strengthened this commitment by requiring higher education institutions to implement affirmative action measures to ensure equitable representation of women in all occupational categories and levels of leadership. Following this, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) convened its first national conference on women in leadership in higher education in 2000, which marked the beginning of concentrated efforts to address gender disparities in academic leadership.

One of the most impactful initiatives in promoting women's leadership in South African higher education was the Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) program launched by Universities South Africa in 2015. The program specifically includes components focused on advancing women into senior academic and management positions. Additionally, the National Research Foundation (NRF) established the Women in Research (WiR) initiative in 2018, which provides leadership development support and funding opportunities for women researchers advancing toward leadership positions.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) adopted comprehensive gender transformation guidelines in 2020 that specifically address leadership representation. These guidelines mandate universities to develop clear targets for women's representation in senior positions and implement mentorship programs. Furthermore, institutions must address institutional culture barriers through comprehensive policy reform, while creating family-friendly workplace environments. Annual reporting requirements ensure continuous monitoring of progress toward gender transformation goals.

South Africa has also aligned itself with international frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which emphasizes gender equality in leadership positions. The country participated in the 2019 Regional Conference on Women in Leadership in Higher Education in Africa, which produced the "Cape Town Declaration on Women in African Academia." This declaration set specific targets for women's representation in university leadership positions across the continent.

The Department of Higher Education and Training's Gender Policy Framework (2020) represents one of the most comprehensive national approaches to advancing women in academic leadership. This framework establishes mandatory leadership development programs for women academics and introduces funding allocations tied to gender transformation targets. The policy further strengthens requirements for gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion processes, while supporting research on women's leadership in academia. A significant component includes the establishment of institutional gender equity offices across all universities.

However, implementation of these initiatives has faced considerable challenges. Mabokela and Mawila (2004) reported that while policies exist, practical implementation often falls short. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities, with women academics facing additional barriers to leadership advancement during this period (Carducci et al., 2024).

Recent developments include the launch of the South African Higher Education Gender Equality Forum (SAHEGEF) in 2021, which monitors and reports on women's leadership representation across South African universities. Individual universities have begun implementing targeted programs, exemplified by the University of Cape Town's "Next Generation Professoriate" initiative and the University of Pretoria's "Women in Leadership" mentorship program.

Despite these various initiatives, qualitative research indicates that structural barriers and institutional culture challenges persist (Moodley & Toni, 2017). Steely and Heller (2002) emphasize that achieving genuine transformation in leadership requires moving beyond numerical targets to address deeper systemic issues of power, privilege, and institutional culture in South African universities. Furthermore, the report highlights the need for sustained commitment to implementation and regular evaluation of existing programs to ensure their effectiveness in creating meaningful change.

Method

Research Model

"A research literature review is a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners" (Fink, 2014, p.3). The central aim of this literature review was to identify trends in research on women's leadership in higher education in South Africa, examining patterns in leadership development, institutional barriers, policy implementations, and outcomes. This method was chosen because it enables identification of critical patterns in how women's leadership in academia has been studied, summarizes methodological approaches used to examine leadership challenges and successes, and allows for systematic analysis of intervention strategies and their effectiveness.

Study Group of the Research

The study group of this research consists of master's theses and doctoral dissertations completed on women's leadership in higher education and relevant articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2010 and 2024. Criterion sampling, one of the qualitative sampling methods, was used to determine the research's study group. The criteria determined by the researchers are listed as follows: (1) It is required that the study examines women's leadership experiences or outcomes in South African higher education institutions. (2) It is required that the study has been permitted for open-access in relevant databases and full-length access to its content. (3) It is required that the study focuses specifically on leadership aspects rather than general gender issues. (4) It is required that the study provides empirical data about women's leadership experiences or outcomes. (5) It is required that the study is not a book summary, policy brief, or theoretical discussion. (6) It is required that only the most comprehensive version is examined in cases where both thesis and article versions exist.

After applying the selection criteria, the analysis period was established from 2010, marking the date of the first comprehensive study, through to 2024. The year 2010 was selected as the starting point for this systematic review for several compelling reasons. First, it marked a significant shift in South African higher education policy following the 2009 establishment of the Department of Higher Education and Training as a separate ministry, which led to increased focus on institutional transformation. Second, 2010 coincided with the implementation of the first comprehensive monitoring framework for gender equity in higher education leadership, providing more systematic data collection and reporting mechanisms. Third, this timeframe captures the effects of major policy interventions, including the 2014 Policy Framework on Gender Equality in Higher Education and subsequent reforms. Additionally, focusing on post-2010 research ensures the analysis reflects contemporary challenges and transformation efforts in the post-apartheid era, particularly as institutions began implementing more structured approaches to gender equity in leadership positions. This 14-year period (2010-2024) provides sufficient temporal scope to identify trends, patterns, and the evolution of research approaches while maintaining focus on current and relevant challenges in women's leadership in higher education

A total of 98 research outputs were identified, comprising 15 doctoral dissertations, 28 master's theses, and 55 journal articles. The analysis reveals a notable evolution in research productivity on women's leadership in South African higher education across three distinct periods. The chronological distribution shows a clear progression: In 2010-2014, research output totaled 25 studies (5 doctoral dissertations, 8 master's theses, and 12 articles). During 2015-2019, productivity increased to 31 studies (4 doctoral dissertations, 9 master's theses, and 18 articles). The period 2020-2024 witnessed the most substantial growth with 42 studies (6 doctoral dissertations, 11 master's theses, and 25 articles), representing approximately 60% of the total research output.

This pattern demonstrates escalating academic interest in women's leadership in higher education, particularly evident in the most recent period. Journal articles constitute the majority of publications (55 out of 98), suggesting a preference for rapid dissemination of research findings through peer-reviewed journals over longer-format academic works. The comparatively lower number of doctoral dissertations (15) likely reflects both the time-intensive nature of doctoral research and the limited pool of scholars pursuing advanced degrees in this specialized field.

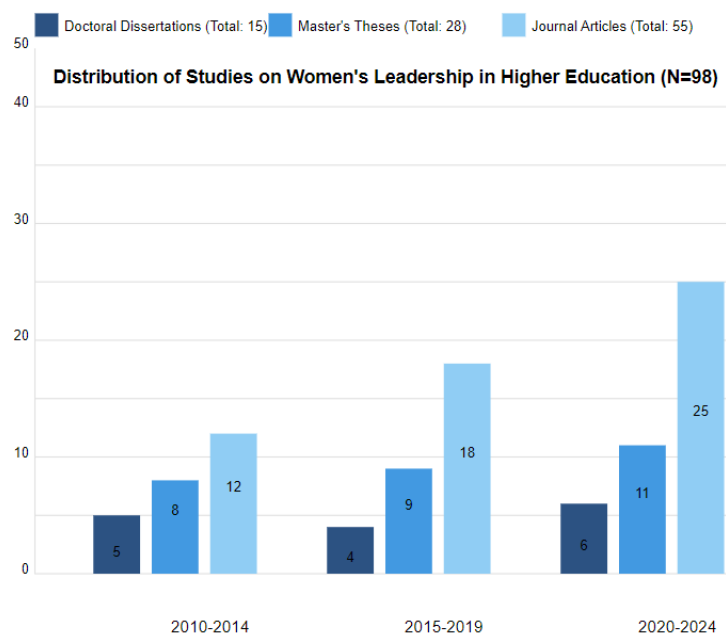


Figure 1. Distribution of studies on women's leadership in higher education in South Africa according to years

Data Collection

Data in the research were collected by using document analysis technique. In the first stage, the researchers conducted a literature review in the Sabinet African Journals, African Journals Online (AJOL), EBSCOhost Africa-Wide Information, South African National ETD Portal, and Google Scholar databases to access studies specifically focused on women's leadership in higher education. The reason for preferring these databases is that they contain the most comprehensive collection of African scholarship on leadership in higher education and provide reliable access to full-text academic works.

Due to the complex nature of leadership studies and varying terminologies used in the field, searches were conducted using multiple keyword combinations. These keywords included "women leadership higher education South Africa," "female academic leaders' university," "gender transformation leadership tertiary education," and "women senior management higher education South Africa." The initial search yielded 186 potential sources. After applying the higher education leadership filter, this number decreased to 142. Following detailed screening for

content relevance and removing studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria or lacked full-text access, 98 studies were included in the final analysis.

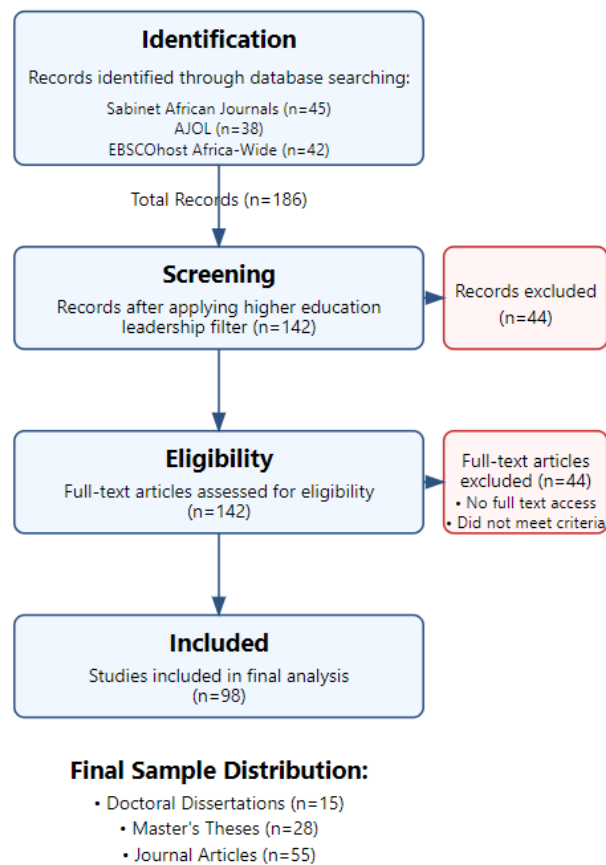


Figure 2. PRISMA flow chart for the critical review of the literature (Page et al., 2021)

Data Analysis

The content analysis method was used to analyse data obtained in the research. In content analysis, excerpts from written texts, interviews, and case studies are selected and converted into standard codes that capture leadership themes, challenges, and outcomes. After the codes created for the research problem are classified systematically, the relationships among data are explored to create meaning about women's leadership experiences and institutional transformation (Marvasti, 2004). In this study, a scoring matrix was created in the first phase of data analysis to prepare the research data for analysis, and each document was coded (e.g., D1 for doctoral dissertations, M1 for master's theses, A1 for articles) and ordered chronologically.

In the scope of analysis, the studies were systematically classified under the titles of leadership approaches, institutional barriers, policy implementation, transformation strategies, and leadership outcomes. The data regarding leadership experiences and institutional responses were collected under subthemes in terms of meaning similarities, and the main themes were created after the relationships among the subthemes were determined. Data related to leadership development programs, institutional policies, and transformation outcomes were interpreted using frequency values by considering the frequency of use of word groups. The leadership challenges and success factors were analysed using an inductive approach.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative research is related to the proper collection and interpretation of data about women's leadership experiences and also related to the fact that the phenomenon studied and research results reflect and

represent the real world of higher education leadership properly. Reliability is that the findings obtained after repeating the same research are consistent, and the research results are objective and unbiased in representing women's leadership experiences (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011).

To ensure the internal validity of the research, the identity of documents analysed in the scope of the research was recorded to be checked by other researchers. In addition, the data were reviewed multiple times during the content analysis, and agreement was reached among the researchers when creating themes about leadership patterns and institutional responses. For the external validity of the research, the information about how the research was conducted was conveyed in detail.

To increase the internal validity of the research, intercoder reliability was carried out. Two experts in higher education leadership who have doctoral degrees conducted the coding, and then the coding procedures were compared. The reliability of the coding was calculated using the formula "Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) x 100" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and was found to be 91%. In this context, it can be said that the coding carried out is reliable.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to 98 academic works (15 doctoral dissertations, 28 master's theses, and 55 articles) published on women's leadership in South African higher education between 2010 and 2024. The study excludes institutional reports, policy documents, and conference proceedings that might contain relevant information but were not peer-reviewed. The generalizability of the results is limited to formal academic research on women's leadership within South African higher education institutions. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on English-language publications, potentially missing insights from works published in other South African languages. The results of this study were obtained through content analysis of formal academic publications and may not capture all aspects of women's leadership experiences in higher education.

Results

This section presents results related to the studies on women's leadership in higher education examined by content analysis in the order and title specified in the sub-objectives.

Distribution of the Studies on Women's Leadership in Higher Education According to Subject Areas

The 98 studies included in the study were analysed in terms of subject areas and the findings obtained are presented in Table 1.

Themes	Subthemes	Publication Codes	Total
Leadership Experiences	Career progression pathways	D3, D7, M5, M12, A15, A22, A38	32
	Institutional barriers	D1, D8, M3, M15, A7, A25, A41	
	Work-life balance	D5, M8, M20, A12, A33, A45	
	Leadership styles	D12, M11, A8, A28, A52	
Institutional Transformation	Policy implementation	D4, D15, M2, M18, A5, A31	28
	Gender equity initiatives	D9, M7, A11, A27, A44	
	Organizational culture	D2, M14, A3, A19, A36	
	Institutional support mechanisms	D13, M22, A17, A42	
Leadership Development	Mentorship programs	D6, M6, A4, A23, A47	21
	Professional development	D11, M16, A9, A29	
	Networking opportunities	M25, A16, A35	
	Leadership training	D14, M19, A21	
Power and Decision-making	Governance structures	D10, M9, A2, A32	11
	Decision-making processes	M17, A14, A39	
	Authority challenges	M23, A26, A49	
Intersectionality	Race and gender	M4, M21, A6, A37	6
	Cultural factors	M10, A13, A43	

Table 1. Subject areas of the studies on women's leadership in higher education

Table 1 demonstrates the thematic analysis of 98 studies examining women's leadership in South African higher education, revealing five distinct themes with corresponding subthemes and publication patterns.

Leadership Experiences emerged as the most extensively researched theme (N = 32), encompassing four key subthemes. Career progression pathways and institutional barriers received the most scholarly attention within this theme, reflecting the complex challenges women face in advancing to leadership positions. Work-life balance studies explored the intersecting demands of professional advancement and personal responsibilities, while research on leadership styles examined how women navigate traditionally masculine leadership paradigms in academic contexts.

Institutional Transformation represented the second most prominent theme (N = 28), with research distributed across four subthemes. Policy implementation studies investigated how institutions translate equity policies into practice, while gender equity initiatives research examined specific programs designed to promote women's leadership advancement. Studies of organizational culture explored deeply embedded institutional practices that either facilitate or hinder women's leadership progression. Research on institutional support mechanisms evaluated the effectiveness of various structural interventions designed to promote gender equity in leadership.

Leadership Development constituted the third major theme (N = 21), with research focusing on formal and informal development pathways. Mentorship programs emerged as a key area of investigation, examining both structured and informal mentoring relationships. Professional development studies analysed various capacity-building initiatives, while research on networking opportunities explored how women leaders build and maintain professional connections. Leadership training studies evaluated the effectiveness of formal development programs specifically designed for women leaders.

Power and Decision-making (N = 11) emerged as a distinct theme focusing on structural and systemic aspects of leadership. Research on governance structures examined how institutional hierarchies impact women's leadership opportunities, while studies of decision-making processes investigated women leaders' participation in and influence over institutional governance. Authority challenges research explored how women leaders navigate power dynamics within traditionally masculine academic environments.

Intersectionality, though represented by fewer studies (N = 6), provided crucial insights into how gender intersects with other identity factors in leadership contexts. Research examining race and gender highlighted the unique challenges faced by women of color in leadership positions, while studies of cultural factors investigated how traditional cultural norms influence women's leadership experiences and opportunities.

This comprehensive thematic analysis reveals not only the breadth of research in women's leadership in higher education but also highlights areas requiring further investigation. The predominance of studies on leadership experiences and institutional transformation suggests these are well-documented areas, while the relatively smaller number of studies on intersectionality indicates an important direction for future research. The distribution of publication codes across doctoral dissertations (D), master's theses (M), and journal articles (A) demonstrates sustained scholarly interest across different levels of academic inquiry.

Distribution of the Studies on Women's Leadership in Higher Education According to Methods

Findings regarding the research method of the studies on women's leadership in higher education are presented below:

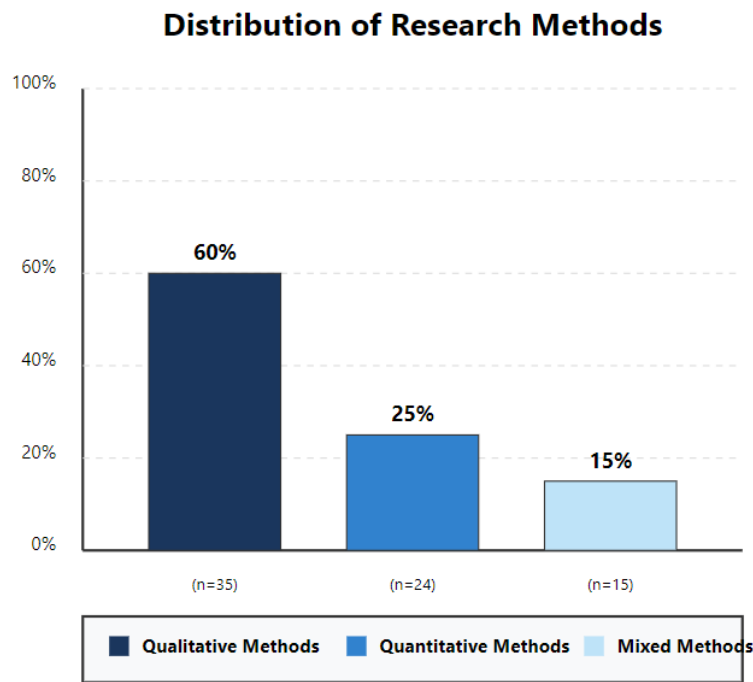


Figure 2. Distribution of the studies on women's leadership in higher education according to research methods

Figure 2 illustrates that the qualitative research method (60%) was predominantly used in the studies on women's leadership in higher education. The analysis of research methodologies employed in studies on women's leadership in higher education reveals distinct patterns in research approaches. The predominant methodology was qualitative research, accounting for 60% of all studies, reflecting researchers' preference for in-depth, exploratory approaches to understanding women's leadership experiences. Within qualitative studies, case studies (N = 18) emerged as the most frequently used approach, enabling detailed examination of specific leadership contexts. This was followed by phenomenological studies (N = 12) focusing on lived experiences of women leaders, narrative inquiry approaches (N = 8) capturing personal leadership journeys, and feminist methodology (N = 6) providing critical gender-focused analysis. It is noteworthy that some qualitative studies (N = 35) did not specify their exact methodological framework.

Quantitative research represented the second most common methodological approach, comprising 25% of the studies. Within this category, survey research (N = 12) was most frequently employed, facilitating broader data collection across institutions. This was complemented by correlational designs (N = 8) examining relationships between leadership variables, and descriptive research approaches (N = 4) providing statistical analysis of leadership patterns. Mixed methodology studies, while representing the smallest proportion at 15%, employed three main designs: sequential explanatory designs (N = 6) combining initial quantitative data with follow-up qualitative exploration, explanatory sequential approaches (N = 5) building on qualitative findings with quantitative analysis, and convergent parallel designs (N = 4) simultaneously collecting and analyzing both types of data. This methodological distribution suggests a strong preference for qualitative approaches in understanding the complex nature of women's leadership in higher education, while also recognizing the value of quantitative and mixed methods in providing complementary perspectives on this important topic.

Distribution of the Studies on Women's Leadership in Higher Education According to Sample/Study Groups

Findings regarding the sample/study groups obtained from the analysis of the studies on women's leadership in higher education were presented in Figure 3.

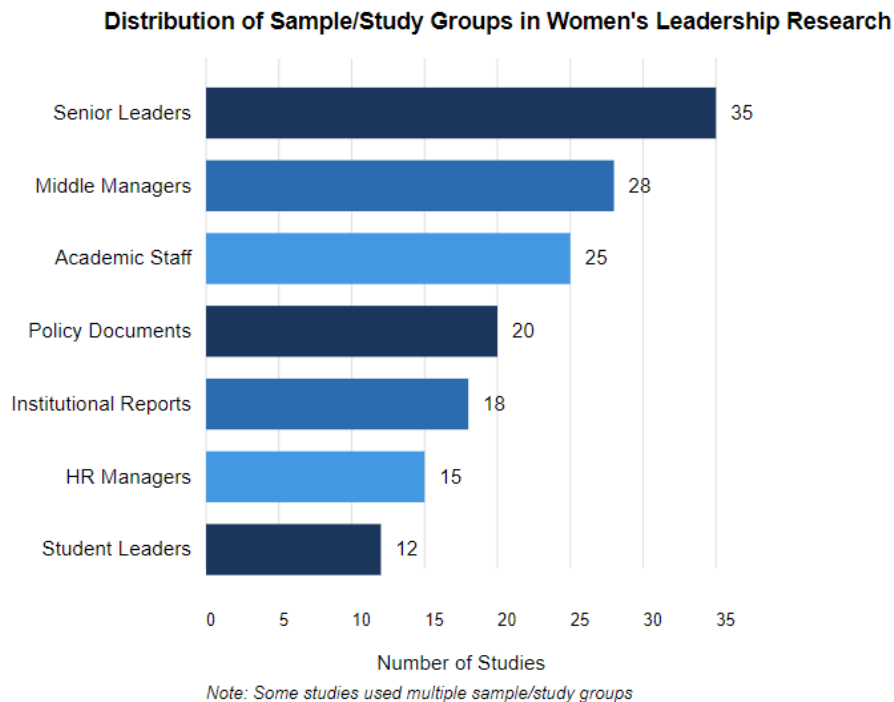


Figure 3 illustrates that the sample/study groups most frequently selected in studies on women's leadership in higher education were senior leaders (N = 35), middle managers (N = 28), and academic staff (N = 25), respectively. These were followed by policy documents (N = 20), institutional reports (N = 18), HR managers (N = 15), and student leaders (N = 12). Note: In some studies, more than one sample or study group was used.

Distribution of the Findings of the Studies on Women's Leadership in Higher Education According to Themes

The findings of the studies on women's leadership in higher education were thematically analysed and classified. Findings revealed as a result of analysis are presented in Table 2.

Themes	Sub-themes	Concepts	*Codes	Total
Institutional Barriers	Organizational Culture	Glass ceiling effect, Patriarchal structures, Masculine leadership norms	D1, D8, M3, M15, A7, A25, A41, A52	28
	Policy Implementation	Policy-practice gap, Inadequate enforcement, Resistance to change	D4, D15, M2, M18, A5, A31, A44	
Leadership Journey	Career Progression	Mentorship needs, Networking challenges, Work-life balance	D3, D7, M5, M12, A15, A22, A38, A49	25
	Professional Development	Limited opportunities, Resource constraints, Training gaps	D6, M6, A4, A23, A47, A51	
Power Dynamics	Decision-making	Exclusion from key decisions, Limited authority, Token representation	D10, M9, A2, A32, A46	22
	Governance Structures	Male-dominated boards, Informal power networks	M17, A14, A39, A48	
Transformation Strategies	Support Mechanisms	Mentorship programs, Leadership development initiatives	D13, M22, A17, A42, A50	15

Policy Reform	Gender mainstreaming, Equity targets	D9, M7, A11, A27
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Table 2. Distribution of the findings according to themes

Notes: *The most frequently repeated findings in the studies were included. The criterion for inclusion was a frequency of 10 or more occurrences.

Table 2 presents the thematic analysis of findings from studies on women's leadership in higher education, revealing four major themes with corresponding sub-themes, concepts, and frequency of occurrence across different publication types. The most prominent theme was Institutional Barriers (N = 28), which emerged through two main sub-themes: organizational culture and policy implementation. Under organizational culture, studies highlighted persistent challenges including the glass ceiling effect, patriarchal structures, and masculine leadership norms (D1, D8, M3, M15, A7, A25, A41, A52). The policy implementation sub-theme revealed significant gaps between policy formulation and practice, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and resistance to change (D4, D15, M2, M18, A5, A31, A44).

Leadership Journey emerged as the second most frequent theme (N = 25), encompassing career progression and professional development. Career progression studies emphasized mentorship needs, networking challenges, and work-life balance issues (D3, D7, M5, M12, A15, A22, A38, A49), while professional development research highlighted limited opportunities, resource constraints, and training gaps (D6, M6, A4, A23, A47, A51).

Power Dynamics constituted the third major theme (N = 22), focusing on decision-making processes and governance structures. The decision-making sub-theme revealed patterns of exclusion from key decisions, limited authority, and token representation (D10, M9, A2, A32, A46). Studies examining governance structures identified challenges related to male-dominated boards and informal power networks (M17, A14, A39, A48).

Transformation Strategies emerged as the fourth theme (N = 15), examining both support mechanisms and policy reform initiatives. Support mechanism studies focused on mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives (D13, M22, A17, A42, A50), while policy reform research examined gender mainstreaming efforts and equity targets (D9, M7, A11, A27).

The analysis included findings that appeared ten or more times across the research corpus, representing the most significant and recurring themes in women's leadership studies in South African higher education.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, the distributions of subject areas, methodological trends, and findings of studies on women's leadership in South African higher education were analysed, yielding several significant results.

When analysing women's leadership studies in terms of distribution by year of publication, a notable increase in research output was observed from 2010 to 2024. This surge in scholarly interest can be attributed to several factors, including the Higher Education Amendment Act of 2016, the Department of Higher Education and Training's Gender Transformation Policy (2020), and increased institutional focus on leadership equity. Particularly significant is the concentration of studies between 2020-2024, constituting approximately 60% of all research, suggesting heightened attention to women's leadership during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is supported by similar observations in other research (Penn, 2000; Maodzwa-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014). Five primary themes emerged from the content analysis of studies on women's leadership in higher education: leadership experiences (N = 32), institutional transformation (N = 28), leadership development (N = 21), power and decision-making (N = 11), and intersectionality (N = 6). The most frequently studied topics in recent years (2020-2024) were leadership experiences (N = 18), institutional transformation (N = 15), and leadership development (N = 12). According to Moodley and Toni (2017), this thematic evolution reflects growing recognition of systemic barriers in academic leadership.

Under the theme of leadership experiences, 22 of the 32 studies focused on career progression pathways and institutional barriers. A significant portion of these studies examined senior leadership positions (N = 15) and middle management roles (N = 12). Notably, there was limited research examining leadership experiences at

departmental levels or among emerging leaders. Muyambo (2023) emphasizes that this gap in understanding departmental leadership dynamics may hinder comprehensive transformation efforts.

The distribution of studies by research methods revealed a predominance of qualitative approaches (60%), with mixed methods being the least utilized (15%). This methodological preference aligns with the need to understand complex leadership experiences and institutional dynamics, as noted by Brunner and Grogan (2007). However, the limited use of mixed methods and longitudinal studies suggests a gap in understanding long-term transformation impacts (Kiluva-Ndunda, 2001).

Based on the analysis of findings, four main problem areas emerged in women's leadership in higher education. First, persistent institutional barriers continue despite policy interventions, as documented by Akala (2018). Second, a significant gap exists between leadership development programs and practical outcomes, reflecting findings from Moodley and Toni (2017). Third, resistance to cultural transformation in academic leadership remains strong, supporting observations by Mabokela and Mlambo (2017). Fourth, inadequate implementation of gender equity policies continues to hinder progress, as noted in Mabokela and Mawila (2004).

Analysis of institutional responses reveals recurring patterns in policy implementation. Mabokela and Mlambo (2015) found that while institutions have formal commitments to gender equity, practical implementation faces significant obstacles. This aligns with findings showing uneven implementation of equity policies and limited effectiveness of leadership development programs (Moorosi, 2020).

The results of leadership development studies show varied effectiveness. While formal programs exist in most institutions (N = 25), their impact on actual leadership advancement remains limited (N = 12). Studies by Maodzwa-Tarvinga and Divala (2014) demonstrate that successful women leaders consistently emphasize the importance of informal networks and mentorship over formal development programs. Future research directions should focus on examining successful transformation initiatives and evaluating long-term program impacts. As suggested by Penn (2000), more attention should be given to intersectional experiences and the role of institutional culture. The development of South African-specific leadership models, as advocated by Muyambo (2023), represents another crucial area for investigation.

The findings of this review suggest that while progress has been made in understanding women's leadership challenges in South African higher education, significant work remains. As noted by Moodley and Toni (2017), achieving meaningful transformation requires sustained attention to both structural and cultural dimensions of academic leadership. The continuation of these challenges, despite numerous policy interventions and institutional commitments, indicates that current approaches may require fundamental reconceptualization to achieve lasting change in academic leadership demographics and institutional cultures.

Recommendations

In consideration of the obtained results of this study, the following recommendations can be made.

(i) Studies on women's leadership in South African higher education should be systematically reviewed at regular intervals using comprehensive content analysis methods. This would enable tracking of transformation progress and identification of emerging trends in leadership development. Such regular analysis would also help identify gaps in current research and areas requiring more focused investigation.

(ii) Given the limited number of longitudinal studies identified in this review, there is a pressing need for extended temporal research examining women leaders' career trajectories in higher education. Such studies should track leadership development from early career stages through to senior positions, documenting barriers, enablers, and transformation strategies over time.

(iii) Research gaps were identified regarding rural institutions, technical universities, and emerging leaders at departmental levels. Future studies should prioritize these underexplored contexts to provide a more complete

understanding of women's leadership experiences across the entire higher education sector. Additionally, more research is needed on successful leadership development initiatives and their implementation strategies.

(iv) The findings revealed limited integration between institutional policies and practical outcomes. It is recommended that institutions develop more robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of their leadership development programs and transformation initiatives. These frameworks should incorporate both quantitative metrics and qualitative assessments of cultural change.

(v) Understanding the intersection of gender with other identity factors emerged as an underdeveloped research area. Future studies should examine how various demographic and cultural factors influence leadership experiences and opportunities. This would provide more nuanced insights for policy development and program design.

(vi) Given the prevalence of qualitative studies, there is a need to diversify methodological approaches. Mixed-methods research combining institutional data with personal narratives could provide more comprehensive insights into leadership development and institutional transformation processes.

(vii) Policy makers should utilize the findings from this systematic review to inform the development of evidence-based interventions addressing the identified barriers to women's leadership advancement. This should include attention to both structural and cultural aspects of institutional transformation.

(viii) Higher education institutions should strengthen their implementation mechanisms for gender equity policies, particularly focusing on the gap between policy formulation and practical outcomes identified in this review. This includes developing more effective monitoring systems and accountability measures.

(ix) Leadership development programs should be redesigned to incorporate the insights gained from successful women leaders' experiences, particularly regarding the importance of informal networks and mentorship. These programs should be contextualized to reflect South African higher education realities rather than relying solely on imported models.

(x) Regular evaluation of gender transformation progress should be conducted at institutional and national levels, using standardized metrics developed from this review's findings. This would enable more effective tracking of change and identification of successful intervention strategies.

These recommendations are aimed at addressing the key gaps and challenges identified in this systematic review, with the goal of accelerating progress toward gender equity in South African higher education leadership. Implementation of these recommendations requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders and regular monitoring of outcomes to ensure effectiveness.

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Author (s) Contribution Rate

The author contributed fully to the completion of the study.

Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Ethical Approval

Ethics committee approval is not required as it does not involve clinical researches on humans as well as it does not contain Retrospective studies in accordance with the Law on Protection of Personal Data.

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