

## Leading Against the Odds:

### Women's Leadership Challenges and Strategies in the Nonprofit Sector

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#### **Introduction**

Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions across public, corporate, and private organizations (Emmerik, 2010). In corporate leadership, for example, women occupy only about 3% of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) roles within Fortune 500 companies (Ely, 2011). In the nonprofit sector, women hold approximately 19% of executive leadership positions among the top 400 nonprofit organizations in the United States. This shows a noticeable difference between the number of women in executive roles in for-profit companies compared to nonprofit organizations (Lansford, 2010).

Additionally, women face challenges in pursuing and building successful leadership careers due to the ongoing prevalence of male leadership (Clarke, 2011). Research shows that women leaders contribute significant economic and social value to an organization's sustainability and success, but leadership opportunities for women are still not as widespread as those for men (Jonsen, 2010; Lansford, 2010; Nadler, 2012). Research shows that women often demonstrate transformational leadership qualities, such as empathy, collaboration, and the ability to inspire teams (Mandell, 2003). These traits align well with the mission-driven and participative nature of nonprofits (Seyhan, 2013). However, the dominance of traditional, male-oriented leadership models can create an environment where women's approaches are undervalued (Christman, 2012). Understanding these dynamics and how women navigate them is

crucial for developing strategies that can support future female leaders in overcoming these obstacles and achieving upward mobility.

Nonprofit organizations differ significantly from for-profit companies in their structure and goals. Unlike for-profit businesses, nonprofits do not distribute profits to stakeholders, rely heavily on voluntary participation, and often lack clear lines of ownership and accountability (Frumkin, 2002). These structural differences mean that nonprofit leadership must focus more on mission-driven strategies, collaboration, and resourcefulness to navigate limited budgets and high public scrutiny (Seyhan, 2020). The nature of these organizations requires leaders who can inspire and motivate teams while fostering a culture of collective commitment and adaptability. It can be argued that women, who often display transformational leadership qualities such as empathy, inclusivity, and the ability to build strong, supportive relationships, are particularly well-suited to meet these unique leadership needs in the nonprofit sector (Mandell, 2003; Seyhan, 2020).

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the unique set of barriers to nonprofit leadership women face in their careers, while also providing insight into how future leaders can navigate through such barriers to achieve upward mobility within nonprofit sector. This study employs semi-structured interviews to identify the distinctive barriers encountered by women with MPA degrees from Villanova University in pursuing leadership roles and analyze strategies these women employ to overcome those barriers. The generated insights provide valuable information for the Villanova Department of Public Administration creating an opportunity to enhance its curriculum.

## **Literature review**

### **Need for Distinct Leadership Approaches**

Nonprofit organizations operate in fundamentally different ways from for-profit businesses, creating unique needs and challenges that require very distinct leadership qualities from their leaders. According to Frumkin (2002), three main features set nonprofits apart from their for-profit and government counterparts: (1) nonprofits do not coerce participation; (2) they do not distribute profits to stakeholders; and (3) they lack clear lines of ownership and accountability. These structural distinctions give nonprofits a unique position to serve and address societal needs that neither government agencies nor private businesses can fully resolve, often filling gaps by providing social services, mobilizing community resources, and addressing long-term social issues. Unlike for-profit organizations, which are primarily driven by financial gain and accountability to shareholders, nonprofits prioritize mission fulfillment and community impact (Frumkin, 2002). This mission-driven focus requires a leadership style that can foster collaboration, inspire volunteers and employees, and operate effectively under limited resources.

Leadership in nonprofits is also shaped by common stereotypes that influence both public perception and organizational expectations. As Carson (2002) highlights, nonprofits are often seen as low-revenue organizations run by volunteer staff and expected to maintain minimal administrative overheads. This perception, however, can lead to inadequate infrastructure and reduced organizational effectiveness, as highlighted by the Urban Institute's Nonprofit Overhead Cost Project (Haggar et al., 2004). When donors and stakeholders push nonprofits to restrict overhead costs, they can limit the resources available for building effective teams, developing strong systems, and supporting leadership. Moreover, nonprofits face frequent scrutiny from the public and the media, often with a focus on scandals, unfulfilled donor promises, or leadership

shortcomings (Carson, 2002). These challenges underscore the need for a leadership approach that is resilient, transparent, and capable of building trust among stakeholders.

In addition to these operational and perceptual differences, the nature of nonprofit work often involves addressing complex social issues that require strategic, adaptable, and community-oriented leadership. Herman (2013) argues that nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in mobilizing local resources and addressing root causes of social problems, giving them a significant influence on social and economic policy. Unlike for-profit businesses, which focus on market-driven objectives, nonprofits are committed to long-term social impact, making their leadership needs unique. Leaders in these organizations must be able to inspire and motivate others, work with limited budgets, and rely on volunteers, all while advancing their mission.

### **Transformational leadership**

This unique context makes transformational leadership especially relevant to the nonprofit sector. Transformational leadership, as highlighted in Bass and Avolio's Transformational Leadership Theory (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003), focuses on inspiring and motivating team members by aligning their personal goals with the organization's mission. This leadership style has four main components: Idealized Influence, which establishes trust and ethical standards; Inspirational Motivation, which creates a compelling vision; Intellectual Stimulation, encouraging innovation and critical thinking; and Individualized Consideration, which addresses team members' unique needs and fosters their development. Given these elements and their importance, transformational leaders are better suited to address the systemic barriers within nonprofits, where challenges like resource constraints, high scrutiny, and complex social missions require leaders who can unify and inspire their teams.

Research indicates that women are well-positioned to excel in transformational leadership roles. Studies by Mandell and Pherwani (2003), as well as Eagly and Johnson (1990), show that women frequently display higher levels of emotional intelligence and collaborative leadership traits, both of which align well with transformational leadership. It has been determined that emotional intelligence is a key factor in transformational leadership because it enables leaders to manage emotions effectively, navigate biases, and foster inclusivity. In the study conducted by Mandell and Pherwani (2003), women scored higher in emotional intelligence field, suggesting they may be better equipped to handle the interpersonal and relational challenges common in nonprofit environments, where empathy, collaboration, and adaptability are essential.

### **Barriers to Leadership for Women in the Nonprofit Sector**

Women pursuing leadership roles in the nonprofit sector face a range of systemic and organizational barriers rooted in societal perceptions, organizational culture, and structural inequities. These challenges collectively hinder their career progression and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to gender disparities in leadership.

One of the most pervasive barriers is the glass ceiling, a term used to describe the invisible yet persistent obstacles that prevent women from ascending to top leadership positions (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Dula, Nicholson-Crotty, & Gazley, 2020). Despite their qualifications and experience, women in nonprofit organizations often encounter resistance as they approach higher levels of responsibility. Compounding this challenge is the phenomenon of tokenism, where women who achieve leadership roles in male-dominated environments are often perceived as representatives of their gender rather than as individuals. This added scrutiny creates stress and imposes additional pressure on women to prove their competence, limiting their

effectiveness and deterring others from pursuing similar roles (Christman & McClellan, 2012; de la Rey, 2005).

Cultural and societal stereotypes further exacerbate these barriers. The nonprofit sector is often viewed as low-revenue and heavily reliant on volunteer work, perpetuating the misconception that leadership in this field requires less professionalism or skill (Seyhan, 2020). Such perceptions diminish the recognition of women leaders' contributions and reinforce biases against their ability to lead effectively. Gender biases, rooted in role incongruity theory, also play a significant role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Leadership is traditionally associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, which leads to undervaluing the more collaborative and empathetic leadership styles commonly exhibited by women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2017). This misalignment between societal expectations and women's leadership approaches often results in women's contributions being overlooked or undervalued.

The dual burden of managing career and family responsibilities remains a significant barrier for women in leadership. This challenge is particularly pronounced in the resource-constrained environment of nonprofits, where extensive responsibilities and limited organizational support leave little room for work-life integration (de la Rey, 2005; Haggart et al., 2004). The absence of structured mentorship and networking opportunities further compounds this issue. Mentorship plays a critical role in developing leadership skills and building professional networks, yet studies indicate that women often lack access to mentors or sponsors who can guide their career trajectories (Burnier, 2005; Jones & Jones, 2017). This lack of mentorship not only limits women's professional growth but also reduces their visibility within organizational hierarchies.

## **Strategies to Overcome Leadership Barriers**

Women in nonprofit leadership roles employ a range of strategies to navigate the systemic and organizational challenges they face. These strategies draw on transformational and relational leadership approaches, the power of mentorship and networking, and the leveraging of education and professional development to overcome persistent barriers.

Transformational and relational leadership styles are particularly effective tools for addressing the challenges women encounter in the nonprofit sector. Transformational leadership, as highlighted by Mandell and Pherwani (2003), focuses on traits such as inspirational motivation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration, which empower women to inspire organizational change and foster a sense of shared mission. These traits align with the collaborative and mission-driven nature of nonprofit work, making women leaders particularly effective in navigating resource constraints and high stakeholder expectations.

Networking and mentorship are equally critical in supporting women's career growth and helping them overcome barriers to leadership. According to Burnier (2005) and Dula, Nicholson-Crotty, and Gazley (2020), professional networks and mentorship provide women with access to guidance, resources, and opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. These relationships serve as a vital source of support and advocacy, enabling women to navigate organizational hierarchies and develop the confidence to pursue leadership roles.

### **Methodology and analysis**

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into these dynamics, scholarship exploring women leaders' actual, lived experiences through qualitative research in the nonprofit sector is scarce. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that captures the personal and professional realities faced by women in nonprofit leadership roles. By examining these

lived experiences, this study aims to identify the most significant barriers women encounter and explore the strategies they find most effective in overcoming them.

## **Method**

This research employed a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with female graduates of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. This approach provided a narrative account of the perceived barriers participants encountered in their careers and how they navigated them. It offered a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of female MPA program graduates.

The research specifically addressed (a) the primary barriers and challenges that female MPA graduates from Villanova University perceived in their pursuit of leadership positions within the nonprofit sector, (b) how these graduates navigated and overcame the identified barriers, and (c) the strategies they employed to achieve upward mobility in their nonprofit careers.

## **Scope**

Participants for the interviews were selected from a pool of female MPA graduates who had broken the glass ceiling and had personal experience overcoming promotion barriers. An interviewee was considered to have broken the glass ceiling if they occupied one of the highest positions in their organization. The goal was not to limit interviews to women who had become executives or CEOs but to gather perceptions from women who had broken the ceiling in their organization. The scope was confined to graduates who had completed their studies within the last decade to provide a more precise representation of the current landscape in the field. A total of 9 participants were included in the study. The list of MPA graduates was accessed through the

Department of Public Administration, and participants were contacted through the social network LinkedIn or their personal or professional emails.

## **Discussion of the Results**

The analysis of the interviews was conducted through a systematic coding process, which identified recurring themes that connect existing literature with the lived realities of participants. The themes were divided into two primary categories: *Leadership Barriers* and *Strategies for Overcoming Leadership Barriers*. Additionally, participants reflected on their leadership styles, personal qualities, and professional approaches, which offered a great understanding of the characteristics they bring to their roles.

The discussion that follows goes into these findings in detail. The first section, *Leadership Barriers*, highlights the structural, cultural, and interpersonal obstacles participants have faced in their careers. The second section, *Strategies for Overcoming Leadership Barriers*, discusses the innovative and adaptive strategies participants have employed to navigate these challenges, discussing both well-documented approaches and new insights unique to this study.

To further enhance the accessibility and applicability of this research, two tables have been created—one outlining the specific barriers women face in nonprofit leadership and another summarizing the strategies they have successfully used to overcome these challenges. These tables serve as a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners, offering a structured framework for understanding gendered leadership barriers while also presenting actionable solutions.

### **Leadership Barriers**

#### ***Work-life Balance and Social Norms***

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the interviews was the pervasive challenge of work-life balance, particularly the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities that women bear. This finding aligns closely with the literature, including Burnier (2005) and Christman and McClellan (2012), which underscores how societal norms and expectations place a dual burden on women to excel both professionally and domestically. Several interviewees described the impact of these expectations on their career trajectories, with some choosing to step back from leadership roles temporarily to manage family responsibilities. One participant noted, "It can be really hard for women to advance if they have to take a step back to take care of their kids or other family members. And I've just seen how the responsibilities of home and work disproportionately fall on those women."

Social expectations around traditional gender roles often created barriers for women leaders. Some participants noted that women are frequently expected to relocate to accommodate their male partners' careers or give up their jobs to fulfill family caregiving responsibilities. One interviewee explained, "Personally, I had a baby, and the emotional stress of managing a team of 30 people ... was a lot. And I just didn't feel like I was able to give my family what it needed." These societal norms place disproportionate pressures on women, often hindering their ability to prioritize their own careers. Another participant shared that they needed to take a step back in their career to take care of their family: "I would say gender played a role in why I made the switch out of a leadership position."

### ***Gender Bias and Stereotyping***

Another recurring theme was the presence of gender biases and stereotypes that undermine women's credibility and authority in leadership roles. These biases, well-documented by Eagly and Johnson (1990) and de la Rey (2005), were illustrated vividly in accounts where

participants faced derogatory narratives questioning their qualifications. One participant shared, "Another colleague started going around saying, 'Well, the only reason that he decided to do that (promote her) was because she walks around in skirts and because she's young and because she's a woman.'" Another reflected on how gender bias influenced opportunities: "People at a higher level decided on someone else (to take on the leadership role), who did happen to be a man, even though the person who was going to be directly working with me wanted me to take that position." Such examples echo Christman and McClellan's (2012) notion of "middle space," where women leaders must navigate the tension between embodying traditional feminine traits and adopting behaviors traditionally associated with male leadership. The interviews reveal that even in nonprofit environments, often perceived as more inclusive and equitable, gendered assumptions persist, creating a cultural climate where women's contributions are undervalued or dismissed. This dynamic perpetuates the "glass ceiling" described by Eagly and Karau (2002), reinforcing structural barriers to upward mobility.

One participant highlighted the unique challenges of being a young woman in leadership. Her experience emphasized how youth, compounded by gender, could intensify perceptions of inadequacy or inexperience in professional environments, leading to additional hurdles in gaining credibility and authority. She explained, "Getting people to take you seriously and getting people to see you for the professional that you are... being a young woman who some people may view as coming in from the outside." Another participant added, "You have to try a lot harder to prove yourself as a younger woman."

### ***Structural barriers and Pay Disparities***

Structural barriers within nonprofits, particularly flat hierarchies and limited opportunities for advancement, were highlighted by several participants. These findings resonate

with Dula et al.'s (2020) discussion of nonprofit organizational structures, where limited upward mobility creates a bottleneck for aspiring leaders. One interviewee described the challenge succinctly: "Nonprofits in general... Most state-based or small nonprofits are pretty flat in terms of hierarchy. And so there's not a lot of room to go up unless you make a really giant move." The literature has extensively examined the unique dynamics of nonprofit organizations, such as their reliance on collaborative and participative leadership styles, which align well with transformational qualities often exhibited by women leaders (Eagly et al., 2003). However, the structural limitations inherent in many nonprofits can stifle the very leadership styles they ostensibly value. This paradox calls for a rethinking of nonprofit governance and leadership models to better support the advancement of women.

Pay disparities, while not exclusive to the nonprofit sector, were another significant theme that emerged from the interviews. Participants noted the systemic underpayment of women in leadership roles, even in female-dominated environments. One participant remarked, "Nonprofits are dominated by women, yet we're still underpaid." This aligns with findings by Burnier (2005), who highlighted the persistence of pay inequities in public and nonprofit leadership, where women are often expected to work "out of the kindness of their hearts" rather than for equitable compensation. The interviews further revealed how these disparities intersect with other barriers, such as the cost of advanced education and the financial burden of unpaid internships. One participant recounted, "Coming from a rural community in Western Massachusetts... when I wanted to get my foot in the door, when I started working in state government, the best way to do that was to take an unpaid internship."

## *Internal Challenges*

One particularly striking insight from the interviews was the internalization of societal expectations and its impact on self-confidence. One participant reflected, "The biggest barrier that I would identify to my rising through the ranks of leadership is internal, and that's self-confidence." Another added, "I think imposter syndrome is a real thing. I think it's more acute in women in leadership roles." Similarly, another interviewee remarked, "I really found myself stumbling through interactions with certain people because I just had never had access to that sort of power or even talking with people who are very highly educated." The literature, including Burnier (2005) and Christman and McClellan (2012), frequently examines external barriers but often overlooks the internal struggles that arise from these systemic inequities.

Additionally, participants acknowledged the critical importance of networking and self-promotion in advancing their careers. However, for those without naturally extroverted personalities, these activities felt uncomfortable or inauthentic. One participant mentioned the need to engage in "chit-chatting" to build professional relationships, while another pointed out the necessity of "bragging and showing off." Both women admitted that these practices felt unnatural but recognized them as necessary for career advancement. Another reflected, "I'm not the kind of person who puts out all of my successes all the time. I just don't do that. It feels against my personality."

Women displayed a more cautious approach when considering leadership positions, often hesitating to apply unless they met all the qualifications. As one participant observed, "Women, if they don't check all the boxes, they don't try for the opportunity. Whereas men just say, 'Oh, I can do that,' even if they don't have any experience." Another explained, "I kind of took what was given in the beginning, like I would just be happy. But no, I would have pushed a little bit

more, and I would have taken risks a lot sooner." This reflects a broader societal tendency where women undervalue their qualifications, while men are more likely to embrace risk and uncertainty in professional advancement.

*Table 1* summarizes the identified barriers, their implications, and the relevant literature that supports these findings.

*Table 1: Leadership Barriers Summary*

<b>Barrier's Type</b>	<b>Specific Barrier</b>	<b>Quotes from Participants</b>	<b>Implication of the Barrier</b>	<b>Literature Discussing the Barrier</b>
<b>Work-life Balance and Social Norms</b>	Disproportionate caregiving responsibilities	<p>"Which is work-life balance challenges because many times women are just expected to do it all."</p> <p>"I just decided like I wanted a role where I would have less responsibility, which in hindsight is very hard for me and has been a challenge, but is better for my family."</p>	Women are forced to step back from career opportunities, slowing advancement.	Burnier (2005), Christman and McClellan (2012)
	Relocation and other gender expectations	<p>"I had a baby, and the emotional stress of managing a team of 30 people and ... was a lot. And I just didn't feel like I was able to give my family what it needed."</p> <p>"I started looking for jobs in DC, and I should say I looked to move to DC because my fiancé lives in DC."</p>	Women often make career sacrifices, leading to unequal professional growth compared to male peers.	Burnier (2005)

<b>Gender Bias and Stereotyping</b>	Questioning women's qualifications	“Another colleague started going around saying, “Well, the only reason that he decided to do that was because she walks around in skirts and because she's young and because she's a woman.””	Undermines credibility and creates additional emotional and professional strain.	Eagly and Johnson (1990), de la Rey (2005)
	Gendered perceptions in hiring decisions	<p>“People at a higher level decided on someone else, who did happen to be a man, even though the person who was going to be directly working with me wanted me to take that position.”</p> <p>“When I interviewed for the a manager position, I had to interview with nine men. And I had one man in particular trying to tell me that I was a spoiled prima donna because I wanted the job.”</p>	Women are overlooked for positions despite being qualified, perpetuating gender inequality in leadership.	Eagly and Johnson (1990), de la Rey (2005)
<b>Structural barriers and Pay Disparities</b>	Flat hierarchies in nonprofits	<p>“Nonprofits in general... Most state-based or small nonprofits are pretty flat in terms of hierarchy. And so there's not a lot of room to go up unless you make a really giant move.”</p> <p>“So even in my own position now, the foundation's not big in terms of hierarchy. So there's not so many places to go up. And so if I were to want to run a foundation or lead more people, I would have to leave and go to a different type of institution. So that's a barrier, I think, is just structure and hierarchy.”</p>	Limited upward mobility in the nonprofit sector, creating a bottleneck for career advancement.	Dula et al. (2020)

	Systemic pay disparities	<p>“Nonprofits are dominated by women, yet we’re still underpaid.”</p> <p>“And the pay inequity as well, you know, between male and female and between people of color and others as well.”</p>	Women receive less compensation than men for similar roles, reflecting systemic inequity.	Burnier (2005)
<b>Internal Challenges</b>	Imposter syndrome	<p>“the biggest barrier that I would identify to my, like, rising through the ranks of leadership is internal, and that's self-confidence.</p> <p>“I’m sure you've heard all of the studies and the research on imposter syndrome. ... My experience with myself and seeing other women who are smart and skilled and hardworking, self-confidence is a huge factor. ... I think that is unique to being a female.”</p>	Decreases confidence, making it harder to assert authority and build professional relationships.	Burnier (2005), Christman and McClellan (2012)
	Hesitation to self-promote	<p>“I kind of took what was given in the beginning, like I would just be happy. But no, I would have pushed a little bit more, and I would have taken risks a lot sooner.”</p>	Prevents women from advocating for themselves, hindering career progression.	Burnier (2005), Christman and McClellan (2012)

## Strategies for Overcoming Leadership Barriers

### *Leveraging Networks and Mentorship*

One of the most frequently cited strategies in the interviews was the importance of building and maintaining strong professional networks and seeking mentorship. Participants described how these relationships provided critical support and advocacy, helping them navigate

complex organizational dynamics and break through leadership barriers. As one participant noted, “Having close women in your network who support you in your success and celebrate your success... has made the biggest difference for me.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying, “I have a group of women who are all in the same position that I have but at different colleges. It has been really helpful for me because I could go to people who knew what my work was but weren’t in my organization.”

The literature corroborates the critical role of mentorship and networking in advancing women’s leadership. Mandell and Pherwani (2003) emphasize the role of emotional intelligence in transformational leadership, particularly in forming meaningful connections and fostering collaboration. Burnier (2005) further highlights how mentorship programs provide women with resources and guidance that are often inaccessible in male-dominated environments. The interviews add depth to these findings by illustrating how mentorship can operate not only within but also across organizations, providing leaders with a broader perspective and support network.

### ***Reframing Barriers as Opportunities***

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the reframing of barriers as opportunities for growth and development. Participants described adopting a mindset that allowed them to view challenges not as obstacles but as opportunities to push beyond limitations and achieve greater success. As one leader shared, “I try not to see them as barriers. I see them as opportunities to really push past that and be strong... to create a better path for myself.” Another participant reflected, “You win, or you learn. It’s not a failure. It’s not a loss to me in any situation.”

This perspective aligns closely with the transformational leadership style described by Eagly et al. (2003), which emphasizes resilience, optimism, and the ability to inspire others

through a shared vision. By reframing setbacks as learning experiences, these leaders embody the transformational approach, demonstrating how a positive mindset can drive personal and organizational growth.

### ***Developing Leadership and Professional Skills***

Continuous learning emerged as a cornerstone strategy among participants, who consistently sought opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. Participants described how they pursued formal education, such as MPA degrees, attended leadership development programs, and engaged in workshops and training sessions. One participant remarked, “I try to sharpen best practices. I try to go to trainings and workshops—anything to build skills.” Another added, “The MPA program specifically helped with my critical thinking and analysis skills. Then there were hard and fast skills like statistics and research.”

The literature underscores the importance of education and professional development in equipping women with the tools needed for effective leadership. Burnier (2005) advocates for gender-inclusive curricula in leadership programs, emphasizing the need for coursework that addresses the unique challenges faced by women leaders. Similarly, Jones and Jones (2017) highlight how professional development and continuous self-assessment contribute to career success. The interviews reinforce these findings while also illustrating how participants applied their education directly to their work, bridging theoretical knowledge with practical expertise.

### ***Advocacy and Self-Promotion***

Self-advocacy and the ability to promote one’s achievements were highlighted as essential strategies for overcoming leadership barriers. Participants described how they learned to navigate environments where their contributions were often undervalued or overlooked. One participant shared, “I advocate for myself. I am always trying to strive to be the best version of

myself, and I didn't let other people's ideas or perceptions stop me." Another explained, "I've made efforts to brag more about my students, to brag more about my staff, to brag more about our events."

This emphasis on self-promotion aligns with findings by Burnier (2005), who discusses how women leaders must actively challenge gendered expectations and assert their professional worth. However, the interviews also reveal the discomfort many participants felt with this practice, highlighting the tension between self-promotion and traditional gender norms that discourage women from "boasting." Despite this discomfort, participants recognized self-advocacy as a necessary tool for advancing their careers.

### ***Balancing Authenticity with Adaptability***

Participants frequently discussed the importance of remaining authentic while adapting their leadership styles to suit different contexts. One leader remarked on the value of a collaborative leadership approach, saying, "Be confident in a democratic, collaborative leadership style. There's so much value in collaborative leadership, especially in nonprofits." Another participant described adjusting her assertiveness to make it more palatable: "I think I've shifted a little bit how that comes off in a way that's more approachable."

This ability to balance authenticity with adaptability reflects the relational leadership style described by Regan and Brooks (1995), which emphasizes inclusivity, collaboration, and the intrinsic value of all individuals. By fostering supportive environments and adapting to organizational cultures, participants were able to navigate hierarchical structures effectively while staying true to their leadership values.

### ***Insights Beyond the Literature***

In addition to aligning with existing research, the interviews revealed unique insights that extend the understanding of strategies for overcoming leadership barriers. One such insight was the emphasis on cultivating well-rounded interests beyond professional life. As one participant noted, “It’s important to develop your own interests and hobbies... being well-rounded people on top of well-rounded professionals.” This perspective, not widely reflected in the literature, highlights the role of personal fulfillment in sustaining long-term professional success.

Another unique theme was the use of vulnerability as a leadership tool. One participant explained, “I usually lead with a story about myself or something that I’ve been challenged with... there’s a way to be strong leaders and still demand equity and justice in a way that brings people to the table.” This approach underscores the power of authenticity in building trust and fostering inclusivity, offering a nuanced perspective on leadership that challenges traditional notions of authority.

*Table 2* summarizes strategies for overcoming leadership barriers, implication of the use of these strategies, and support from the literature if applicable.

*Table 2: Strategies for Overcoming Leadership Barriers*

Strategy	Quotes from Participants	Implication of the Strategy	Literature Discussing the Strategy
<b>Developing a Strong Network</b>	"Having close women in your network who support you in your success and celebrate your success."	Building a strong network provides emotional support and opens doors to new opportunities.	Burnier (2005); Dula et al. (2020)
	"I made some really close friends working in the state house who are also rising in leadership roles."	Networks enhance career progression in male-dominated spaces.	

<b>Proactively Seeking Mentorship</b>	"I've been intentional about asking and seeking out support."	Seeking mentors offers guidance and feedback necessary for navigating leadership challenges.	Mandell and Pherwani (2003); Burnier (2005)
	"Mentoring opportunities designed specifically for women have been vital for me."	Mentorship programs tailored for women enhance leadership growth.	
<b>Claiming Space and Addressing Imposter Syndrome</b>	"Even if I don't feel like I deserve a space here, I need to claim it."	Overcoming self-doubt is crucial for women to confidently step into leadership roles.	Mandell and Pherwani (2003)
	"You have to push past the feeling of not being good enough to really make an impact."	Imposter syndrome can hinder leadership aspirations unless actively countered.	
<b>Focusing on Professional Development</b>	"I try to sharpen best practices. I try to go to trainings and workshops."	Professional development enhances skill sets and prepares women for leadership challenges.	Jones and Jones (2017); Burnier (2005)
	"Pursuing the MPA helped me develop critical thinking and analysis skills that are essential for leadership."	Higher education equips women with both technical and analytical skills for leadership roles.	
<b>Advocating for Oneself</b>	"I advocate for myself. I am always trying to strive to be the best version of myself."	Self-advocacy helps women gain recognition and combat biases in workplace environments.	Mandell and Pherwani (2003)
	"If you don't advocate for yourself, no one else will."	Encouraging self-advocacy combats systemic inequalities and promotes career growth.	
<b>Leveraging Collaborative Leadership</b>	"Be confident in a democratic, collaborative leadership style. There's so much value in collaborative leadership."	Collaborative leadership aligns with transformational traits and is effective in nonprofit environments.	Mandell and Pherwani (2003)
	"I've learned that collaboration can drive change more effectively than going it alone."	Collaborative leadership builds stronger teams and fosters inclusivity.	

<b>Balancing Work and Life</b>	"I transitioned to roles that offered me work-life balance so I could spend more time with my family."	Prioritizing balance helps women sustain leadership roles without burnout.	Burnier (2005); Dula et al. (2020)
	"Choosing organizations that align with my values, including equity and balance, has been essential."	Work-life balance policies enhance employee satisfaction and retention, especially for women.	
<b>Building Relationships and Networking</b>	"When I see someone that I admire in my profession, I get time with them, and I'm very intentional with the time I set."	Intentional networking creates meaningful relationships that foster growth.	Mandell and Pherwani (2003); Burnier (2005)
	"Networking isn't just about mixers; it's about meaningful conversations that lead to real connections."	Women benefit from personalized approaches to networking rather than generic strategies.	

**Conclusion**

Women in nonprofit leadership continue to face significant barriers, ranging from structural limitations and societal expectations to gender biases and self-imposed challenges. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with female MPA Villanova University graduates, this study identified key obstacles to leadership advancement and highlighted the strategies women employ to navigate these challenges. The findings reinforce existing literature while also offering new insights into the lived experiences of women leaders in the nonprofit sector.

A key contribution of this research is the development of two comprehensive tables that summarize both the barriers to leadership and the strategies for overcoming them. These summaries provide a practical resource for future leaders, nonprofit organizations, and scholars seeking to understand and address gender disparities in leadership. Therefore, this study bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering both academic contributions and real-world applications.

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