

# Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Diverse Workforces: Structural and Psychological Barriers for Women Leaders—A Principal's Lived Experience

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## Abstract

*Despite decades of global advocacy for gender equity, women remain significantly underrepresented at senior levels within organizations—particularly in multicultural, male-dominated environments. Drawing upon both conceptual literature and lived personal experience, this study explores how structural barriers (such as opaque promotion systems and entrenched “old boys’ networks”) intersect with psychological mechanisms (including stereotype threat and the imposter phenomenon) to hinder women’s leadership advancement. The author reflects on her journey as a female principal of a leading Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institution in Guyana—navigating a professional landscape historically dominated by men. Early skepticism from male colleagues and deeply rooted systemic biases posed formidable challenges. However, through resilient, inclusive, and transformative leadership, the author led a decade of institutional growth and renewal. Under her stewardship, student enrolment increased from 1,200 to over 1,900 annually; graduation rates improved from 45% to 75%; institutional accreditation was achieved; ISO quality standards were initiated; student industry attachments surged from 15% to 86% and more women ascended to senior positions at the institute. By integrating academic frameworks with authentic leadership experience, this paper highlights the complex dynamics affecting women in leadership and presents practical, evidence-informed strategies for CARICOM employers. Recommendations include transparent promotion practices, gender-sensitive mentorship models, and organizational cultures that value diverse leadership styles—ultimately aiming to create more inclusive and equitable leadership pathways across the region.*

**Keywords:** *Glass Ceiling, Gender Leadership Gap, Guyana, Structural Barriers, Psychological Barriers, TVET.*

## Introduction

Women comprise nearly 40% of the global labour force, yet they continue to face disproportionate underrepresentation in top leadership roles, holding only 28% of C-suite positions [19, 20]. In Guyana, the gender gap is even more stark, especially in the extractive, engineering, and technical sectors—industries traditionally dominated by men [24]. Despite women accounting for 60% of all tertiary-level graduates, they occupy a mere 15% of

executive and decision-making positions in these fields [23]. These statistics point to a persistent misalignment between women’s educational qualifications and their professional advancement, underscoring the systemic nature of the barriers they face. This article seeks to revisit and expand the metaphor of the “glass ceiling,” drawing on both empirical research and lived experience to explore the institutional, cultural, and psychological challenges that continue to obstruct women’s leadership progression [28].

My own experience as a female principal in a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institution—an environment often perceived as the domain of men—has revealed the complex interplay of implicit bias, exclusionary practices, and systemic inertia. From the outset, I encountered scepticism and subtle resistance. My authority was questioned, my decisions were bypassed, and my capabilities were doubted. One senior instructor's comment, "This place needs a man," encapsulated the deep-rooted stereotypes that equate leadership legitimacy with masculinity. These remarks were not isolated, but rather emblematic of a broader institutional culture that implicitly devalues women in leadership roles [16, 17].

Yet, such adversity became a powerful catalyst for transformation. Rather than internalize these challenges, I used them as a springboard for change—modelling an inclusive and participatory leadership style, advocating for equity-oriented institutional policies, and mentoring emerging leaders, both male and female. Over the course of ten years, the institution saw marked improvements in student outcomes, faculty engagement, and external partnerships. Staff morale increased significantly, student registrations grew by over 50%, and industry placements expanded from 15% to 86%. These achievements were not merely operational; they signified a deeper cultural shift—one that proved leadership effectiveness is not determined by gender, but by competence, vision, and integrity.

The metaphor of the glass ceiling must therefore be reframed. It is not simply a barrier preventing women from reaching the top; it is a complex, often invisible web of institutional practices, gendered assumptions, and social expectations that restrict upward mobility. To dismantle it, we need both structural reforms—such as transparent promotion processes and inclusive governance—and cultural shifts that normalize diverse leadership models [18].

As more women take on leadership roles in male-dominated spaces like TVET, their presence becomes both a challenge to outdated norms and a beacon for the next generation [9]. Their success illustrates that leadership, when redefined through inclusivity and equity, can catalyse not only individual advancement but also systemic transformation [30].

## Research Aim

This study aims to examine how structural and psychological barriers impede women's leadership advancement in diverse workforce settings, with a particular focus on male-dominated environments. It incorporates autoethnographic reflections from a female principal in Guyana's vocational education sector to provide nuanced insights into gendered leadership challenges and resilience.

## Objectives

- 1. To identify dominant structural barriers cited in empirical studies, 2015–2025:** This objective aims to systematically examine peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2025 to uncover the prevailing structural impediments to women's leadership advancement, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Emphasis will be placed on institutional policies, organizational cultures, governance models, and promotion mechanisms that disproportionately hinder women's upward mobility.
- 2. To analyse psychological barriers that women face throughout career stages:** Beyond structural limitations, this study seeks to explore the psychological and intrapersonal challenges that women encounter at various stages of their professional trajectories. These include phenomena such as stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and the

internalization of societal expectations. The objective is to understand how these psychological barriers intersect with institutional factors and affect women's confidence, career progression, and leadership identity.

3. **To integrate lived experience of leadership resistance, resilience, and reform:** By incorporating an autoethnographic account of the author's tenure as a female principal in a male-dominated Guyanese TVET institution, this objective seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The study will examine how personal experiences of exclusion, challenge, and transformation can both affirm and enrich empirical findings, offering a nuanced perspective on how leadership is navigated and redefined in real-world contexts.
4. **To recommend evidence-based and experience-informed interventions for CARICOM institutions:** Drawing from both the reviewed literature and the author's lived experience, this objective aims to propose actionable strategies for improving gender equity in leadership across CARICOM member states. Recommendations will target institutional reforms, leadership development programs, and policy frameworks designed to dismantle gender-based barriers and foster inclusive, performance-driven leadership cultures in technical and professional education settings.

## Materials and Methods

A narrative literature review was conducted between March and June 2025 to examine the persistent structural and psychological barriers affecting women's leadership advancement, with a particular focus on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sectors. Databases searched included Scopus, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar, using key

terms such as "*glass ceiling*," "*TVET leadership*," "*intersectionality*," and "*psychological barriers*." Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed, published between 2015 and 2025, and addressed gendered leadership challenges within technical or male-dominated professional contexts.

A total of 82 articles met the inclusion criteria and were subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's 2006 [3, 4] six-phase process: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This methodology allowed for the identification of dominant patterns across the literature related to gender bias, organizational resistance, stereotype threat, and leadership resilience.

Complementing the literature review, an autoethnographic approach was employed to integrate the author's lived experience as a female principal in a male-dominated TVET institution in Guyana. Reflective journaling was used as the primary data collection tool, offering firsthand insights into navigating institutional bias, authority challenges, and transformative leadership practices. Autoethnography, as described by Ellis et al., 2011 [13], provides a methodologically rigorous framework for blending personal narrative with cultural analysis, thus deepening the contextual understanding of women's leadership within underrepresented professional environments [5].

## Results

The analysis revealed four dominant themes that illustrate the multidimensional challenges women face in ascending to and sustaining leadership roles in male-dominated TVET environments. These findings are informed by both thematic insights from the literature and autoethnographic reflections from the author's leadership journey.

1. **Organizational Architecture:** Structural barriers embedded within institutional frameworks hinder upward mobility for women. These include opaque promotion policies, hierarchical decision-making, and male-dominated governance bodies [25]. In my experience, reform proposals were routinely deferred or dismissed unless reintroduced by male colleagues—a pattern reflecting the covert gatekeeping mechanisms often present in technical institutions.
2. **Social Capital Access:** Access to influential informal networks remains skewed. Literature on workplace dynamics emphasizes the enduring influence of male-centric “old boys’ clubs” in shaping career advancement [29]. I was routinely excluded from informal gatherings where key decisions were made. In response, I cultivated alternative networks with external stakeholders—including ministries, NGOs, and private-sector leaders—to amplify institutional visibility and legitimacy.
3. **Identity-Based Bias:** The leadership culture in TVET often valorises traits culturally coded as masculine, which delegitimizes female authority [2]. Throughout my tenure, I faced scepticism regarding my technical knowledge and leadership capacity. Male subordinates hesitated to follow directives, reinforcing gendered power dynamics. It was only as measurable institutional gains emerged that my leadership began to be taken seriously.
4. **Internalized Constraints:** Psychological barriers such as the imposter phenomenon initially eroded my confidence, aligning with findings [7]. However, quantifiable successes—such as an increase in student registrations from 1,200 to 1,900 annually and improved industry placement rates from 15% to 86%—enabled a critical

reframing of my self-image from “outsider” to innovator. This personal transformation affirms the role of performance-based validation in disrupting internalized gender stereotypes.

## Discussion

The findings affirm multilevel theories of gendered leadership by demonstrating how structural discrimination—from microaggressions and exclusionary networks to rigid norms—creates fertile ground for psychological barriers, such as imposter phenomenon, to take root [21]. These structural dynamics not only restrict access to leadership but also foster internalized doubt, highlighting that the glass ceiling is both an external obstruction and an internalized condition [19]. My personal narrative underscores this dual impact: professional skepticism and institutional barriers gave rise to persistent self-questioning even amid success.

Yet the story also illustrates that meaningful change is possible. Through a resilient vision, strong community and industry coalitions, and a data-driven leadership approach, women can reshape institutions from within. This aligns with recommendations for evidence-based equity initiatives that operate at individual, organizational, and institutional levels to dismantle bias and support inclusive leadership development [27]. What began as resistance became transformation: structural obstacles were steadily dismantled, imposter feelings gradually gave way to confidence, and exclusionary norms were replaced by inclusive practices. In sum, by confronting both systemic barriers and internalized limitations, women can redefine institutions that once excluded them, paving the way for equitable leadership opportunities.

## Recommendations

Grounded in both research and practice, the following multi-level interventions are proposed to dismantle gendered leadership barriers and cultivate inclusive institutions:

**Bias-Aware Metrics:** Transition performance evaluations to competency-based appraisal systems, reducing subjective bias and gatekeeping [12]. Evidence from fairness-aware ranking models underscores how structured, objective metrics can mitigate bias without sacrificing organizational utility [16].

**Sponsorship Over Mentorship:** Move beyond traditional mentoring toward formalized sponsorship programs, where senior leaders actively advocate for women's advancement by securing opportunities and resources. Research shows that women are often over-mentored but under-sponsored, and sponsorship is critical for career progression and higher leadership attainment [8].

**Leadership Identity Safety:** Make female leadership visible and celebrated through institutional storytelling, awards, and inclusive branding cues. Such counter-stereotype exposure can reduce implicit bias and reinforce leadership identity safety [6].

**Psychological Empowerment:** Embed resilience coaching and imposter phenomenon training within professional development programs. Longitudinal evaluations of women's leadership programs show coaching enhances self-efficacy and organizational influence over time [15].

**Regional Alignment:** Align institutional policies with CARICOM's Gender Equality Indicators and gender mainstreaming frameworks, integrating them into national accreditation and quality assurance standards. CARICOM member states are progressively implementing gender-responsive tools and monitoring mechanisms to support inclusive governance and institutional accountability [1, 4].

## Conclusion

Breaking the glass ceiling is not solely about enabling individual women to reach top leadership positions; it is about reconfiguring the structural, cultural, and psychological foundations of leadership so that the path to the top is no longer riddled with invisible, yet deeply entrenched, barriers. Within the context of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)—a sector historically and culturally dominated by men—this challenge becomes particularly acute. As a female principal who has navigated exclusion, resisted normative gender expectations, and implemented reform from within, I can attest to the resilience and vision required to redefine leadership in such spaces.

In male-dominated environments, competence alone is often insufficient. What is required is a leadership model grounded in *transformational resilience*, one that is not about conforming to existing paradigms but rather about reshaping them [26]. Women leaders must challenge the dominant narrative that equates leadership with masculinity and technical prowess, often at the expense of collaboration, inclusion, and empathy—qualities that research increasingly links with effective leadership [10, 11].

Literature on women's leadership advancement suggests that the most enduring progress is achieved through a dual strategy: *institutional reform* and *individual empowerment*. Structural changes such as transparent promotion systems, anti-bias training, and gender-inclusive governance create enabling conditions for equity [14]. Simultaneously, psychological enablers—such as mentorship, leadership coaching, and identity-affirming development programs—help women to internalize their right to lead and thrive in roles traditionally closed to them [22].

My experience as a principal reflects this intersection of reform and empowerment. The shift in institutional culture—from passive resistance to active collaboration—was not

achieved through authority alone, but through consistent modelling of inclusive, performance-driven leadership. Over time, measurable gains in student enrolment, industry partnerships, and staff engagement began to validate not only my leadership but also the broader idea that leadership can and should look different. This transformation did not just benefit me; it laid a new foundation for future leaders—regardless of gender—to rise without facing the same obstacles.

In conclusion, the metaphorical glass ceiling must be understood not as a single surface to shatter, but as a multilayered system of interlocking barriers—organizational, cultural, and psychological—that require persistent and intentional dismantling. When institutions invest in both equity and empowerment, they do more than open doors for women—they foster

cultures where leadership is diversified, inclusive, and truly transformative. Only then can the legacy of leadership reflect the full spectrum of talent and potential in our societies.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest.

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