

**Beyond the Double Bind: Female Leaders' Experience in  
Corporate South Africa**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

03 November 2025

## DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research investigated how women in senior leadership roles in corporate South Africa, experience and navigate the double bind in their careers, guided by role congruity theory. Furthermore, it investigated how women leaders are developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations, to provide insights beyond gender and into the evolution of an understanding of leadership.

Data was collected via 18 semi-structured interviews with senior women, currently sitting on the executive committee of their respective organisation, or reporting to a member of the executive committee. Qualitative narrative inquiry via induction was employed to understand their lived experiences of the double bind.

Reflexive thematic analysis found that senior women leaders in South Africa, are actively reframing the tightrope of the double bind, viewing it as more than a personal dilemma, but as a clear indicator of an outdated leadership model. Their navigation strategies are underpinned by a decision to focus on authenticity as the anchor. This authenticity is a contextual intelligence tool, empowering them beyond the binary conundrum (agency vs. communion), toward a fluid, relational and effective leadership spectrum. This research contributes to challenging the notion of the double bind and how women view it, implying that they see as perpetuating the underdeveloped definition of leadership, rather than as a barrier that limits their personal effectiveness.

Systemic support for women and a deeper understanding of the role of culture on women leaders' success and integration, remains relevant, with an emphasis on the need to include women in the leadership of cultural transformation programs. Furthermore, identity work can empower women to operate authentically beyond the double bind. Similar studies amongst younger female leaders and at lower levels in organisations, would detail how the double bind is experienced at more junior levels. An emphasis on intersectionality and the relationship between race, culture, age and gender in the double bind experience, would close the gap in this study. The research did not consider the complexity of sex and gender, nor did it consider transgender or non-binary identities.

**Keywords:** Double Bind, Gender, Leadership, Role Congruity Theory

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CHRO	Chief Human Resources Officer
COO	Chief Operating Officer
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
ExCo	Executive Committee
GIBS	Gordon Institute of Business Science
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NDP	National Development Plan
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDG 5	Sustainable Development Goal 5
STEM	science, technology, engineering and maths
UN	United Nations

# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROBLEM**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The lack of female representation in leadership roles is an ongoing issue within business, globally and in South Africa (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Buss et al., 2025). The most significant barriers preventing balanced representation of women in leadership are a result of behavioural and cultural dynamics and gendered perceptions of the definition of leadership (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025). Whilst there has been an improvement in the representation of women in the workplace, the absence of transformation at senior levels is a challenge. Research into the barriers women face in reaching leadership levels within organisations is abundant, but there is a gap in the understanding of how women who have succeeded and reached senior leadership roles, have navigated the barriers described in academic literature (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023).

Whilst there are many challenges facing women in leadership, one such challenge, known as the double bind, was the focus of this research. This study explored how women in senior leadership roles in corporate South Africa experience and navigate the double bind in their careers, and how they are developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations. This chapter provides some detail around the double bind to provide a background to the research problem, as well as the practical and theoretical purpose of this research, within the context of South Africa.

## **1.2 Background to the Research Problem**

In leadership roles, women often find themselves faced with a phenomenon that is multifaceted and complex, known as the double bind (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The double bind was originally defined almost 70 years ago by Bateson et al. (1956), in the field of psychology, initially to describe schizophrenic symptoms resulting from competing messages (Hirji, 2021). The term then expanded to other social situations where people are faced with dilemmas or difficult choices. This was then popularised in mainstream media by the book *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995), describing the dilemmas women face in the workplace.

The double bind is a result of gender stereotypes that influence not only daily life, but also women in leadership roles in organisations. The seminal work of Eagly and Karau (2002), states that leader roles are often in conflict with the female gender stereotype, because of the expectations that leaders are agentic, and women are communal. Agentic traits such as confidence, ambition and assertiveness are viewed by society as an indication of competence in a leadership context. Communal traits, on the other hand, such as warmth, empathy and collaboration are typically attributed to the female gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002). As such, the double bind is the contradictory expectation for women in leadership to demonstrate both traditionally perceived feminine traits, such as empathy and warmth, as well as traditionally perceived masculine traits, of competence and assertiveness (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Eagly & Carli, 2018). The expectation is that women need to demonstrate both to be effective leaders (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). The double bind has been fuelled by the binary stereotype of leadership, whereby the typical leader is agentic and therefore male. This view has resulted in extensive research into how these prototypes disadvantage women, who are stereotypically viewed as communal but lacking agency (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025).

The traditional understanding of leadership is that there is an agency-communality trade-off, rather than viewing it as a spectrum, requiring the blend of behaviours depending on the context and situation (Feng et al., 2025). Instead of understanding the relationship between agency and communion, what followers prefer, and what outcomes are achieved, research has instead considered the preference for male versus female leaders who exhibit agency, disqualifying the alternatives (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). In addition, research into agency has been done without consideration for the differentiated types of agency, and which of those are favourable for male and female leaders (Ma et al., 2022b). This distinction of the types of agentic behaviour provides an explanation for the previously held view that women are penalised when they demonstrate gender incongruent agency (Ma et al., 2022b). The impact of this is that the binary view of leadership, the binary view of gender, and the stereotypical assumptions about how each gender leads, are under scrutiny.

Women leaders who do not successfully manage the tightrope balance of the double bind, by being both warm and competent, can face negative repercussions (Ryan &

Morgenroth, 2024). This tension that women need to manage, means that they often experience a penalty for displaying agentic traits that are assumed to demonstrate competence by violating female gender norms (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). When women display agentic traits, they can be perceived as unpopular or too aggressive, and this can place added pressure on women to expend additional effort into how they come across, by blending agency and communion (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). The effect of these gender biases in the workplace is that women encounter more barriers than men when trying to progress in their careers, when applying for jobs or seeking promotion. In these situations, gender bias applied to the way women are evaluated leads to unfair disadvantage (Heilman et al., 2024).

The double bind has garnered attention not only in academia but also in popular media. Psychology Today, Harvard Business Review and other online leadership and management magazines describe this challenge for women in rising through the ranks, offering advice as to how to navigate it (McCollum, 2023; Wells & MacAulay, 2025). However, the framing of this phenomenon is quite different across the two domains. Popular media tends to highlight individual stories and high-profile female leaders as examples of being “too soft” or too “tough (Wells & MacAulay, 2025, para.7), depicting the double bind as a balancing act, reducing it to challenges around confidence, communication or leadership style. The focus is often on quick fixes, such as coaching, or stories of women who have broken through the glass ceiling, Hilary Clinton being a popular example of this. In both her presidential campaigns, Hilary was subject to gender discrimination, with reference to the double bind whereby she was judged no matter the leadership and communication approach she took (Goldenberg, 2015). In addition, the hair care brand TRESemmé, owned by the FMCG giant Unilever, ran a campaign in 2017 in collaboration with a gender justice NGO, to conduct a study into the prevalence of women experiencing the double bind. Using the high frequency of women experiencing these contradictory expectations, they encouraged women to embrace their personal style as a powerful tool (Meisel, 2022). Whilst this campaign raised awareness of the double bind, it can be argued that it was an example of Femwashing, whereby as commercial entities, they used feminist struggles for their commercial branding (Hainneville et al., 2023).

In contrast, Femvertising seeks to authentically empower women through the use of transparent and respectful messages that seek to challenge gender stereotypes,

rather than only capitalise on them (Hainneville et al., 2023). In this example, TRESemmé perpetuated gendered beauty norms and placed the responsibility on women to navigate the double bind they face, whilst also not supporting women with these challenges beyond the campaign to generate profit. As well as this, the campaign inadvertently placed emphasis on women using their appearance as a way to manage gender bias, which would likely enhance their femininity, thereby potentially perpetuating the double bind, through assumptions made about their leadership abilities (Giacomin et al., 2022). Women continue to receive mixed messages around achieving career success and what it takes to get there: notably in 2018, EY held a women's leadership training event in which female leaders were guided to be agreeable and wait their turn in order to develop professionally (Peck, 2019).

These stories and attention in the press raise awareness; however, they also oversimplify the issue, suggesting the responsibility lies with women, rather than the structures that produce the double bind (Wilsher, 2024). In contrast to this, scholars view the double bind as a system and structural phenomenon, rooted in theoretical frameworks describing gender bias and discrimination (Kark et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2018). This contrast between the popular media narrative and the academic narrative highlights a gap: whilst the double bind is popularised in the media and the responsibility of overcoming this is placed on women, the structural roots are ignored. Scholars have long discussed the glass ceiling in women's leadership, describing the invisible barriers women face when attempting to reach senior leadership roles because of gender stereotypes (Heilman et al., 2024). Whilst the glass ceiling limits women's opportunities to reach these roles, the double bind affects their legitimacy enroute and once they are there (Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

There has been some progress in the representation of women in leadership roles; however, women are still underrepresented compared to the global female population (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The Grant Thornton Women in Business 2025 report shows that 34% of senior management roles globally are held by women, an increase from 19.4% in 21 years (Grant Thornton, 2025). Notably, the South African statistics of women in leadership roles, show an increase from 26.5% to 47.2% in the last 21 years (Grant Thornton, 2025). However, according to the

Women's Report 2025, only 6% of the world's CEOs are women, having increased slightly by 1% since 2022 (Bosch, 2025).

In the Women @ Work report by Deloitte (2024), it was found that whilst most women (75%) desire to progress to senior leadership roles, 25% do not, and the main reason for this is the culture where they are currently working in. When workplace culture dynamics are unpacked in this report, 25% of women experience inappropriate actions or comments from senior leadership in their organisations that deter their ambitions. According to a McKinsey study (2024), Women in the Workplace 2024, working environments have not improved for women: they continue to feel it is harder for them to advance and that their gender limits their progress. Not enough support from their managers, and the likelihood of experiencing bias that questions their abilities and their leadership potential, are cited as strong concerns (Krivkovich et al., 2024).

### **1.3 South African Context**

The Commission for Gender Equality published a report in 2024, 'Women in the South African Economy in 2024', despite the policies in place to address and advance women's economic participation in South Africa through the National Development Plan (NDP) and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment legislation, amongst others, progress is slow, and women continue to face challenges in achieving gender equality. The hurdles that women are facing in the labour market include societal stereotypes in relation to gender roles, pay gaps and other institutional barriers that slow women's career advancement in South Africa (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024). In addition, research in Western societies has shown that in societies where there is economic inequality, masculine traits are regarded over feminine traits, adding to the challenges women face through the emphasis on role incongruent behaviours (Moreno-Bella et al., 2023). Economic inequality is ever present in South Africa, and therefore, may result in greater gender discrimination based on a stronger preference for more masculine traits, exacerbating the prevalence of the double bind (Moreno-Bella et al., 2023).

The advancements in gender equality legislation and private sector diversity initiatives in South Africa have contributed to positive strides in the representation of women in senior leadership positions, according to the Grant Thornton Women in

Business 2025 Report. Through their research, which digs deeper into the C-Suite roles in business, significant variations in the representation of women in South Africa are clear. For example, 35,2% of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are women and 38.5% are Chief Operating Officers (COOs). In contrast, 52.7% of Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) are female, and 57.1% of Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) are female (Grant Thornton, 2025). Functional roles are often considered extensions of communal or relational competencies, as they are considered supporting roles for others with operational responsibilities. These qualities are typically seen as feminine, and women are rewarded for displaying them (Eagly & Karau, 2002). CEO and COO roles are operational and strategic, and associated with typical leadership traits of the agency, attributed to men. Given the prevalence of the double bind and the backlash that can ensue when women violate these gender norms, organisations may be inadvertently placing women into these leadership roles, where their communal strengths are valued and do not threaten masculine examples of leadership and power (Yoshikawa et al., 2024).

Studies in the US imply that an increase in female CHROS may have a detrimental effect on the appointment of other women to senior executive positions (Yoshikawa et al., 2024). A focus on the CHRO as a post for females, given the gender association of it being a more feminine role, can reduce gender diversity at the executive committee (ExCo) level (Yoshikawa et al., 2024). Whilst the context of South Africa is different, there may be a word of caution for organisations in South Africa against viewing the CHRO role as a gender specific role, given 57% of CHROs in the country are female (Grant Thornton, 2025). In addition, these disparities in gender across roles exist contrary to the evidence that gender diversity within leadership teams tends to improve financial outperformance, amongst other non-financial benefits for businesses (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023; Fouad et al., 2023).

Research conducted in South Africa this year by First for Women, who are owned by Telesure Investment Holdings, the insurance group, found that 90% of the 4,000 women surveyed, viewed "softness and gentleness as forms of strength", while 94% placed emphasis on "balance over ambition" (Mashamaite, 2025, para. 2). As such, women in South Africa are demonstrating the sentiment to lead towards a future where strength and softness, achievement and wellbeing, and individual and collective success, can exist together (Mashamaite, 2025). This acknowledgement

and the ability to put their voice to their unique strengths and what they value, is an indication that there may be a shift from a defensive and adaptive approach when faced with judgment for communal qualities, to interpreting these as legitimate sources of power.

Ubuntu is an ancient African word, with deep roots in South Africa, focusing on interconnectedness (Muller et al., 2019). The philosophy was only recorded in literature in the 1990s. Previously, Ubuntu was verbally passed down from one generation to the next through storytelling, providing a foundation of hope and leadership (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025). In South Africa, Ubuntu as a philosophy directs the way many of the population live their lives, and furthermore, other cultures in South Africa may exercise these principles without referring to it as Ubuntu (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025). Ubuntu leadership has garnered the attention of scholars recently in South Africa, as it redefines successful leadership through community, empathy, and collective purpose (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025). In popular media, there have been calls for human-centred leadership, inspired by the philosophy of Ubuntu (Khumalo, 2025). HR Practitioners are arguing for greater attention to be placed on people skills, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, reframing these soft skills as essential skills. In South African, where production-oriented business forms a large part of the economy, individual contributors who are promoted to line manager roles, are often not trained in how to lead, and the concept of Ubuntu could enable these new managers to build relationships and lead with confidence (Khumalo, 2025). The increased attention on Ubuntu leadership demonstrates an openness to non-typical styles of leadership, towards communal approaches, that may contribute to reducing the double bind tensions women experience.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Research**

Whilst the above context suggests attempts have been made towards providing an inclusive environment for women globally and in South Africa, it hides challenges for women holding these leadership roles or aspiring to hold leadership roles. In addition, the business and economic case for diversity in organisations is clear; diverse leadership teams demonstrate improved action orientation, increased innovation, and enhanced financial performance (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). Organisations that effectively support women leaders' growth and progression stand to gain a competitive advantage through these diversity benefits. This research topic holds

particular relevance in South Africa, in that diversity breeds diversity (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Increased representation of women in the workplace further encourages more women to take seats in the economy, which then impacts gender equality across society, by providing women with a voice and financial backing (Statistics South Africa, 2024). In a study conducted by Born et al. (2022), the willingness of women to lead teams based on a team's gender composition was assessed, and it was found that women are less willing to lead teams that are composed of more men than women, highlighting that more women in a team increases a woman's desire to then lead that team. Hence, diversity leads to further diversity (Born et al., 2022).

Whilst previous research has examined various ways women cope with the double bind in the workplace (Chikwe et al., 2024; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023), insufficient attention has been given specifically to how women in leadership roles in South Africa do this. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to better understand the double bind in the South African context.

## **1.5 Business Need for the Study**

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), established by the United Nations in 2015, aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls across the globe (UN Women, n.d.). SDG 5 is central to achieving all 17 of the SDGs as gender equality is a broad-reaching and fundamental human right (United Nations, 2025). Despite progress, the world is not on track to achieve the goals set by 2030, given the slow progress to close leadership and pay gaps, amongst other reasons (United Nations, 2025).

A 2019 report from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) demonstrated that gender diversity improves business performance, with two-thirds of the surveyed companies reporting that their diversity initiatives improved their business outcomes (International Labour Organization, 2020). However, whilst there is a business case for diversity, with concrete evidence including a more comprehensive understanding of success, beyond financial gain, the implication that there should be an economic rationale to recognise any group of human beings, is problematic (Ely & Thomas, 2020). As such, gender equality should be an imperative born out of the human case, rather than the business case (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

There are several paradoxes within the field of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), despite being grounded in the pursuit of social justice (Bosch, 2024). For example, in South Africa, high unemployment, a large youth population and business contraction, provide a complex set of dynamics. Employers may find themselves replacing current employees with those from previously disadvantaged groups, such as women, in response to legislation that mandates diversity. This means the pursuit of social justice can clash with the reality of job scarcity; therefore, efforts to enhance social justice may worsen the tensions in an economically tough market (Bosch, 2024). Care needs to be taken to consider paradoxes such as these, in the pursuit of balanced workplace justice, that doesn't produce another set of tensions for marginalised groups, such as women, to manage (Bosch, 2024). Kumalo and Nkomo (2024), state that achieving gender equality in South Africa is fundamentally connected to women's participation in the economy and financial inclusion. Without deliberate strategies to address the challenges women face, businesses will perpetuate inequity and miss opportunities to use a vital part of the workforce.

Leadership development programs geared towards women, often have a narrative that implies women need to be fixed, and that they are partly responsible for the challenges they face in their growth and development (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). This is misplaced, as it fails to recognise the impact of gender expectations and the implications for organisational approaches to leadership development. It is further emphasised that fixing women to fit the masculine stereotypical view of leadership is not the right approach, and could perpetuate discrimination (Day et al., 2021). Popular media is advocating for business and society to relieve conflicting expectations on women, as part of reducing hurdles they face in leadership (Hewlett, 2019; McCollum, 2023). A study to review the challenges women face contributes to creating inclusive business practices and development programs, improves business performance, and thereby contributes to long-term economic growth and social justice.

## **1.6 Theoretical Need for the Study**

From an academic perspective, this research addresses calls for more contextually varied research into the double bind and the strategies women employ (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). Systemic change in gendered perspectives of leadership, requires a richer understanding of the qualities that women bring to their

leadership roles that break the stereotype of what “ideal workers” look like, what “ideal leaders” and even what business success looks like (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024, p.557). The idea of the “ideal leader” stereotype appears to have changed over the past ten years, with a reduction in the desire for traditionally perceived masculine leadership traits, and an increase in preferences for traditionally perceived feminine leadership traits (Vial et al., 2025, p. 413).

Research is driving the review of the essence of leadership, through a focus on leadership as relational, questioning the outdated emphasis on agency (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). An added nuance that needs further understanding, is that followers prefer leaders who are more communal, and this means not always being agentic, but taking a context-specific approach to crafting a leadership style (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). Furthermore, it is emphasised that organisations should not only attend to developing an individual's influence, but also their ability to lead effectively (Newstead et al., 2021). By analysing and understanding strategies and approaches that enable women to lead effectively despite the double bind, this study aims to contribute to developing more diverse and inclusive leadership theory. In fact, a focus on women's leadership styles, may help emphasise the significance of communal traits, with the potential to break down barriers for women in leadership (Vial et al., 2025).

## **1.7 Delimitations**

The research aimed to understand how women navigate one of the complexities in leadership as a result of gender bias, namely the double bind. Put more descriptively, how do women balance the social expectations of them as women in their leadership roles, versus the typically accepted traits of leadership, which tend to be associated with agentic behaviours. This research focused on the stories and experiences of women leaders and treated gender in binary terms (male and female), as it is commonly defined in organisational research and business structures. The research did not consider the complexity of sex and gender, nor did it consider transgender or non-binary identities. The intention was not to minimise the importance of these contributions, but rather to reflect the scope and delimitations of the project, and the alignment with the existing body of knowledge on the double bind, historically discussed through a gender binary lens.

## **1.8 Chapter Summary**

Schultheiss argues that there has been a development towards focusing on diversity in leadership theories that can provide frameworks to promote research into women's leadership approaches and objectives (Schultheiss, 2021). Women in senior leadership roles in corporate South Africa face an ongoing challenge of the double bind that restricts their leadership success and career growth. This phenomenon is well researched globally (Kark et al., 2024; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023), but the research on how it manifests in a South African context and the strategies women employ is limited.

This study considered the impact of the double bind on women in South Africa and its impact on business. Understanding these experiences of women provides insights beyond gender, and into the evolution of the understanding of leadership: interrogating the assumption that leadership is agentic, and arguing that it is, in fact, relational, requiring a careful blend of a variety of leadership behaviours.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The need to delve further into the experiences of the double bind of women in senior leadership roles in corporate South Africa has been discussed in Chapter 1. Having introduced the concept of the double bind in Chapter 1, the aim of this chapter is to understand the evolution of leadership theory, and as such, our current understanding of what effective leadership is defined as, which perpetuates the double bind experiences women face. The chapter ends with a discussion around how women navigate the double bind, the strategies they employ, the organisational support provided and required, and the future research required to understand how to continue the journey to empower women in their leadership roles.

The primary academic framework used for reviewing the double bind is role congruity theory, incorporating studies of backlash, leadership resonance and women's leadership identity into the review, to allow for greater complexity of understanding of the phenomenon. Whilst there are intersections of other identities (race, generation, etc.) that impact women in leadership roles beyond their gender, the scope of this study focuses on gender, specifically as experienced by the participants interviewed.

### **2.2 Leadership**

Whilst the academic research done on leadership is plentiful and important, no single definition has been accepted as universal: these tend to cover how people lead and not what leadership actually is (Genza, 2021). Rothausen (2023) argues that whilst there is some consensus around the definition of leadership, it is largely described as a top-down process of influence, done by a solo agent, being the leader. Traditionally, leadership is seen as power over, and there is evidence of a shift to power with, and power through others, via a human centric and contextual approach (Leroy et al., 2025; Madsen, 2024). Abstract or universal definitions of leadership do not take context, culture or social norms, and thereby gender, into account, overlooking how power has typically operated over time (Rothausen, 2023). Contemporary definitions are more inclusive in nature, and this indicates optimism for women to be better represented in leadership roles (Madsen, 2024).

Leadership is defined by Nyberg et al. (2025) as the intended influence placed over others to instruct, organise and enable activities and relationships in a team or a business. Its purpose is to achieve shared objectives through conscious influence, to move an organisation to what it is and what it aims to be (Liden et al., 2025; Nyberg et al., 2025). Leadership is demonstrated by actions, and leaders are those who inspire or engage followers, which can develop outside of a title or power (Liden et al., 2025). Research is also highlighting the relevance of employee wellbeing in the modern world, and the importance of HRM practices and leadership styles in achieving that is emphasized (Wunderlich & Løkke, 2025). Whilst traditional theories of leadership often view leadership as a result of hierarchical power and titles, this is perpetuated in practice and continues to fuel gender gaps in leadership, given women struggle to access to power (Koburtay et al., 2019; Phipps & Prieto, 2021). Genza (2021) continues to argue that a clear and inclusive definition of leadership is needed to further develop leadership theory and practice, as it provides a platform for effective review, advancement and training. Without this, cultivating future leaders will continue to be vague and lacking impact.

It is useful at this stage to distinguish between leadership theory and leadership styles. Leadership theories are the frameworks describe how and why leadership is effective, considering the mechanisms that leaders employ to influence followers and achieve results (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Leadership styles are the patterns of behaviour and interaction that leaders use to achieve results, in other words, the how of leadership, and many leadership styles stem from the broader leadership theory (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). The local academic discourse argues that women in South Africa craft different leadership styles from those typically seen in men (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). In the following section, the focus is on six prominent and at times gendered leadership styles, as these provide an understanding of how women's leadership is perceived and experienced in organisations. In later sections, gender and bias theories, such as role congruity and backlash are explored as a way to explain the lens through which women's leadership is judged.

### **2.2.1 Leadership Styles**

There is a crisis within leadership science, as research has produced various styles, each one receiving media attention as the solution to what leadership looks like (Eva et al., 2024). Currently, the field is dominated by mention of Charismatic and

Transformational Leadership, which have nonetheless been criticised for being ill-defined and lacking a moral foundation (Eva et al., 2024). Transformational Leadership is often compared with Transactional leadership, and this is symbolic of gendered differences, whereby women tend to demonstrate the former style, and men the latter (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). Adherence to prescriptive gender roles can therefore lead to gendered leadership styles, which continue to reinforce restrictions for women in organisations (Hanek & Garcia, 2022). In addition, the focus has been that good outcomes are a result of 'good' leadership styles, and vice versa. However, studies show that the reality is not as straightforward; positive leadership can at times have negative repercussions and negative leadership can have positive outcomes (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Liden et al., 2025). A focus on what leadership ideally should be, may bring more attention to the importance of feminine attributes in leadership (Vial et al., 2025).

Transactional Leadership describes a more traditional and hierarchical leadership approach, more agentic in style and focused on reward and punishment as a way to achieve outcomes (Abbas & Ali, 2023). This style is often the most prevalent in organisations, yet the academic discourse receives less attention, given the emphasis in popular media on styles such as Transformational Leadership and Authentic Leadership (Young et al., 2021). Transactional leaders use their personality traits to motivate employees to achieve organisational objectives, particularly through their confidence and determination (Dong, 2023). It is unfair to cast a cloud over this style of leadership, as there may be some benefits and contexts where it is required (Young et al., 2021). However, overuse of these traits can result in an authoritarian style, as well as a lack of empathy, which impacts teamwork (Dong, 2023). Therefore, leaders employing this style need to ensure they adapt to the context and individual where necessary, to demonstrate empathy (Liden et al., 2025). There is evidence to suggest that Transactional Leadership still holds relevance, but that context is an important consideration to mitigate some of the negative effects of reduced independence, whilst reaping the benefits of empowerment (Young et al., 2021). Given the more masculine nature of the behaviours of transactional leadership, women often face backlash when employing this style, as they are criticised for a lack of empathy, which is seen as incongruent with societal expectations of them (Lee, 2023).

Transformational Leadership was developed to enhance the theory of Transactional Leadership (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Transformational Leadership describes leaders who engage with each employee as a result of their understanding of them (Bakker et al., 2023). This highly relational and individualised style has received the most attention of all the styles in recent years, with significant evidence to support its effectiveness through its ability to transform followers (Liden et al., 2025). Transformational Leadership has often been associated with women's style of leadership as it emphasises behaviours such as motivation through inspiration, personal consideration and the development of followers, all of which align with the communal and collaborative traits traditionally ascribed to women (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Empirical studies show that women score higher on Transformational Leadership dimensions than men, through empathy, mentoring and engaging decision making (Shen & Joseph, 2021). Whilst this association has been considered as evidence that women bring notable abilities to leadership, it also continues to demonstrate the gendered view of leadership, as it reinforces the assumptions that women are more relational and nurturing (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Whilst much of the discourse suggests that transactional leadership and Transformational Leadership are opposites, there is the view that they are, in fact, complementary, and both are needed for effective leadership (Madsen, 2024). In the South African context, research into the leadership styles that senior women leaders in corporate employ showed they align more with the Transformational Leadership style, as this is how they have been socialised and raised (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022).

Authentic leadership builds upon Transformational Leadership and was introduced to incorporate the complexities arising in contemporary leadership and to distinguish between genuine displays of Transformational Leadership and more manipulative manifestations (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Madsen, 2024). This style has a foundation in positive psychology, describing authenticity as underpinned by trust and influence in a sustainable manner (Gardner et al., 2021). Authentic Leadership suggests that effective leaders' behaviours are aligned with their true selves and their moral fibre (Gardner et al., 2021; Madsen, 2024). Whilst there is value in an authentic leadership style, care needs to be taken against using it as a universal solution (Gardner et al., 2021). Effective leadership requires navigating social and political norms, requiring diplomacy and flexibility, which at times may conflict with one's true self and the

foundation of Authentic Leadership (Ayaz et al., 2024). For women in leadership, an Authentic Leadership style can be appealing, as it reinforces relational and empathic approaches that oppose the more hierarchical or transactional styles (Gardner et al., 2021). However, this style may reflect naivety, given the realities of organisations and societies (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). The construct of this style is based on individualistic principles, namely agentic and stereotypically masculine behaviours, whereas women tend to display more collective behaviours. Acting authentically may therefore expose them to the double bind and subsequent backlash as they behave in ways that contradict gender expectations (Madsen, 2024). Atypical leaders, those leaders who don't fit the typical male-centric view of a leader, spend time, effort and expend emotion on building a multidimensional identity, thus engaging in more 'emotional labour' than their typical leader counterparts (Ayaz et al., 2024). As such, it may be harder for women to demonstrate authenticity through an authentic leadership style, given the gender bias they typically operate in, and the 'emotional labour' required to manage varying personas and identities (Ayaz et al., 2024). Whilst South African women leaders tend to favour a Transformational Leadership style, they are also acutely aware of their roles and responsibilities as leaders, demonstrating some correlation with the components of Authentic Leadership (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022).

Servant Leadership was introduced to describe a leadership style as a paradox of the traditional approaches that focus on the concerns of the leader, to shift attention to servicing the needs of the follower (Madsen, 2024). This leadership style retains its prominence in contemporary leadership research as it focuses on developing others, sharing power and ultimately reducing the adoration of the leader (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). There is evidence to suggest that Servant Leadership may counteract the disadvantage women face in the workplace, by promoting leadership behaviours in women that are often more inherent and universally accepted (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). In other words, the communal nature of Servant Leadership suggests that women may be better role models and ambassadors than men, as societal expectations associate those communal qualities with women (Lemoine & Blum, 2021; Plouffe et al., 2023). However, this ethos may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes by describing effective leadership as fundamentally nurturing and feminine (Liden et al., 2025). There is still confusion over the definition and measurement of Servant Leadership, with unclear links between the effects of the

behaviours and the behaviours as they are defined (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Scholars also caution that Servant Leadership can glorify self-sacrifice and emotional labour, which are behaviours often expected of women (Liden et al., 2025). Whilst Servant Leadership often creates psychological safety for followers, it can erode it for the leaders demonstrating it, which is particularly challenging for women navigating complex dynamics in the workplace (Plouffe et al., 2023).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Ubuntu Leadership is underpinned by African philosophy, with deep roots in South Africa, focusing on interconnectedness (Muller et al., 2019). Perfectly described by the proverb, “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together” (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025, p. 2). This proverb highlights the need for progressive and inclusive leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where leaders take their team to a better place, for combined success (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025). Incorporating Ubuntu principles into leadership practices in South African organisations has shown potential through cultivating organisational cultures marked by trust, respect and collaboration, thereby promoting inclusivity and psychological safety (Chetty & Price, 2024). The principles of this leadership style can promote wellbeing, gender equality and inclusion (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). In fact, scholars argue that incorporating Ubuntu philosophy into society, institutions, and organisations may assist with a broad range of issues that affect women, beyond gender bias in the workplace (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024).

Contextual Leadership has experienced rising popularity in the past few years, born out of the shift the emphasis away from a purely trait-based view of leadership, to one that acknowledges there is always a context in which leadership is demonstrated (Oc, 2018). Enacting leadership in an increasingly complex world requires emphasis on contextualising leadership; however, it has been argued that scholars have not paid enough attention to the context in which leadership is enacted (Johns, 2024; Uhl-Bien, 2021). Contextual Leadership has a foundation in complexity theory, which suggests that leaders adapt to environmental cues, and through modelling their behaviour according to them, they positively influence the actions of their employees (Oc, 2018). These environmental cues can come from social, organisational or cultural contexts (Johns, 2024). In addition to leadership occurring in a particular context, gender and leadership are also subject to a context, which is an important detail to consider (Round et al., 2025). Whilst leadership is constantly being

assessed by followers within a particular context, leaders need to be adaptable based on the context, and women tend to seek contributions from their context when making decisions about their leadership behaviour (Round et al., 2025). When it comes to women leaders navigating gender discrimination, a study in South Africa to explore how women use their resilience, found that beyond simply being a personal attribute, resilience is contextual and impacted by the environment (Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025). Female leaders are developing a situation-focused approach to navigating gender discrimination as part of their leadership toolkit (Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025). One of the key leadership learnings that came out of the COVID-19 pandemic is that complex times result in complex interactions between leaders and followers, and understanding both sides of the coin will improve our understanding of what leadership can look like, incorporating more inclusive styles (Uhl-Bien, 2021).

### **2.3 Gendered Expectations of Leadership**

Given the definition of leadership involves followers and a context, as mentioned earlier, it is not enacted in a genderless setting (Zheng et al., 2018). Gender sets an important and variable background that shapes the expectations of leadership, as well as the evaluation of leadership (Mohan et al., 2023). A discussion on the gendered expectations of leadership would be incomplete without mentioning feminism's role in providing a framework for understanding and addressing the gendered nature of leadership and of organisations (Bell et al., 2020). Despite its goals to develop and maintain the rights of women in everyday life, feminism's contributions to management and organisation studies are limited, largely due to the dominance of masculine perspectives (Bell et al., 2020). Use of the words feminist or feminism has controversial connotations, and misinterpretation has fuelled what can be described at times as fear and trepidation when the word is mentioned in the workplace (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). Feminism is concerned with social change and justice, and as such, a feminist view in organisations can challenge the “fix the woman” notion that places the responsibility on women to advocate for their own inclusion and rather address structural bias as a collective (Fotaki & Pullen, 2024, p.594). Given the emphasis on equality and social justice globally and particularly in South Africa, as well as emphasis by organisations on promoting diversity and inclusion, it can be argued that expanding leadership research from a feminist perspective, is well timed (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016).

Significant scholarly attention has been given to the differences across gender, which, as a result of socialisation, determine the views that men and women have on what leadership looks like (Mohan et al., 2023). Whilst this distinction is important, there is a call for leadership studies to shift the focus from gender differences in leadership, to the nature of leadership and the criteria for it to be impactful. This change aims to improve the understanding of the gender differences in leadership (Shen & Joseph, 2021). On the other hand, men's leadership has been studied extensively, whilst women's leadership has been overlooked until more recently (Schultheiss, 2021). Over time, leadership theories have developed along with broader societal changes. As more women take on leadership roles, a shift in the traditional leadership models has moved the dialogue from the heroic model, which centred on strong male leaders through their inherent gender characteristics, towards models that embrace other traits and styles, often associated with women (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). This movement suggests there is hope for more diverse styles and views of leadership, and thereby better representation of women in positions of power (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). In addition, removing the masculine stereotypical image of a leader, providing greater access to equal opportunities and improving cultural sensitivity, are ways for leaders to build trust and motivate their teams (Schultheiss, 2021). The communal expectations of women and the agentic expectations of leadership, result in incongruence between the female gender and the view of effective leadership, and this can be best explained through Role Congruity Theory.

### **2.3.1 Role Congruity Theory**

Eagly and Karau developed role congruity theory in 2002, to describe the mismatch between the social role expectations of women and the expectations of leaders. This theory is the most prominent contribution to the notion of the Double Bind and seeks to explain how and why women are faced with impossible choices that prejudice them. When society has shared expectations of how an individual should behave in certain roles, and the individual's behaviour or character is not in line with those expectations, the individual may receive a negative evaluation (Triana et al., 2024). The continuum of leadership behaviours is typically conceptualised on a range of agentic to communal (Mohan et al., 2023). Leadership competence is largely associated with assertiveness and strength, characteristics typically viewed as masculine, whereas women are viewed as displaying communality, through concern

for others and empathy (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Role congruity theory was born from social role theory and details the double bind women face in leadership – how discrimination occurs when there is a perceived incongruity across group stereotypes (Anglin et al., 2022).

Agency, which are traits often exhibited by men, are about task orientation and a focus on achievement. On the opposite end of this, communion is a trait usually linked to women and includes demonstrating kindness and care for others. In other words, men are seen as leaders who are assertive and focus on results, whilst women focus on relationships and provide emotional support (Heilman et al., 2024). This gendered perception of strong leadership has been consistent over time and across cultures and has resulted in men being seen as more natural and obvious leaders, leading to easier ascent to leadership roles (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). These beliefs remain entrenched amongst women and men, indicating they are strongly entrenched in society (Mohan et al., 2023).

There are arguments within the literature that propose that the gender variances in leadership originate from biology, whilst others argue that social factors play a significant role (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). The impact of gender on leadership is complex, and some contexts might provide women with a 'female advantage' (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). Recent research into differences across genders has suggested that gender equality does necessitate that men and women need to be psychologically similar, but that recognising and seeing the value in their differences could lead to improved equality and outcomes in many spheres (Eagly & Revelle, 2022). Eagly et al. (2020) propose that across the last seven decades, women's advantage through their communality has increased, as well as improved belief in female competence, challenging the claim that gender stereotypes are fixed or rigid. The indication is that as the roles of men and women in society have changed, and continue to change, and as such the consensual beliefs about their attributes are also changing (Eagly et al., 2020). In the South African context, however, an economically unequal society may perpetuate gender stereotypes, as masculine traits tend to be more valued than feminine traits, further compounding the double bind for women in South Africa (Moreno-Bella et al., 2023).

Research on leadership theories is still dominated by the view that success is defined by masculine behaviours, such as autocratic and charismatic leadership, requiring women to “lean in” to adapt and “fit in”, rather than providing space for a broader understanding of diverse qualities that contribute to leadership (Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Phipps & Prieto, 2021, p. 245). In addition, these stereotypes of ideal leaders undermine women leaders by cultivating self-doubt and inadequacy over their leadership abilities and create a situation whereby they monitor and compensate for the stereotypical views of them as leaders (Schultheiss, 2021). Scholars have highlighted the merits of feminine traits or leadership styles; however, despite efforts to appreciate such femininity, men continue to dominate leadership roles (Koburtay et al., 2019).

Balancing expectations of leadership competence with their typically inherent feminine traits is a continuing challenge for women, and current theories around gender and organisational change are led by three dominant approaches: “fix the woman”, “value the feminine” and “provide equal access to opportunities” (Bosch & Booysen, 2021, p.3). One of the less frequently adopted approaches is “fix the system”, which looks at the nuance and complexity of the systemic inequality across society that makes its way into the workplace (Bosch & Booysen, 2021, p.3). The future of leadership theory ought to focus on diverse contributions and move away from the “fix the woman” approach, and toward a “fix the system” approach, through placing attention on the systemic barriers that maintain gender inequity (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024, p.566). As such, the issue is not that women lack leadership ability, but rather the system's contradictory expectations of them: this tension is described by the phenomenon of the double bind.

### **2.3.2 The Double Bind**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the double bind was originally defined in the field of psychology by Bateson et al. (1956), and has since evolved to encompass everyday life dilemmas, including those faced by women in organisations as a result of gender stereotyping. The double bind, when applied to gender dynamics, describes how women are expected to exhibit masculine behaviours that are typically associated with leadership, to be considered competent, whilst also maintaining traditionally feminine traits to be considered likeable and nurturing (Chikwe et al., 2024; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). Ineffective management of this double

bind often results in backlash against women or undesirable career and social consequences (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). These biases that hinder their professional advancement can be linked to the lack of women in senior leadership roles (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Women's leadership is often reviewed with a double standard in that whilst their strengths are acknowledged, they are also connected to negative feminine-stereotyped traits (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). For instance, women are often judged as being less competent than men, more unpredictable, more likely to prioritise non-economic objectives over maximising shareholder value and generally seen as less directive and effective (Rovelli & Mismetti, 2025). Additionally, they must perform better than men to be viewed as competent, due to higher performance expectations placed on them (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). The result of this is that women spend more time and energy proving their worth and capability (Schultheiss, 2021).

Research shows that another reason women are less likely to be promoted to leadership roles due to socialisation processes and culturally rooted values, which results in girls receiving fewer signals of leadership expectation and less praise for their leadership abilities (Dunlop & Scheepers, 2023). The result of this socialisation is part of the reason for the low numbers of women in senior management positions (Dunlop & Scheepers, 2023). In addition, whilst women are expected to be people-focused and kind, they are often penalised if they do not display these traits (Heilman et al., 2024). For example, failing to help a struggling colleague negatively affects a woman's job evaluation more than her male counterpart (Heilman et al., 2024). When women do display communal behaviours, they usually receive less recognition than men for the same behaviour (Dunlop & Scheepers, 2023). What this suggests is that while women are expected to display caring behaviours, if they do not, their careers can be negatively impacted (Heilman et al., 2024).

Another element of the double bind applies to the expectation of what a leader looks like at face value, and certainly, a feminine appearance is associated with feminine traits (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Studies have shown that the perception of facial maturity of men and women influences leader selection and leadership perceptions (Giacomin et al., 2022). Furthermore, scholars argue that women leaders are expected to appear significantly more powerful to be considered leader-like (Giacomin et al., 2022). However, women are judged socially as more attractive if

they appear youthful (Madsen, 2024). This presents yet another set of paradoxical choices for women leaders when it comes to their appearance and the correlation with their leadership ability.

The double bind is further entrenched by the infamous “boys club” in corporate settings. This describes the powerful structural and cultural impediments to women's progression in leadership (Ahuja & Weatherall, 2023). The term describes the preservation of social elites, whereby men in leadership roles instinctively promote and trust those who resemble themselves, i.e. other men (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). Within these systems, leadership is also defined through masculine traits, enforcing the view that competence and confidence are inherently male traits (Ahuja & Weatherall, 2023). The lack of access for women to these networks means they are excluded from informal discussions and decisions, making progression through the hierarchy difficult (Groenewald & Odendaal, 2021). There is significant evidence that the “boys club” lives on, and that the majority of women feel excluded from this style of relationship building at work (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). Interestingly, an even larger majority of men do not feel they are excluding women, exposing a blind spot (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). Despite extensive anecdotal evidence on the “boys club”, there is little quantitative evidence on the subject, given that social interactions are not documented by organisations (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). The “boys club” sustains the structural dimensions of the double bind, whereby women are required to exhibit ambition and agency to be included, yet they risk social and professional backlash if they appear too assertive or competitive. Indeed, it is a delicate balancing act, and the “boys club” amplifies the feeling of not belonging, whereby women must fit in, but not too much.

The development of research into the double bind has moved beyond the study of women operating in traditionally male-dominated environments and identified other contexts where women are faced with a double-edged sword, because of role incongruity (Cardador et al., 2022). Cardador et al. (2022) completed a study of the status-levelling burden faced by female doctors, working in a male-dominated profession who are required to interact with nurses, typically female, and at a lower professional status. A cross-occupation double bind was identified, whereby the female doctors faced negative reactions from the female nurses when they acted in a more masculine way, given their context was to demonstrate these masculine traits

to show the same authority as their male doctor colleagues (Cardador et al., 2022). The negative repercussions for women when retaining this masculine approach with female nurses were that the nurses felt they were looked down on by the female doctors, resulting in resistance and less cooperation on their part, hampering the effectiveness of the female doctor. This research suggests that the double bind can extend to work contexts where senior women working in male-dominated occupations, need to engage and collaborate with women in lower status occupations (Kark et al., 2024).

The wellbeing of female leaders, in relation to their experiences of the double bind, has not yet been well explored (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). What has been assumed is that leaders enjoy better wellbeing, because they have access to the resources they need to execute in their role (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). What is implied is that female leaders are susceptible to the negative impacts of middle management, more so than their male colleagues (Hu et al., 2023). Adverse health conditions and a reduced level of intrinsic reward experienced by female middle managers, may make it challenging for them to obtain senior leadership levels within organisations (Hu et al., 2023). More research needs to be conducted to understand how the double bind, and therefore the ambiguity women face as a result of role incongruity, affects their wellbeing, and their ascent to senior leadership.

Research has emphasised that leadership depends on relational and communal competencies, rather than simply agentic dominance (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). This challenges the traditional, masculine view of leadership prototypes and brings with it new complexity to the double bind. Women leaders who typically had to suppress their communal traits to avoid being seen as weak and ineffective, may now find that these behaviours align more with the current expectations of authentic and inclusive leadership (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025).

### **2.3.2.1 The Double Bind in South Africa**

In the South African corporate context, women leaders experience the double bind with a unique cultural tension between two competing forces: the dynamics of the “boys club” that are exclusionary in nature, and the inclusive ethos of Ubuntu. Since the late 19th century, South Africa's economy has been run by powerful groups of economic elites, originating from the discovery of gold and diamonds (Barnard &

Luiz, 2024). These elites have commanded considerable influence over South Africa's political and economic direction, especially during Apartheid. Research conducted on corporate governance prior to the dawn of democracy in 1994 revealed a close-knit group connected through “boys clubs” and social networks, with many prominent South African families commandeering the majority of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (Barnard & Luiz, 2024). Whilst the country is now politically transformed, and efforts have been made for economic redistribution, there is still evidence of these “boys clubs’ in organisations. A recent study in South Africa to understand the reasons for the lack of female representation at Audit Firms, discovered that many women who had left the firm cited the prevalence of the “boys club” and their inability to enter those as a reason for their lack of career advancement (Groenewald & Odendaal, 2021). Scholars argue that within emerging markets, personal relationships and networks are critical and prevalent in the absence of strong institutions (Barnard & Luiz, 2024). Given the argument that “boys clubs” maintain the structures that exacerbate the double bind, there is reason to consider that South Africa's history and context intensifies the experience of the double bind for women, and the importance of their navigation tactics.

The 'boys club' in South Africa represents the legacy of Apartheid and historical power, where leadership was viewed as assertive, individualistic and male (Barnard & Luiz, 2024). This culture pushes women towards an agentic style to gain access to these male-led networks. In contrast, Ubuntu promotes communal behaviours and an emphasis on relationships, which are aligned with typically feminine traits. Women leaders in South Africa may therefore find themselves in the middle of these two competing expectations. This could heighten the impact of the double bind, where women must continually reconcile global corporate norms with local ethical values.

Mention needs to be made to the double black bind whereby being a black female is a twice bind, whereby being a black female brings with it the intersection of race discrimination with gender discrimination (Wessels, 2020). Popularised in mainstream media by the rap song with the lyrics “Sometimes being a woman is like being black twice” (Wessels, 2020, para.1), the implication is that the double bind that black women navigate, is even more complex than that of their non-black women compatriots (Wessels, 2020). In South Africa today, there is still evidence of white domination and black subordination (Pirtle, 2022). However, as mentioned earlier,

the purpose of this study was to explore the gender experienced by the women leaders interviewed, regardless of their race.

### **2.3.3 Backlash**

Despite development in gender roles, stereotyping and gender equality in the workplace, whilst advising women to essentially be more like men, there has not been the same development in norms surrounding the behaviour of those perpetuating the stereotypes to maintain power and control (Croft et al., 2021). As a result, gender stereotypes that remain prevalent in the workplace, make women susceptible to negative consequences when they do not adhere to these expectations, known as backlash (Mitchell et al., 2023). This backlash effect has been documented by scholars to describe how limiting gender stereotypes are reinforced and maintained (Croft et al., 2021). The result of this backlash for women is social and economic: it can be in the form of lower pay relative to male colleagues, slower progression and poor performance evaluations (Mitchell et al., 2023). Intricately connected to role congruity theory, backlash describes the economic and social penalties experienced by individuals who contradict the stereotypical expectations of their group (Lee, 2023). It consists of direct and indirect resistance by privileged groups against business initiatives to promote diversity and inclusivity in the workplace (Lee et al., 2023). The result of backlash stretches into counterproductive activities in the workplace and hostility towards organisational change to embed diversity (Lee et al., 2023).

Deeper studies into backlash against women have demonstrated that women who desire status and therefore respect, often linked to consensus-seeking behaviours, experience less backlash than women who desire power (Mishra & Kray, 2022). In addition, women who seek power whilst seeking respect, can mitigate the likelihood of experiencing backlash by behaving in ways that are perceived as more balanced with the feminine elements associated with status-seeking behaviours (Mishra & Kray, 2022). This research further demonstrates the tightrope balance that women need to manage when balancing their typically feminine and masculine behaviours in the workplace. The threat of potential backlash is also a powerful influencer on the decisions women make (Chakraborty & Serra, 2024). In a study into women's career choices, it was found that women are less likely to desire a leadership role if there is a backlash threat. In addition, female managers are more likely to experience

backlash from unhappy employees, than their male colleagues (Chakraborty & Serra, 2024).

#### **2.3.4 Leadership Resonance and the Context of Gender Bias**

Goleman et al. (2001) first introduced resonance into leadership studies, arguing that the pinnacle of effective leadership is resonance – which is the creation of a positive emotional context that generates trust, collaboration and high performance (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). They argued in their influential writing that effective leadership goes beyond strategy or a vision, that it seeks to generate resonance whereby leaders are emotionally attuned to their followers, creating alignment that inspires commitment and collective energy to reach goals (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Leadership resonance is particularly helpful in highlighting the mismatch between what leadership theories advise and what is seen in organisational practice. Many of the regarded leadership theories describe leader traits or approaches; however, Ruben and Gigliotti (2021) propose that leadership is far more complex and nuanced: it is a socially co-constructed process created by leaders, followers and the systems in which they engage. They suggest that Leadership Resonance Theory is a sounder way to understand the dynamics of leadership, and that effective leadership is demonstrated when leaders and followers are aligned emotionally and relationally. Communication inspires shared meaning and connection, and these relationships are nurtured over time (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021).

The incongruity between leadership theory and practice often stems from traditional models underplaying the role of communication, context and systems of influence (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Leadership in the modern world is more than a leader demonstrating a style, but about how they navigate organisational limitations, social expectations and feedback from followers (Lewis & Aldossari, 2022). As such, leadership relies less on studiously applying theoretical models and rather on the ability to build resonance, maintain dialogue and adapt to complexity (Lewis & Aldossari, 2022).

Leadership resonance theory argues that attempts to create resonance need to be considered within the context and against follower expectations, highlighting that leadership is not just about emotional alignment, but also about identity tensions in light of the gendered bias within organisations (Gaan et al, 2024). The interactive

and systemic nature of leadership can either amplify or limit resonance depending on how gendered identities are created in the workplace (Tan, 2024). The effectiveness of resonant leadership requires leading through a mix of masculine and feminine traits rather than a binary style, in order to balance the weaknesses of each (Gaan et al, 2024). The decisions around what blend of leadership to display will vary based on the context and environment the leader is operating in (Gaan et al, 2024).

### **2.3.5 Women's Leadership Identity**

Identity is the knowledge, experiences and meaning that shape an individual, and it can be constructed through personal traits, social roles or group memberships (Buss et al., 2025). An individual's identity as a leader drives how they behave and interact with others, as well as how others perceive and experience their behaviour (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). Identity work refers to the activities an individual undertakes to shape and maintain their sense of self within the social context they operate in (Zheng et al., 2021). As mentioned, the typical view of a leader is based on traditionally masculine traits, which places pressure on women in their construction of their identities as leaders (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). This can make it more difficult for women to create a strong and convincing leader identity, in light of the gendered expectations of leadership, and subsequent role incongruity regardless of what end of the agentic-communal spectrum they wish to lead (Zheng et al., 2018). Creating a professional identity is a process that requires ownership of identities and those identities being acknowledged by others in social engagements (Buss et al., 2025). Women expend more 'emotional labour' managing their identity in workplaces not typically designed for women to hold leadership roles (Ayaz et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2021).

In the past 20 years, there has been attention placed on the idea of the heroic leader, being an individual crucial for an organisation's success (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). This concept of Messiah leadership tends to exclude women as it conjures up a masculine image of a leader (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). Adding to the crisis in leadership science are the various workforce disruptions over the past five years, including the COVID-19 pandemic and new ways of working, as well as the current disruption of Artificial Intelligence (Nyberg et al., 2025). A study conducted by Nyberg et al. (2025) involved understanding from senior business leaders what they feel is needed to lead successfully within such disruptive times, and several themes were

identified, describing both ineffective and effective leadership behaviours (Nyberg et al., 2025). Autocratic and arrogant leadership behaviours came out as problematic, whilst coming across as authentic and approachable were highly regarded leadership traits during such times of crisis (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

In addition, popular leadership styles such as Authentic Leadership suggest leading with one's true self, and a stereotypically feminine female would therefore be conflicted with the traditional masculine view of leadership and her own innate gender identity (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). Whilst authenticity is encouraged as something everyone can integrate into their leadership, those who present as typical leaders will find this easier than those who are atypical, such as women leaders (Ayaz et al., 2024). Although it is possible to lead authentically, women will need to expend more emotional labour to create the balance between their true self and the commonly accepted demonstration of leadership (Ayaz et al., 2024).

Women's self-characterisation demonstrates gender bias in action in relation to their leadership identity. Hentschel et al. (2019) claim that whilst women don't subscribe to the stereotype that they are not as capable as men, they still feel they are not as assertive or as strong leaders as men are, demonstrating that they are holding onto traditional views of leadership and gender. In addition, it has been found that women adapt psychologically when they anticipate backlash as a result of the double bind, and the impact can be low motivation and a hesitation to take on leadership roles in an organisation (Triana et al., 2024). This suggests that women are still influenced by societal views of gender through their self-concept and identity, and in assessing their capabilities as leaders and crafting their identity around that role (Hentschel et al., 2019; Triana et al., 2024).

### **2.3.6 The Gendered Nature of Leader Emotion**

Building on role congruity theory, it has been purported that there are expectations of the types of emotions women leaders ought to display according to their gender role, and the degree to which they demonstrate those emotions (Buss et al., 2025). The assumption is that women can be more emotional than men and less able to control and manage their emotions (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Furthermore, women's emotional expression tends to be viewed as overly intense and a result of

a lack of control, feeding the view that these emotional expressions are inappropriate for the workplace, where a more rational approach is prioritised (He et al., 2025).

Given that the demonstration of emotions in organisational life plays a key role in building a perception around status and success, these types of emotions are typically seen as attributable to men, where male leaders who display pride or anger are seen as more powerful and successful (Heilman et al., 2024). Women expressing anger or pride can be negatively judged, whilst when women display pride, they can be seen as aggressive or pushy, both negative labels when it comes to women (Buss et al., 2025). Galsanjimed and Sekiguchi (2023) extend this further by stating that the gendered assumption is that women don't have the emotional management that is required for leadership, thereby limiting their progression. More recently, it has been found that negative perceptions of women as a result of displays of negative behaviour, are reduced when there is a pre-existing relationship with followers based on understanding and trust (Buss et al., 2025).

### **2.3.7 Intersecting Identities**

Traditionally, leadership has been considered from the perspective of the prototypical white male leader, assuming that leadership approaches will emulate their typical leadership style (Schultheiss, 2021). The importance of taking an intersectional approach when viewing identity, statuses, race, age, and abilities is acknowledged (Schultheiss, 2021). Intersectionality originated in Black-feminist scholarship to explain overlapping oppression, whereby racism and sexism reinforce each other (Hudson et al., 2024; Petsko et al., 2022). Scholars are placing focus on intersectionality to develop and enhance social equity (Hudson et al., 2024).

Earlier in the chapter, the dynamics in South Africa that might impact the experience of the double bind by women leaders, such as the double black bind, were discussed (Wessels, 2020). For this research, incongruity was considered only across gender, as is typical with most studies in this field; however, it is noted that there is compelling evidence that role incongruity extends beyond leadership and gender, and into differences across race, age, and sexual orientation (Triana et al., 2024). Society is in middle of a gender revolution that is moving beyond the binary view, to incorporate other identities beyond those of male or female (Martin et al., 2022). There are opportunities and challenges within this, and no doubt these will have an impact on

gender stereotypes and gender equality in society and in organisations; however, this study considered gender as the sex assigned at birth, in line with most of the research into gender equality in the workplace (Kroese, 2023).

Mainstream media has popularised generational differences, seeking to generalise groups based on birth year, resulting in unintended discrimination and misguided interventions (Rauvola et al., 2019). In the corporate world and beyond, Baby Boomers and Gen X women often faced discrimination in their earlier careers and did not have the means to challenge or report it (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). Millennials and Gen Z have been assumed to be more vocal and therefore more forthcoming when dealing with bias or oppression they experience (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Lyons et al., 2015). Sound research into these differences is lacking, and this study did not address in detail, the specific generational views of gender equality and diversity. Role congruity theory was used as a platform to uncover the incongruity between the typically expected and socially accepted female behaviours, and the opposing expectations that society has about leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

## **2.4 Navigating the Double Bind**

Managing the challenges and choices that come with the double bind is a reality for women leaders, requiring consideration and energy (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). Whilst there have been studies done on the complex dance for women in addressing the conflicting demands of warmth and competence, there is still a need to understand the nuances and complexities of these choices they make (Chikwe et al., 2024).

### **2.4.1 Personal Strategies**

#### **2.4.1.1 Blending Agency and Communion**

Schock et al. (2019) argue that women who develop into leaders, have balanced their agency with communion, and have demonstrated typically strong leadership traits more often associated with men, whilst remaining aware and in tune with the needs of their followers' concurrently. In a recent study to understand how the most senior women, i.e. those acting as board directors, navigate the double bind, Trzebiatowski et al. (2023) interviewed 43 female directors who were serving on listed entities in the United States, to understand what tactics they use to navigate

stereotype concerns. Managing this tightrope of the expectation for female Directors to demonstrate warmth, versus the director role expectation to exhibit competence, women directors employed distinguishable tactics to manage this tightrope (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). Instead of avoiding behaviours that could lead to backlash, these Directors made strategic decisions around which tactics to employ when, depending on their overall aim of their role as a Director (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). However, it should be noted that Board Director roles are advisory roles that require extensive knowledge and experience, yet more limited interactions with peers, other Board Directors. These influential roles required women self-monitor to adapt to a context-specific challenge, and constantly adapt to gendered expectations, even in senior and advisory roles such as sitting on a Board (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023).

It has been found that female leaders can achieve success by strategically adopting a masculine persona in certain situations, whereby they embrace masculine traits to be considered serious leaders (Round et al., 2025). They do this to display a demeanour of strength, linked to the view that leaders are strong. In fact, female leaders can benefit from particular types of agentic qualities, thereby escaping the backlash of the double bind. The agentic qualities that provide them with an advantage are competence, diligence and independence (Ma et al., 2022b). When women demonstrate dominant agency, there is a high likelihood that they experience an agentic disadvantage. Dominant agency describes behaviours that are controlling, arrogant and forceful and are considered socially undesirable (Ma et al., 2022b). Therefore, an important consideration for women leaders is not only the blend of their agency and communal behaviours, but also to consider the type of agentic traits they are demonstrating and emphasise those that are positively viewed. A tool to navigate this delicate balance is a paradox mindset, whereby women can manage the opposing forces that place contradictory or confusing expectations on them (Buss et al., 2025). Appreciating that opposing forces can coexist and leveraging the differences based on the context has been shown to help women leaders in South Africa navigate the tensions of the double bind (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023).

#### **2.4.1.2 Competence as a Shield**

Expanding further on the concept that emphasising demonstrations of agency can be an advantage for women leaders, competence has been identified as an important trait to balance the negative associations of agentic dominance in female leaders (Feng et al., 2025).

The previously held view that there is a trade-off between agency and competence is challenged by the emerging notion that leaders can be competent and communal (Mitchell et al., 2023). Women who have confidence in their abilities through their experience and technical expertise are more inclined to showcase their competence in ways that reshape the view of their leadership and reduce the potential for backlash (Feng et al., 2025). Self-confidence and competence, as well as commitment to outcomes, have been found to help senior women leaders navigate the double bind by providing them with a platform to display behaviour that might violate gender expectations for the purpose of fulfilling the responsibilities of their role (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). In other words, women who are confident in their abilities and have the necessary expertise, as well as the commitment to the purpose of their role, are likely to have the tools required to display behaviours that might be in conflict with expectations of their gender, as they can justify that behaviour as a way to meet their obligations. However, women are still required to carefully consider their approach in each situation and context, necessitating that they still expend emotional and cognitive energy to navigate dynamics (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023).

#### **2.4.1.3 Leadership Styles to Navigate the Double Bind**

Whilst traditional leadership styles emphasise agentic behaviours, aligned with masculine prototypes, contemporary approaches such as transformational, servant, and contextual styles integrate both agentic and communal elements, allowing women to lead in ways that are effective and socially congruent. Adopting non-masculine but effective leadership styles—like transformational and servant leadership—can help women lead successfully (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). These styles make use of emotional intelligence, emphasise follower wellbeing, and prioritise community, all of which align with traits associated with women. These approaches are particularly effective for women, yet biases remain, such as the belief

that men are naturally better leaders and preferences for male bosses (Galsanjimed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Eagly and Carli (2018) suggest that female leaders typically demonstrate a more collaborative and inclusive leadership style, which can be effective in the modern working world. Collaboration allows women to lead authentically based on their gender norms, by being empathic and relationship-focused while still achieving the results required. They go on to argue that a collaborative style can help women navigate the double bind of contradictory expectations by allowing them to influence without being perceived as too authoritative and thereby violating gender expectations. Women may, in fact, benefit from adopting a gender-blind ideology, whereby they minimise differences across gender as opposed to applauding or acknowledging them (Shen & Joseph, 2021). Women who approach their leadership and careers without taking the gender role differences into account claim to be more confident, which is often connected to more agentic behaviours and less concern over backlash from others, allowing them to be themselves (Shen & Joseph, 2021). The literature from a South African perspective demonstrates that women may be pushed to adopt a gender-neutral leadership style, to be able to engage and appease their male bosses and both their male and female direct reports (van Rensburg, 2021).

Whilst styles of leadership provide useful frameworks that explain the various behavioural approaches to leadership, they bring the risk of reiterating gender stereotypes and oversimplifying the complex and contextual nature of women's leadership (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Applauding styles that demonstrate 'feminine' leadership qualities can inadvertently re-entrench gendered expectations of leadership, rather than focusing on the expectations of leadership, regardless of gender.

#### **2.4.1.4 Power and Relational Support**

Strategic access to power and relational support is a crucial tool for women to influence and maintain legitimacy within their organisations, through social and relational capital (Pena-López et al., 2024). Given the prevalence of masculine behaviours in organisations, women are required to navigate the restrictive nature of gendered power dynamics if they wish to progress in their careers (Bosch &

Booyesen, 2021). It has been found that women are hesitant to acknowledge that they have or even lack power (Kinnear & Ortlepp, 2016). In addition, women may face backlash for demonstrating emotions that depict power (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). However, women with power motivation are more likely to reach senior leadership positions in organisations (Buss et al., 2025). It has also been established that when women have power, they tend to use that power in ways that are more prosocial than men (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). They are also more likely to demonstrate leadership capability and take on a leadership role, if they have the motivation and resilience to handle and navigate the challenges they face, given the gender biased view of leadership (Buss et al., 2025).

Kinnear and Ortlepp (2016) explored how women in South Africa construct power in their leadership roles, confirming that women still create leadership power in terms of patriarchy and the masculine dominance of the corporate world through engaging in the typically masculine behaviours. However, an early and emerging model was identified that could contribute to transforming the limitations and double binds imposed on them through the patriarchy and gender discrimination: a combination of social power, psychological power and spiritual power (Kinnear & Ortlepp, 2016). This combination of strength through social networks, understanding of self, and finding purpose can assist women to transcend the exclusivity of the 'boys club' through authenticity and a communal orientation (Kinnear & Ortlepp, 2016). These unique constructs of power and relational support may help women to navigate the double bind and reshape the dynamics and expectations of leadership in their organisations. However, despite these emerging and transcending strategies, women's mechanisms remain adaptive and with the intent to survive the systems of power that support discrimination (Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025).

#### **2.4.1.5 Self-Awareness and Authenticity**

A paradox mindset has been discussed as a tool to navigate the tensions of the double bind, and this can be developed and enhanced through authenticity and self-awareness (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023). Women who are aware of and maintain their authenticity are better prepared to respond to conflicting demands and tensions without negotiating their values (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023). They do this by using their understanding of themselves to adapt their behaviours in various contexts,

enabling them to successfully navigate behavioural tensions and contradictory expectations of them in the workplace (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023).

However, an overemphasis on authenticity as an individual trait is problematic (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). The additional responsibility of being authentic in environments where the dominant culture is at odds with an atypical leader, such as a woman, requires emotional labour to suppress and manage an individual's presentation of self (Ayaz et al., 2024). As such, it can be difficult for women to be truly authentic in masculine prevailing organisational cultures, without experiencing backlash for role incongruence (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). What is important is to acknowledge the organisational responsibility to foster and cultivate a culture that supports authenticity for all its employees (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

As a result of these hindrances, women face challenges in bringing authenticity into the workplace, leading them to act and perform in ways that meet the expectations of their leadership style (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021). Butlerian theory explores the concept of performativity within gender identity, with the view that some gendered behaviours are a learned performance, rather than natural (Round et al., 2025). Extending Butlerian theory to women's leadership has found that women still demonstrate considered and strategic means to wear a mask of masculinity at work, as a way to improve perceptions of them as competent and legitimate (Round et al., 2025). What can potentially bridge the gap between this performance and their true selves is the development of self-perception and confidence. This increased awareness of their strengths and development needs will allow them to uncover their real traits in building an authentic leadership style to better position them to manage the tensions of the double bind (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021).

#### **2.4.1.6 Advocating for Inclusion**

Worker voice, defined as the effort to have a say and potentially influence practices in the workplace, is an important element to drive change and advocate for inclusion (Cooper et al., 2021). There remains a lack of understanding of how gender impacts worker voice; however, there is evidence that there is diminished voice amongst women who are working in male-dominated environments where masculine behaviours dictate the culture (Cooper et al., 2021). In addition, women are less inclined to leverage in person interactions with their managers to self-promote and

advocate for their competence and abilities (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). These challenges make it difficult for women to advocate for themselves and stand up against backlash as a result of the double bind.

Beyond individual-level advocacy, women leaders who hold senior positions in their organisations can actively engage in advocacy for inclusion across their organisations, using their power and influence to drive change within the systems that are responsible for gendered limitations (Page et al., 2024). This advocacy signals to others that success can be achieved outside of masculine norms, through what is known as the trickle-down effect (Ali et al., 2021). Role modelling at the top has an impact on perceptions, expectations and opportunities at lower levels in the organisations, allowing women to advocate through collective agency, for communal and relational leadership styles. Increasing visibility and advocacy for these styles and perspectives can reduce the gap in the binary expectations of leadership, decreasing the tension of the double bind (Page et al., 2024).

#### **2.4.2 Organisational Interventions and Support**

Organisations abound with initiatives to rebalance workplace gender inequity, from attracting women to certain professions where they are less present, to supporting their growth, to those that try to keep them in the workforce (Ryan, 2023). Whilst well-meaning, these interventions are not crafted from evidence of success (Ryan, 2023). Classical organisational interventions that strive towards workplace gender equality, typically focus on boosting women's ambition for senior leadership roles, as well as providing them with the required abilities to reach these roles (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Sheryl Sandberg popularised the term “lean in” via her number one best-selling book, advocating for women to confront their fears and “dare to lead” (Phipps & Prieto, 2021, p. 245). Whilst the intention was to empower women, and some of that was realised, she was criticised for focusing on the shortcomings of women. Addressing gender inequality and a lack of progress for women in the workplace, by focussing the training on women only, assumes that women are the problem, and the reason for their own lack of growth, when in fact consideration needs to be given to the social system that perpetuates the challenges, such as the double bind, and pushes women to do more and be more, to overcome the double binds to succeed (Lau et al., 2023). Phipps and Prieto (2021, p. 258) further assert that the answer also requires a combined effort from business and society, with a focus on evolving

values for more progressive cultures where women are supported so that they can subscribe to the advice to “lean in”.

Gender stereotypes are the key perpetrator, and when creating support initiatives for women, the structural issues are ignored, and instead attention is paid to addressing the individual (Gierke et al., 2025). For example, programs to encourage women to undertake studies within science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), take an approach to boosting their ambition and motivation, or encouraging women in corporate to make bigger sacrifices or take bigger risks, to be authentic and to work on their imposter syndrome, all of which seek to “fix the woman” (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024, p.556). Ryan and Morgenroth (2024) argue that building cultures that promote authenticity, which thereby improves employee job satisfaction and commitment, can be particularly beneficial for women by improving their sense of fit and belonging in the workplace, empowering them to confidently handle the dilemma of the double bind.

Organisations have started to include gender diversity training for their leaders and teams as part of their multipronged approach to overcome gender inequality (Lau et al., 2023). There is evidence that practical training that highlights and challenges stereotypes, such as interactive workshops, can work towards changing attitudes and behaviours, to develop skills to manage diversity through the awareness of perhaps unintentional bias (Gierke et al., 2025). Kroese (2023) proposes the role of gender in training programs, needs to be addressed by training practitioners. There is scholarly recognition for a better understanding of the challenges female leaders encounter in their development, with studies in South Africa reporting that women had negative experiences because of leadership development programs that don't address structural issues that perpetuate the double bind and other gender discrimination (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025).

Gierke et al. (2025) suggest that positioning women as drivers of cultural transformation initiatives would allow for more attention and value placed on the purpose and direction of an organisation, which would feed more communality into organisational cultures. Improving levels of psychological safety through cultivating a culture of learning allows for mistakes to be made and can promote gender inclusivity (Franczak & Margolis, 2022). Athanasopoulou et al. (2025) argue that

there is a lack of consideration for the interplay of formal and informal practices in relation to the development of women, in other words, collaboration between organisational initiatives and those created by the women themselves. In addition, hiring women into leadership roles helps to expand the narrative and view of what leadership is, beyond the typical transactional or agentic style (Lawson et al., 2022). This highlights a gap, whereby organisations could include women in their cultural transformation programs, to be advocates for more feminine styles of leadership, which in turn could reduce instances of the double bind (Gierke et al., 2025). Focusing on adjusting organisational language by increasing female representation across all levels could help women navigate the double bind, given there is a tendency to associate women with the positive aspects of agency, whilst demonstrating communal traits (Lawson et al., 2022).

Managers can play a critical role in recognising and advocating for women's competence and credentials, to emphasise their leadership abilities (Feng et al., 2025). Given there is evidence that men face fewer negative repercussions for incompetence, considering societal expectations of their competence, it would be helpful if organisations create clear criteria for evaluating capability (Feng et al., 2025). This would ensure that assessments of leadership are based on objective accomplishments, instead of merely potential, allowing women's competence to receive more attention, showcasing their leadership abilities as a tool to reduce the occurrence of the double bind (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

Gendered perceptions of leadership are ongoing, whereby traits associated with male leaders are dominant in the definitions and expectations of a leader (Genza, 2021; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). The term “think manager, think male” was popularised in 1973 by scholars to describe the gendered assumptions of leadership; in other words, managers are assumed to be male (Heilman et al., 2024, p.172). These deeply entrenched norms exacerbate the double bind, where women are torn between displaying agentic traits, which are less natural, and communal traits, which are more ingrained into their socialisation (Heilman et al., 2024; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Using role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), this double bind can be viewed not as a personal failing, but rather as a structural and cultural issue

embedded into organisational standards and norms, and society-wide standards of raising young girls (Dunlop & Scheepers, 2023).

Whilst there has been progress towards gender equality in society and indeed the workplace, relative to several decades ago, persistent inequalities still exist (Ryan, 2023). It's important to acknowledge the ongoing inequalities, taking a pragmatic and nuanced approach to the challenges as they are, and what still needs to be done (Ryan, 2023). Despite these challenges, other leadership paradigms, particularly those that emphasise feminine traits and reducing the masculine stereotypical image of a leader, can offer women effective and natural ways to navigate the paradoxical expectations placed on them (Schultheiss, 2021). In addition, if collectively as a society, improving diversity of leadership is to be a continued priority, the context needs as much attention, if not more, than the person being developed (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). New tools can be valuable not only for individual success but for organisational transformation, as they sustain inclusive environments where representation promotes further representation, working to create a more level playing field in relation to power and privilege (Schultheiss, 2021).

Women are continuing to balance the tightrope of the double bind, which are the tensions between complying to masculine dominant leadership expectations and constructing their identity in sustainable and authentic ways. It is essential that reflection and attention be given to these tensions, and encouragement and empowerment provided by organisations to support women to co-create new leadership models and lead on their own terms, to meet the demands of world today (Kinnear & Ortlepp, 2016). The benefit of questioning the status quo of what leadership looks like, is to continue the shift of leadership as influence, rather than authority, which challenges the masculine-dominated view of leadership and legitimises the way many women lead (Madsen, 2024). Representation of women in leadership would challenge gender stereotypes and tackling the quandary of women being considered either capable or likeable (Lawson et al., 2022).

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### 3.1 Introduction

The key objective of this research was to document and analyse the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions within corporate South Africa, in relation to the double bind. The study aimed to identify and evaluate the tactics and strategies these women leaders employ to navigate the paradoxical expectations they face, and to investigate how women are developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations. Role congruity theory was used as a tool to understand the experience of women with this double bind and the implications in their leadership roles.

### 3.2 Secondary Research Questions

Considering the objectives above, the intention of this study was to contribute to the body of research already conducted on the double bind in women's leadership, by providing answers to the following questions:

*RQ1. How do women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind?*

This question was formulated to understand the lived experiences of women navigating the double bind in leadership roles in South Africa, and why they have these experiences. Whilst there is research into the double bind women face in the developing world (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023), there is a need to understand the South African context in which women leaders operate, and how the double bind is experienced by them (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This question sought to understand how these women believe their gender affects the way their leadership style is perceived, and what the double bind means to them as a leader, through the sharing of their personal experiences. This question explored the situations they have been faced with, whereby their behaviour has been incongruent with expectations of them as women, and the impact of that on their careers and their development as leaders.

*RQ2. How do women leaders in South Africa navigate the double bind?*

This question was formulated to gather the strategies that assist women in sustainable leadership effectiveness, while pushing the boundaries of gendered constraints imposed by the double bind. The question explored how these women leaders feel when contradictory expectations are placed on them, how they respond in situations when a more direct and agentic leadership style is required and how people around them, their peers, their boss and their teams, respond to these traditionally gender incongruent approaches. In addition, the question sought to understand how they see others respond when they take a gender aligned approach, and how they are navigating that balance, to ensure that they take the right approach in light of the context and style required (Ma et al., 2022b).

*RQ3. How are South African women leaders developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations?*

This question was formulated to gather information about whether women are developing their own leadership style to navigate these contradictory expectations. The question explored how, if at all, women are redefining leadership away from the traditional view that is agentic and authoritative, towards promoting leadership behaviours that build trust, inclusion, and performance through authenticity (Nyberg et al., 2025). The objective was also to highlight the importance of feminine attributes in leadership (Vial et al., 2025). Gathering their advice for other women who are faced with similar contradictory expectations, shed light on personal strategies and organisational support that can be beneficial for others in future.

### **3.3 Chapter Summary**

The research purpose was to develop an understanding of the double bind for women in corporate settings, and given the research objectives described in this section, a qualitative approach was used, with the foundation of academic literature described in Chapter 2. The study was qualitative in nature, which, as defined by Flick et al. (2004), aims to describe the human experience, from the perspective of those who are living it, to build a richer understanding of social realities and form patterns of meaning.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology and design, as applied to the research questions detailed in Chapter 3. It provided a critical foundation for the researcher in conducting the research, to guide the research process. This chapter aligns the research questions, the objective, the collection of data and the analysis of the data to ensure validity, reliability and potentially the transferability of the findings of the research conducted. The objective was to ensure a potential contribution to the overall body of knowledge about the subject of the double bind in women's leadership. Given that the research was exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach was used to guide the methodology and design.

### 4.2 Choice of Research Methodology and Design

#### 4.2.1 Purpose of the Research

The key objective of this research was to document and analyse the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions within corporate South Africa, in relation to the double bind. The study aimed to identify and evaluate the strategies these women leaders employ to navigate the paradoxical expectations they face, and to investigate how women are developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations. The study was **exploratory** in nature, whereby it sought to uncover new information about a subject that is not well understood (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This approach is useful for phenomena, particularly the subject of women's leaders experience of the double bind, which is not currently well understood globally, or in South Africa (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023).

#### 4.2.2 Research Philosophy

The research design followed an **interpretivist** philosophy, which assisted in obtaining a deeper and nuanced understanding of how women attribute meaning to their experience of the double bind in South Africa, and the tools they use to navigate it (Frechette et al., 2020). The subjective realities of these women leaders were co-constructed through the interaction with the researcher to reveal meaning and understanding that is socially created (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

#### **4.2.3 Approach Selected**

This research used **induction** as the theory development approach. Induction often referred to as a bottom-up process, derives themes from the data gathered (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). As such the lived experiences of women being interviewed, were used to build on theory in relation to how women in corporate South Africa experience the double bind. Induction was found to be appropriate given the lack of understanding of the double bind in women's leadership at senior levels in organisations (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023).

#### **4.2.4 Methodological Choices**

A **qualitative** method was employed for this study, in the same way that Trzebiatowski et al. (2023) used this method to understand how female Board Directors navigate the Double Bind. Qualitative research uses text as empirical material and is concerned with the perspectives of the participants in their everyday life in relation to the issue being studied (Flick, 2011). This approach assisted the researcher in exploring the ways women leaders make sense of their experience of the double bind and how they mitigate this (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Qualitative data was collected from accounts of the lived experience of participants within their contexts, allowing the voices of participants to contribute to theory building in relation to the double-bind (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research was a **mono-method** qualitative study, through the use of semi-structured interviews as the only data collection technique (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

#### **4.2.5 Strategy**

**Narrative Inquiry** was used through interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2016) further propose that research may reflect more in a narrative study, whereby the participants have stories to share about their lived experience, shedding light on the research questions. The research strategy was selected given the requirement to encourage participants to freely share their experiences of behavioural dilemmas and competing demands, without fear of judgment or repercussions (McCracken & McCracken, 1988). A similar approach was taken by Amaro and Scheepers (2023) in their study on how women leaders in corporate South Africa navigate paradoxical expectations.

#### **4.2.6 Time Horizon**

A **cross-sectional** time horizon (which refers to a research design wherein data is gathered from a population at a point in time) was used for this study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Given the time limitations, data was gathered from participants at one point in time, known as a “snapshot” (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p.129). It explored the participants' current thinking when it comes to navigating the double bind in their leadership roles, based on their current reality, and reflection on some of their past experiences in the carer journey.

#### **4.3 Population**

Within this research, the population consisted of women in leadership roles in corporate South Africa across different racial groups and across industry.

The selection criteria for participants were:

- 1) Female, with at least 10 years of work experience, regardless of industry
- 2) Currently in a leadership role, sitting on the executive committee of their respective organisation or reporting to a member of the executive committee
- 3) Currently working in South Africa

The above selection criteria were believed to ensure the credibility of the participants, to describe and narrate their lived experiences of the double bind in their leadership roles in the corporate world (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Targeting executive committee members, or those reporting to the executive committee, was believed to produce participants at senior levels within organisations, who would have the requisite depth of leadership exposure to contribute to rich insights on their experience of the double bind and how they have crafted their leadership style in light of it. This is in line with Alase (2017) suggestion that that when selecting participants for a study, it's essential to choose those who have similar lived experiences to the phenomenon being studied, who can therefore provide rich empirical data and evidence. Homogeneity within the sample population was important to ensure that a true understanding of the experiences around the phenomenon could be uncovered, and as such women at a similar seniority within their organisations, was the focus of the study (Alase, 2017).

#### **4.4 Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis, which refers to a primary entity or subject being studied (Saunders & Lewis, 2018), was the working life stories of the women leaders who fit the criteria above. These were their personal and subjective opinions that they shared through descriptions of their experiences in the corporate world in South Africa.

#### **4.5 Sampling Method and Size**

**Non-probability purposive** sampling was used for the research, in that the researcher used their judgement to choose those who were best placed to answer the research questions, through the criteria selection listed above (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). In selecting the sample, the researcher was careful to ensure diversity in the sample across race, age, years of experience and industry, to include a variety of perspectives on the phenomenon under study.

The sample was obtained, initially through the networks of the researcher, such as friends, LinkedIn connections and other acquaintances. In addition, snowball sampling expanded the sample, with two participants referring their acquaintances who they knew would have insights on the double bind (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). In fact, as Alase (2017, p. 13) describes it, these participants, who had already taken part in the study, “put in good words” to attract the other willing and relevant participants to contribute.

The suggested size of the sample for qualitative studies has been debated by scholars, and it recommended that researchers continue with interviews until data saturation is achieved, where further data obtained provides few, or even no new insights (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Alase (2017) recommends a range of two to 25 participants when embarking on semi-structured interviews, while Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that theoretical saturation may be achieved at 15 interviews. On the other hand, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggest that for a qualitative study, a range of 9-17 interviews will likely lead to saturation. Attention was paid to what Hennink and Kaiser (2022) emphasised about the tendency of some scholars to use statistical models to estimate sample sizes before data collection. In fact, this contradicts the objective of qualitative research, which is exploratory, and not confined by statistics

and volume. As such, a target of 18 interviews was set in advance, with objective to reach a minimum of 12 participants. Once 15 interviews were completed, analysis began with another three interviews taking place later to test for any new insights and to confirm that no new themes were emerging.

#### **4.6 Measurement Instrument**

This study used semi-structured questions as the means to collect the data. An interview guide was used (see Appendix C), consisting of key questions and themes to guide the conversation and to allow the researcher to explore the participants' responses in detail (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Alase (2017) describes the qualitative research interview as an “interview with a purpose” (Alase, 2017, p. 15), where the researcher develops a bond with the participant to allow them to freely and openly tell their story.

**Semi-structured interviews** allow for variation in the interview process, which facilitates the extraction of the richest possible data from the participants through probing questions if necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It also ensured that the interviewer could keep track of questions covered when conversations deviated from the set structure and enabled the researcher to focus on listening to the participant (McCracken & McCracken, 1988).

The interview guide questions were open ended and aimed understand how women manage the competing expectations to be agentic and communal in their leadership roles. This was in line with Amaro and Scheepers (2023) study detailed earlier. Interview questions were developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature and theory on gender in leadership, role congruity theory, the double bind and backlash. The draft questions were then refined together with the researcher's supervisor, a seasoned scholar in the field of women's leadership, to obtain expert feedback on the content and sequence. This is supported by Kallio et al. (2016), who state that seeking expert validation from a specialist in the field, can ensure the appropriateness of the questions in line with the study objectives.

The interview guide and the researchers interview technique, was tested via a pilot interview with a participant similar to those approached for the interviews, a senior

female leader working for a South Africa corporate. This ensured that the questions being asked solicited data required to answer the research questions, that they would be understood by the participants, and to assist the researcher in gaining confidence in their interviewing technique (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The pilot test assisted in identifying flaws in the interview style, the protocols and the questions, and assisted the researcher in articulate the context of the study and describe the double bind to participants in a way that felt relatable to them and encouraged contribution (Majid et al., 2017). The pilot interview was excluded from the data analysed but ensured the practicalities of the interview process were rehearsed. The nature of the questions was found to be appropriate following the pilot, and no changes to the questions were made. A key learning from the pilot was that the researcher tended to talk more than necessary, and as advised by McCracken and McCracken (1988), the participant must do most of the talking.

#### **4.7 Data Gathering Process**

The data was collected online via Teams with the researcher and participants webcams on. Participants were approached via email (refer to Appendix A), with a description of the study and details of the value of the research for women leaders in the South African context to encourage participation. Once a participant agreed to take part, a consent form was shared for them to sign, and a time was agreed upon that suited their schedule (refer to Appendix B). As such, the researcher made herself available to ensure participants could fully engage and not feel rushed in their responses.

It was important, given the nature of the topic and the sensitivity of it, that the researcher emphasised confidentiality to encourage the participant to share openly. In addition, the researcher asked the participant to confirm their consent to take part, as well as provide permission for the researcher to record and document the discussion to assist in the data analysis process thereafter (Alase, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that typing and listening are difficult to do, and recording the session allowed the researcher to concentrate on the interview questions, reading the body language of the participant and building rapport. As a result, the order of the questions and some of the structure varied, depending on the

participants contributions, in line with the emergent and non-linear nature of narrative enquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Interviews took place via Teams, over 4-weeks, and 17 of the 18 interviews were conducted with the webcam on. One participant asked to refrain from turning her webcam on as she explained she was not camera-ready, and that request was respected. The interviews were between 23 and 76 minutes long, with the average interview length being 43 minutes (refer to Table 4.1 below).

**Table 4.1: Interview Details**

<b>Detail</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Number of interviews conducted	18
Total duration of interviews	777 minutes
Longest interview	76 minutes
Shortest interview	23 minutes
Average time	43 minutes

*Source: Author's own.*

There were two participants who spoke for less than 30 minutes, and the reason for this can be attributed to their succinct communication style. As a result, in the interviews where all the questions were answered, the researcher used follow-up questions and other prompts to flesh out other experiences that could be used in the data analysis (McCracken & McCracken, 1988). The transcription functionality was used to create the transcriptions from the interviews, and those transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher shortly after the interviews to ensure accuracy, and to reflect on the discussion and to build emerging themes before the analysis began.

#### **4.8 Analysis Approach**

**Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)** using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was implemented to analyse the data from the interviews conducted. Employing a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, places emphasis on the researcher's ongoing role in building knowledge, and codes are considered a representation of the researcher's understanding of patterns of meaning found within the empirical data (Byrne, 2022).

Clean transcriptions of the interviews were coded to identify themes and patterns using ATLAS.ti, a software program that handles data obtained from qualitative studies. A six-step process of RTA was employed, as found in a practical example of Braun and Clarke's guidance, detailed by Byrne (2022). The six steps included data familiarisation, code creation, thematic analysis, review of themes, consolidation of themes and data reporting (Byrne, 2022). The main themes from the study were uncovered through linking codes iteratively, referring to the interview transcripts, re-reading the quotations and watching the video recordings to confirm the researcher's interpretation. As the ATLAS.ti software required familiarisation; the researcher's experience of analysing interviews from earlier academic endeavours and through her professional experience, allowed for the supplementation of the analysis through some manual linkages and theme identification (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Beyond the intellectual demands of reading, analysing and writing, this study required the researcher to confront her own assumptions, biases and vulnerabilities. The process of sustained focus and emotional presence required for RTA was managed through periods of reflection and reprieve, taking the time to reengage with the purpose of the study. This process of self-regulation and deep thought became integral to the research itself, mirroring some of the themes of empathy, connection, self-leadership and purpose that underpin this study. Research positionality is discussed in the quality control section under research bias.

## **4.9 Quality Controls**

Ensuring the validity and reliability of the research and reducing possible bias, are essential to create credible and rigorous research (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Rigour of the research process was viewed as the responsibility of the researcher, rather than relying on those judging the work externally (Morse et al., 2002). Rigour was implemented in the following ways, to ensure that deviations and threats could be proactively managed and corrective action taken (Morse et al., 2002):

### **4.9.1 Data Quality**

The use of an interview guide ensured the interview process was consistent, so that the same topics were discussed with each participant. Audio recordings were

transcribed and read through in detail by the researcher to ensure they represented the content of the interview accurately. Where necessary, the recordings were revisited to ensure the themes identified accurately reflecting the content of the interviews. The raw data of the study, such as the video recordings and transcripts, have been stored safely for future access (Morse et al., 2002).

The quality and relevance of the participants are a key part of establishing the credibility and impact of this study. As well as a non-probability purposive sampling approach, participants were selected for their seniority, whereby they were members of the executive committee of their respective organisation or reporting to a member of the executive committee. This was deemed to ensure information-rich cases through participants ability to offer nuanced and thoughtful insights into their experience with the double bind over the course of several years of working and in a senior leadership role. This alignment between participant quality and the research focus, ensured a higher likelihood of the potential extension of the body of knowledge of the double bind, and transferability of the findings.

#### **4.9.2 Member Checking**

Member checking was conducted on the pilot interview participant, whereby the articulated themes were shared with the participant to check that the interpretation was well understood and accurate, as advised by Creswell and Poth (2016) and by Rose and Johnson (2020). However, member checking was not conducted with the 18 participants as the researcher felt that this hard-to-access sample had already contributed their time to the study and did not want to ask more of them. As described by Motulsky (2021), it is difficult to predict how participants would respond to member checking; they may be unwilling to invest further time in the process, or they may feel embarrassed reviewing their contribution and feel invaded in ways they did not expect. Therefore, to avoid encroaching further on participants precious time, the decision was made not to conduct member checking.

Post the interviews, peer debriefing was employed, whereby emerging themes and codes from all interviews were discussed with the researcher's supervisor. The rationale behind the interpretation was discussed and debated, and where required, amended to ensure reliability (Long & Johnson, 2000). Rose and Johnson (2020) suggest that engaging with a supervisor who is methodologically experienced and

an expert in the field of study, as was the researcher's supervisor, can assist through questioning the methodology, the analysis and the insights gathered to improve the resonance of the research.

#### **4.9.3 Researchers Bias**

Researcher bias was considered as part of this study, and it was crucial that the researcher's personal experience was separated from the lived experiences of the participants (Alase, 2017). The researcher was aware of her potential bias, given that she met some of the selection criteria for the study, and as such, the research methodology was followed meticulously, including selecting participants carefully against the criteria, to prevent bias from entering the study. Active listening was embraced post the pilot interview, whereby the researcher played back the recording to critique the style employed, realising that not enough time was given to the participant to respond on their own terms. There was a deliberate gap of 10 days between the pilot interview and the first participant interview as an opportunity to ensure a smooth logistical process for collecting data, to review the interview guide and most importantly, for the researcher to take the time to document her thoughts and emotions that surfaced after the interview, which might bias the collection of the data with participants. This allowed the researcher to be aware of transferring views and emotions onto participants through commentary, affirmations or body language (Chenail, 2011).

#### **4.9.4 Thick Descriptions**

Noble and Smith (2015) define transferability as the relevance of the findings for other contexts or settings. Research that produces detailed descriptions and a deep, rich understanding of the human experience should be the fundamental aim of qualitative research (Carminati, 2018). Detailed data provides an objective representation for readers of the study; this comes from the participant's narrative and from the researcher's understanding and interpretation (Rose & Johnson, 2020). An interpretivist study such as this demands thick and rich descriptions, given the average length of the interviews, and the depth of the findings as detailed in Chapter 5, the analysis and conclusions of this research were detail rich.

#### **4.9.5 Presentation of all Information**

Data that differed from the literature were retained and presented with the findings in Chapter 5 and insights generated in Chapter 6. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), data that contradicts the literature or expected outcomes contribute to the credibility and validity of the research. Rose and Johnson (2020) also argue that including data that both contradict and affirm the findings, rather than overlooking them, improves the validity of the study.

#### **4.10 Limitations**

Saunders and Lewis (2018) emphasise that conclusions from qualitative studies cannot be considered definitive and generalisable. Rather, the data collected applies to the particular context of the study, and indeed the nature of narrative enquiry is such that an individual's story comes into existence in the process of telling the story, which then provides meaning to the experience (Kramp, 2003). Observation of an event provides part of the picture, and not the understanding of that experience by the individual; therefore, an objective collection of truths will not be the outcome (Kramp, 2003). In addition, the following limitations have been identified:

##### **4.10.1 Time Horizon**

This study was cross-sectional, which means it was not possible to analyse data over time. Therefore, understanding women leaders' experience of the double bind at different points in their career, based on the organisation they are working for and their personal circumstances, was not possible. As such, the findings are a snapshot in time of their experience.

##### **4.10.2 Sample Size and Criteria**

This sample size of 18 was considered practical; however, it may be limited. The 18 participants are a hard-to-reach group, given their seniority level in the organisations they work for. Future research could include a broader range of industries, as well as interviewing more female participants across a larger age range and other diversity categories, such as race and culture within South Africa.

#### **4.10.3 Time and Resource Constraints**

Time constraints meant that the researcher was limited in the ability to extensively analyse the data and employ ongoing RTA to produce meaning and insights from the interviews. Enlisting participants took longer than expected and resulted in some delay in the commencement of the analysis process. A period of three weeks was spent analysing the data; however, another week of analysis may have provided richer insights.

#### **4.10.4 Researchers Role**

The researcher is a white female who grew up in South Africa, and part of her youth was experienced under the Apartheid regime. As such, the researcher recognises the potential bias that may occur given her context, and the fact that she has insider status given she meets some of the sample criteria. There are indeed benefits to insider status, such as an ability to connect and understand the perspectives of participants; however, it has also been found that there is room for bias in interpretation, and a reflexive approach when collecting and analysing data may reduce incorrect interpretations from assumptions made from being an insider (Ademolu, 2024).

Furthermore, it was important to mitigate pressure on participants to provide what they felt, were the right answers. At the start of each interview, the researcher emphasised to the participants that the research was subjective, as in there were definitive answers. The researcher also explained to participants that the purpose of the research was exploratory, their participation was voluntary, and their contributions were confidential.

#### **4.10.5 Ethical Concerns**

Protecting the rights and privacy of participants is the responsibility of qualitative researchers, and it ensures that the impact of the study on the participants is minimal (Alase, 2017). To ensure participants rights were protected and they were well-treated, ethical clearance was granted by the university before data collection was conducted. Participants were given consent letters explaining that their participation was their choice, that they could remove themselves from the study at any time, and

that the confidentiality of their contributions would be maintained. As mentioned, confidentiality was re-stated at the beginning of each interview.

Given the research was of a sensitive nature, participants may have been less forthcoming in sharing their full experience; however, the richness of the data indicates they shared meaningful and comprehensive experiences. Transcriptions were anonymised; participant names were removed from the transcripts, as well as any mention of companies or other individuals. All data gathered, in the form of transcriptions and recordings, were saved securely in the cloud, according to the requirements of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS).

#### **4.11 Chapter Summary**

This chapter detailed the research design and methodology used in this study to understand how senior women leaders in corporate South Africa experience and navigate the double bind, as well as how they are crafting their leadership style in light of the contradictory expectations they face. A qualitative study was conducted as the study was explorative in nature. Research questions were crafted from the foundation of the literature in Chapter 2, which were used as a guide in the creation of an interview guide to ensure all three research questions were covered. A sample of 18 interviews was conducted through non-probability purposeful sampling from senior women leaders who are executive committee members, or those reporting to the executive committee, of their respective organisation. The interview insights of these women leaders' experiences were captured by recording and transcribing the interviews. The data was coded and analysed, identifying themes using RTA. The trustworthiness of the data was preserved as the interviewer conducted all the interviews and analysed the data to draw findings, conclusions and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings gathered from the interviews with participants, namely, senior women leaders in various sectors within South Africa. The main objective was to analyse the lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions within corporate South Africa, in relation to the double bind. The study aimed to go beyond a theoretical discussion and provide a rich and empirical understanding of the challenges and strategies employed in the context of the double bind, in a specific geographic and sociocultural context. These findings address the three main research questions that guided this study, which are:

*RQ1. How do South African women leaders experience the double bind?*

*RQ2. How do South African women leaders navigate the double bind?*

*RQ3. How do South African women leaders develop their leadership styles given these contractionary expectations?*

This chapter is structured into three main sections. The first section provides an overview of the sample, which confirms the relevance and sufficiency of the sample, as well as alignment of the data with the objective of the study. This is followed by the findings, which correlate with the research questions. Each uses evidence that combines direct quotations and subthemes from the consolidated codes to form themes. Themes were developed through deep interpretive engagement with the transcripts, through an iterative process to obtain meaning from the participant contributions. The last part of the chapter presents the summary and conclusion of the findings, which are then discussed in Chapter 6.

### **5.2 Overview of the Sample**

#### **5.2.1 Description of the Sample**

The study consisted of 18 participants who occupied executive leadership roles in various industries within South African corporates, including retail, management

consulting, oil and gas, NGOs, mining, financial services, telecommunications, and manufacturing (refer to Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Study Sample**

Participant No	Age	Role	Reports to	Industry	Region	Years of Experience	Race
1	48	Managing Director, Apparel	Chief Executive Officer	Retail	Gauteng	25	Indian
2	44	Director, Africa Public Affairs & Marketing	Africa Lead	Management Consulting	Gauteng	19	White
3	60	Chief Human Resources Officer	Chief Executive Officer	Oil and Gas	Gauteng	28	Black
4	43	Managing Executive, Corporate Development and Strategy	Chief Executive Officer	Mining	Gauteng	19	Indian
5	35	Business and Client Experience Lead	Executive, Digital Business	Financial Services	Gauteng	12	White
6	58	Executive: Governance, Risk & Compliance	Chief Executive Officer	Mining	Gauteng	33	Black
7	51	Expert Partner	Global Expert Partner Leader	Management Consulting	Gauteng	28	Indian
8	48	Chief Digital and Information Officer	Chief Executive Officer	FS	Gauteng	27	Indian
9	42	Senior Executive, Finance	Chief Executive Officer	NGO	Gauteng	19	Coloured
10	49	Chief Business Officer	Chief Executive Officer	Telco	Gauteng	26	Black
11	46	Executive: Business Development	Chief Executive Officer	Mining	Gauteng	21	Black
12	48	Chief Public Affairs, Communications and Sustainability Officer	Chief Executive Officer	FMCG	Gauteng	23	Indian
13	59	HR Director	Chief Executive Officer	Manufacturing	Western Cape	34	White
14	41	Chief Executive Officer	Board	Infrastructure	Gauteng	20	Black
15	42	Vice President, Health, Safety, Environment, Security & Communities	CEO, Minerals Business	NGO	Gauteng	18	Black
16	44	Senior Executive, Sustainability	Chief Executive Officer	Mining	Gauteng	20	Indian
17	46	Regional Executive: HR	MD, KZN	Manufacturing	KZN	22	White
18	55	Chief Executive Officer	Chief Executive Officer	NGO	Gauteng	30	White

*Source: Author's own.*

The ages of the participants ranged from 35 to 60 years, with professional experience ranging from 12 to 34 years. All participants were based primarily in the Gauteng Province, with one participant based in the Western Cape and another in KwaZulu-Natal, reflecting the concentration of corporate headquarters in South Africa's economic hub, Johannesburg.

Participants held various executive titles, such as Managing Executive, Chief Officer, Group Executive, Chief Digital and Information Officer, and Vice President. The majority reported directly to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), demonstrating their proximity to organisational power and decision-making. Direct reports ranged from 2 to 15, while indirect reports extended up to 6,400 employees, highlighting significant leadership responsibility and organisational reach. In terms of demographics, the sample was racially diverse, consisting of six Black, six Indian, five White, and one Coloured participant. Levels of education were high, with most participants holding postgraduate qualifications (10 with Master's, six with Honours, and two with Bachelor's degrees).

### **5.2.2 Adequacy of the Sample**

The sample size of 18 participants was considered adequate, given that non-probability purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Senior female leaders across a variety of industries were asked to take part in this study, who matched the criteria as discussed in Chapter 4, to provide rich data to analyse. Whilst there was a risk of researcher bias in choosing participants, clear criteria mitigated some of that risk. Using Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) suggestion that saturation can be reached over the range of 9-17 interviews, the sample size of 18 was considered sufficient.

### **5.2.3 Relevance of the Data**

The most frequently occurring words, "women", "leadership", "experience", "empathy", "balance", "assertive", "authentic", and "expectations", reflect the key themes surrounding the participants' perceptions of leadership identity and the tension present in navigating gendered expectations within leadership contexts. In addition, the prevalence of the words "women" and "leadership" demonstrates the participants' identity within leadership structures, while the occurrence of "balance"

and “experience” highlights the relevance of the study's framework. Words such as “empathy”, “caring”, and “authenticity” suggest the value placed on relational and emotionally intelligent leadership traits. However, the presence of words such as “assertive”, “aggressive”, and “firm” indicates that participants also recognise the need to embody traditionally masculine leadership attributes to maintain authority and credibility. Additionally, words like “navigate”, “challenges”, and “expectations” describe the continuous choice between competing demands of professional roles and gendered perceptions of leadership behaviour, namely the double bind. This review of the types of words used by participants, supports the study's objective, by emphasising how women in senior leadership must continually manage contradictory behavioural expectations to manage their legitimacy, influence, and career progression within male-dominated organisational cultures.

### 5.3 RQ1 Findings: Experiencing the Double Bind

The first research question aimed to understand the way in which women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind. The research question can be recapped as follows:

*RQ1. How do women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind?*

The five core themes derived from the data, which capture the structural, relational and psychological dimensions of this experience, are summarised in Table 5.2 below:

**Table 5.2: RQ1 Themes – Experiencing the Double Bind**

Themes	RQ1
Stereotypes, Bias, and Double Standards	Experiencing the Double Bind
Identity and Psychological Toll	
Questioned Authority, Legitimacy, and Credibility	
Exclusionary Relationships and Organisational Structures	
Dynamics of Intersectionality	

*Source: Author's own.*

### 5.3.1 Stereotypes, Bias, and Double Standards

Among the 18 women interviewed, there were varying opinions regarding the role of gender on the perception of their leadership. Seven women indicated that they felt their gender had less impact on the perception of their leadership, while five believed it still significantly affected how their leadership was viewed. Interestingly, despite this divergence, all the women shared examples and experiences of the double bind and other forms of gender bias that had impacted their careers, and how they had subsequently used those experiences and observations of other leadership approaches to craft a new style for themselves.

Participant 11 commented that she had demonstrated capability with her team in the initial stages of working together, allowing her to focus on delivery and collaboration to achieve outcomes:

*“I don't believe gender plays a significant role in terms of how the team perceives me. I think I've earned my stripes in terms of my leadership.” (P11)*

Participant 1 commented on authentically employing her naturally agentic style in her career, given the view that this approach is necessary to be effective. Therefore, she did not have to forgo traits typically associated with her gender, to lead well:

*“But I don't think I've really exchanged anything as a female leader. I am an eight on the Enneagram, so I'm not forcefully being assertive. I naturally am assertive and decisive. It is a skill that makes sense.” (P1)*

The increased awareness around diversity, inclusion and various undesirable leadership traits and behaviours, has placed a spotlight on other ways of leading, allowing a typically feminine leadership style more opportunity to evolve into organisational life:

*“People are now aware of their unconscious biases through training, through education, through punitive programmes like the ‘Me Too’ movement, which has shown society that how you used to behave in the past is now frowned upon, and people are looking for some of the more feminine qualities.” (P10)*

Participant 7 emphasised how her leadership style had developed over the course of her career, whereby her professional experience helped to minimise bias and build a good reputation:

*“I don't think my gender impacts how my leadership is perceived, and I'm talking where I am now in my career. Maybe when I was much younger, there was a bit of bias. But I think you find your space and you build credibility in things that you are engaging with.” (P7)*

In contrast, Participants 8, 9 and 12 felt their gender did have an impact on others' perception of their leadership. Participant 8 commented on industry variations, whereby her experience in telecommunications and financial services required a tougher and stronger style, emphasising that context is a key factor when it comes to what's considered effective leadership:

*“I think it has quite a high impact in terms of how my leadership style is perceived. In certain industries like telco and finance, I had to maintain a very specific profile in terms of my behaviour sets, and how I dealt with workplace issues, by coming across as a lot stronger.” (P8)*

Mismatch between authenticity and typically expected leadership styles was implied by Participant 9, stating that a lack of fit can result in lost trust and engagement across the organisation, making women less effective:

*“Because you're not sure if being yourself is accepted, so I think that's the initial challenge. And when you see that somebody's not authentic, they lose buy-in, and trust.” (P9)*

Participant 12 was quite emphatic, with a firm response that gender and perception of leadership style are intertwined, where women are never on an even playing field with their male counterparts, and any deviations from gendered expectations bring about challenges in the interactions:

*“You can't separate it at all. As a woman, you are never on an equal footing with your male counterparts. And as soon as you behave in a particular way that falls outside of what the expectation is, it becomes difficult for them.” (P12)*

Whilst there was some agreement that being a woman leader impacts the way others perceive their leadership style, there was implied hesitation from some participants to acknowledge the impact. This could indicate that these participants had reached a stage in their journey where they had found ways to overcome the challenges or perhaps didn't want to accept or verbalise the impact their gender has on how others perceive them. As a result of this subtle resistance when answering the question, the researcher decided to change approach and move straight to the second question in the interview guide to understand what the double bind meant for them as leaders within their specific contexts.

Through further questioning around their double bind experiences, participants described their leadership journey as being influenced by unfair, contradictory, and ongoing gendered expectations. Their experience was described by an expectation to demonstrate competency, where assertiveness is discouraged and oftentimes reprimanded, and status is automatically given to male colleagues. For women leaders, this scrutiny results in emotional and professional strain. Participant 1 explained the expectation to always justify her presence at the highest levels:

*“Some of the struggles that you face as a woman are that you really have to prove yourself to be worthy at a table.” (P1)*

Participant 12 describes her initial encounter with a new male peer, whereby she could sense his doubt over her presence in her role, and whilst she was the initiator of the meeting with the purpose to discuss her contributions, he soon took over the agenda:

*“I had a meeting with a peer, and in our first meeting, I could see his expectation was ‘Who is this young woman and what is she coming to do? What is she possibly coming to say? What value is she going to add?’” (P12)*

Imposter Syndrome was mentioned by one participant, through unavoidable shortcomings around the expectation of what gender a leader should be:

*“Even as a young manager, I suffered from and still suffer to a large extent, from what's known as impostor syndrome. Where you don't feel suitably qualified because you don't meet the traditional criteria of what a leader is, and one of the first criteria you miss is that you're not a guy.” (P17)*

Participant 12 shared her experience where she had been hit with derogatory and highly gendered descriptions:

*“I have been accused of being aggressive, talking too much, being too assertive, and being bossy.” (P12)*

Participant 16 noted that she was often the subject of gossip because of her direct leadership style, whereby colleagues in meetings could not challenge her based on her presentation of facts, but in a separate setting later, the discussion would centre around the notion that she should have, in fact, been challenged, implying that her assertive style was just cause:

*“After hours, they would all be in an office having a good old chat about me and how assertive I was, and why I said what I did, and why didn't anyone challenge me?” (P16)*

This monitoring continues even to professional communication styles, where asking questions, a sign of due diligence, is misinterpreted, as was the case with Participant 14, who reported:

*“I find that the same person asking exactly the same questions gets a different reception than what I would have. And I am being perceived as difficult just because I want to understand.” (P14)*

Participant 17 went on to describe feedback from her female boss regarding the frequency of her contributions in meetings. When she onboarded that feedback and subsequently provided space for others to contribute, she was then criticised

because her colleagues had failed to contribute and meaningful opportunities were missed, demonstrating another variant of the double bind:

*“My boss said to me, you need to give your colleagues more opportunities to come up with suggestions and ideas, because sometimes I feel like yours is the only voice in the room. Then, when I kept quiet and gave others space, they didn't occupy the space. Now it's my fault because the business suffers because I didn't contribute, which I agree with. The business does suffer because I didn't contribute. But you can't have it both ways.” (P17)*

Participants' discussions revealed a notable structural bias where professional authority and status were automatically given to men. Participant 1 and Participant 4 shared experiences of having been undermined based purely on gender and physique:

*“I would walk into a room and my junior, who was a tall male, would be greeted as the person leading the meeting.” (P4)*

Participant 17 described how blending agentic and communal traits was a delicate balance that she feels she hasn't quite yet mastered, leading to feelings of inadequacy. She also mentioned a derogatory comment, whereby being outspoken and speaking up as a woman leads to negative connotations of being a feminist. The view that feminism challenges traditional views of masculinity and thereby men's social status, are evident here:

*“If you are quite an outspoken female, then everything is viewed through a lens of you must be a feminist. So now to be assertive, direct and incredibly balanced and flexible isn't an easy way to communicate at all, and that's probably where I will find I lack the confidence.” (P17)*

The expectation of women leaders who are mothers to demonstrate empathy from male and female direct reports, was highlighted by Participant 6 and Participant 15. The emotional support they provided to their teams was seen as the cause of implied incompetence, and even used as a manipulation tactic to generate leniency:

*“There was this guy who was reporting to me. He was the Head of Risk, and every morning after every day, he had a story to tell about why he could not be doing this and that. I was understanding because he was going through a lot, so I would be lenient with him. But that leniency meant I had to work all night on the Board report because it was not what I expected. But the comment that I got before we went into the meeting from a female boss was yes, we are behind because you are busy mothering your team.” (P6)*

*“You've got some females that you're taking care of, and then they're the ones who are expecting that whole empathetic side, the warm side to come through. And you know they will say, you're a mom, you're a parent. You should understand my situation.” (P15)*

This theme paints a vivid picture that women leaders experience the double bind as a set of interlinked, negative professional challenges and outcomes deeply rooted in gender and cultural stereotypes.

### **5.3.2 Identity and Psychological Toll**

Along with the challenges of bias and double standards, women leaders described the psychological toll of navigating contradictory expectations. This cost is a result of self-suppression, emotional regulation, and identity management, leading to personal strain. Participant 10 summarised the negative impact on her wellbeing:

*“The impact is emotional, it's physical, it's psychological, it's harsh, it's tough.”  
(P10)*

Participant 16 commented on the physical and emotional cost of trying to maintain performance levels:

*“I didn't realise how much of a burden it was. I was not sleeping. I was carrying this huge weight, this invisible weight, a weight that I had placed on myself to be the best at absolutely everything.” (P16)*

Women leaders are often drawn between their genuine desire to lead with empathy and the fear that this will reinforce the stereotype of being soft or ineffective. Participant 2 explained this struggle to maintain this style:

*“I’ve started to disregard some of those stereotyping views around it and lead more with empathy as a choice. Although sometimes when I do it, I can feel that people perceive it as weakness rather than strength.” (P2)*

Participants further explained that this constant emotional tension leads to a continuous, thorough search for professional fit within an organisational structure that was not designed with them in mind. Participant 9 captured the exhaustion of striving for balance:

*“Women struggle to find their place because they first struggle to find their fit.” (P9)*

This theme demonstrates that the experience of the double bind has a structural origin of ongoing emotional labour that forces women to expend energy to gain legitimacy.

### **5.3.3 Questioned Authority, Legitimacy and Credibility**

A prominent feature of the double bind experience is the pervasive disregard of female authority and legitimacy, forcing women to operate from a position of professional deficiency. Participants believed their formal authority and accomplishments were often undermined. Participant 8 expressed shock at the challenge to her authority:

*“I didn’t expect that because working at the C-Suite level, you have a mandate, you have power over a particular scope of work.” (P8)*

Participant 4 described being overlooked for a leadership role based on a superficial lack of perceived maturity, whereby competence is associated with age and gender:

*“I was told a few years ago for a role, you don’t have grey hairs or the gravitas to be leading a Team.” (P4)*

Participant 4 commented later that her height was a factor when it came to demonstrating competency and capability:

*"I'm quite short. I'm 1.54 meters, and I've always been considered younger than I am. I felt it worked against me." (P4)*

Consideration of tactics to enhance image to meet expectations of age and experience was expressed by Participant 1:

*"I don't want to be wrinkled, but I was considering maybe getting a pair of glasses to have this posturing of something more serious." (P1)*

To overcome these superficial challenges to their credibility, women leaders feel they are expected to work aggressively or harder than their male colleagues, as Participant 15 expressed:

*"If you are female, you need to work like not even twice as hard, but so much harder than our male colleagues to show that we are competent." (P15)*

Participant 8 emphasised ongoing efforts to demonstrate competence and strength to prevent doubt from others:

*"You had to show that you are not weak. I'm strong enough. I can handle this job. I'm big enough for this job, I'm mature enough. But you're constantly having to prove that in showcasing the way you respond to challenges." (P8)*

Participant 4 echoed relentless attempts to be the best and instil confidence in her abilities through ongoing knowledge and skill acquisition:

*"I think over the years I felt that I've had to prove myself a lot more. I've had to be the best at everything and have the answer to everything because that's the only way you're going to show up against males." (P4)*

Double standards of expectations placed on women, that didn't appear to apply to male colleagues, led to Participant 16 deciding to leave her employer:

*“It's one of the reasons why I left my previous employer, because there are also these undue expectations put on women to meet certain requirements that men aren't expected to. So, in addition to now proving yourself and showing you know you've got the sort of 'kahunas' to go in there and claim your space, you also have this need to justify that you're competent.” (P16)*

Finally, the achievement of senior roles was often followed by an external reaction of surprise or doubt. Participant 1 described this experience of their success being considered unusual:

*“The current role that I'm in has surprised a lot of people in the marketplace and in this company.” (P1)*

In summation, this theme confirms that the experience of the double bind structurally confronts women's authority, demanding high levels of effort to achieve the credibility their male colleagues receive by default.

#### **5.3.4 Exclusionary Relationships and Organisational Structures**

The experience of the double bind is interpersonal, shown through interaction with peers, subordinates, and superiors. Participants detailed the way organisational structures and established peer behaviour either exaggerated or reduced the challenges. The challenges for women leaders emanate from their peers, often from specific generational or cultural backgrounds that tend to resist modern leadership styles. This peer objection was experienced as restricting access, where colleagues pre-emptively impacted their reputation by spreading negative labels in relation to gender expectations. This demonstrates the expectation that women ought to be agreeable to be liked, and instead, when they display assertive and directive behaviours in questioning decisions, they are perceived as difficult, and less likeable. Participant 14 noted:

*“People get warned before they even meet me that I'm just a difficult person, that they should be fearing me, but all I'm doing is just asking questions in my view. So, there's a perception, and most of the time I hear about it after.” (P14)*

Participant 12 noted the origin of this friction, underlining the issue between the women leaders' assertive behaviour and the expectations from senior male colleagues. The perception that her style was domineering indicates that assertiveness was viewed in a negative light, particularly among those from an older generation, where traditional assumptions about the behaviour of men and women are more entrenched. This highlights how women can be criticised for traits that are admired in men, reinforcing the notion of the double bind, where the tension results in a no-win situation:

*“The issue lies with my colleagues. And they're from a particular generation, so my style is too domineering for them.” (P12)*

Disconnects between perceived status in one-on-one interactions with male colleagues and the dynamics within a boardroom setting, were highlighted by Participant 17, who holds an HR Director role in her organisation. Her description of how she is perceived by her male colleagues on the ExCo as a supporting actor, demonstrates the challenge to be considered an equal to her male colleagues in a setting where performativity is present. This also highlights the view that particular roles that are functional and support other roles, such as HR and Finance, are seen as extensions of communal or relational competencies. In social settings, colleagues' behaviour is impacted, whereby they seek approval based on how they feel other members of the group expect them to behave towards their female colleagues:

*“I can tell you that I don't feel a peer to my male ExCo counterparts now. One-on-one, they will tell you I am their peer. But the minute you sit around a boardroom table, which is a more status-driven discussion, and this is my perception, there are certain roles everyone is expected to play, and then I am automatically relegated to a supporting actor role.” (P17)*

Female colleagues who align themselves more with male colleagues to reach a higher social status within the organisational structure, was mentioned by Participant 16. This then perpetuates a culture that penalises women who don't conform to gender norms, whereby women feel pressure to choose between solidarity with their female colleagues versus acceptance in a male-dominated environment. Her last comment implies that this tactic has limits, that despite aligning with the “boys club”,

these women may still experience the double bind in other ways that will limit their continued progression:

*“And there are women, most women, who choose that to be part of the boys club, and they actually put other women down in order to be lifted up, and that's what some of them did, and they still do, and they got where they needed to go. But it takes you only so far.” (P16)*

In experiencing the double bind, the relationship with immediate superiors and the type of executive structure, were found to be major mitigating factors. When women leaders had the support of their immediate environment, the overall experience changed. Participant 1 and Participant 9 noted the significant difference that a supportive, perhaps non-traditional, superior made:

*“I don't have any issues with the ExCo. My boss is older than an average CEO.” (P1)*

*“I can see that support from my CEO here now. He has a nice way of trying to coach you and support you, even if you don't know it. And that's what I like about him.” (P9)*

In conclusion, this theme uncovers that women leaders' experiences of the double bind are framed by their interpersonal and structural environment, requiring them to monitor and manage their relationships, as well as facing the dilemma between a range of behaviours to experience acceptance and effectiveness.

### **5.3.5 Dynamics of Intersectionality**

Some of the participants mentioned race and culture as part of their experience of the double bind. Societal norms in South Africa, the diverse nature of the cultures, as well as the racial dynamics, intersect and at times, compound the challenges women face in navigating the double bind. Participant 3, who is a black female, noted that in South Africa, men and women are both judged for the level at which they engage respectfully with others. This is likely an indication of African cultural expectations, whereby respect is underpinned by the concept of Ubuntu, and these values apply to both men and women:

*“We operate in a box called South Africa. And when women become rude, they're judged harshly. When men are rude, they're still judged.” (P3)*

Participant 1 described how race features in leadership perceptions, whereby the white male in the room is automatically assumed to be the leader, given the traditional view that leaders are white and male. This demonstrates how gender and race intersect to heighten the barriers faced by women in their leadership roles:

*“I would be in certain rooms and I'm the most senior person, but the white man next to me is assumed to be the boss. So, someone who reports to me, a customer will think they are the boss as opposed to me.” (P1)*

Participant 3 gave an example later of the policing of her professional identity that extended to their physical presentation, linking clothing to cultural expectations:

*“Cool pants, but for an African woman? Maybe you should consider a more suitable outfit.” (P3)*

Responding to these interpersonal challenges, women leaders use strategic and contextually appropriate methods to enforce professional boundaries to minimise further harassment or disrespect. Participant 3 described another scenario where culture, race and gender intersect. In this example, she used her mother tongue, as well as her identity as a black African female, to assert her position in response to an email in a language it was assumed she would not understand. This tactic is a reciprocation to counteract the disrespect demonstrated:

*“A white male Afrikaner wrote me a very demeaning e-mail in Afrikaans. And I wrote back to this gentleman in my deepest Tswana. That's how I nipped it in the bud.” (P3)*

Participant 5 described her interactions as an English mother tongue speaker with an Afrikaans mother tongue speaker, and the varied expectations of women in each of those cultures:

*“I can be very direct and very straightforward...men especially, struggle with that, especially when there's a lot of traditional Afrikaans men. So, like women have their place, women have their role, and I'm English.” (P5)*

Whilst there are challenges in South Africa as a female leader given the double bind and intersectionality, Participant 3 mentioned that she had made an intentional decision to establish her professional excellence within South Africa, given she had developed an understanding of these cultural and racial dynamics:

*“I selected to work on this continent for the exact same reason... I just understand Afrikaners here in Ventersdorp. I know them. They're my brothers. We grew up together here and in this country.” (P3)*

These quotes demonstrate that at times, women leaders in South Africa experience a compounded double bind, such as the double black bind. These dynamics of intersectionality in South Africa complicate an already difficult dilemma that women leaders face.

#### **5.4 RQ2 Findings: Navigating the Double Bind**

The second research question aimed to uncover the ways in which women leaders navigate the double bind. The second question is recapped as follows:

*RQ2. How do women leaders in South Africa navigate the double bind?*

Their accounts are clustered into three themes, summarised in Table 5.3.

**Table 5.3: RQ2 Themes – Navigating the Double Bind**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>RQ2</b>
Calibrating Communication, Emotions and Persona	Navigating the Double Bind
Leveraging Competence and Identity	
Cultivating Relational Safety and Alignment	

*Source: Author's own.*

#### 5.4.1 Calibrating Communication, Emotions and Persona

Women leaders fine-tuned their communication, assertiveness, and self-projection as a strategy to navigate the double bind. This tactical response was necessary to ensure that whilst they continued with their leadership mandate, they moderated the professional and social backlash associated with being labelled as aggressive. Participants described trying different methods of communicating to find the balance. Participant 15 expressed the difficult trade-off:

*“I became less direct...but I realised that it's also not really working. And changing yourself in that way doesn't make you come across as authentic.”*  
(P15)

Participant 12 acknowledged this reality as a factor that dictates her public demeanour:

*“We've been socialised in a particular way, so that there are particular behaviours that are acceptable for leaders.”* (P12)

Participant 16 describes how she learnt to show two sides of herself early on in her career, whereby she would put forward her viewpoint in a clear and assertive manner, strategically tempering that with demonstrations of communality and care in other interactions, to balance the perception others had of her:

*“I had to be quite assertive in how I put things forward. But I was never aggressive because I don't believe in women being aggressive. It really gets you on the wrong side of the court. You're the only one sitting there cheering on for yourself. So, for me, it was to be very firm, and where I would speak, I would speak. But if you don't listen, I would say, look, you're not hearing me, this is what I want you to hear. But I would still care enough to go: How was your day? How's your family?”* (P16)

Intentionality was another strategy employed by women leaders to prevent the negative gendered interpretation of their behaviour. Participant 9 articulated this approach to manage external perception, especially in male-dominated environments:

*“I had to really be intentional about how I approached the room, how I projected myself... I was very intentional about my behaviours and what I did. But then I just focused on what I needed to do to deliver on that role and spent less time worrying about the fact that they were used to a male account lead.” (P9)*

Participant 7 discussed intentionally managing emotions, so as not to engender a stereotypical assumption of an emotionally out-of-balance female:

*“As women, we do have a little bit more of a balanced approach to things, which could sometimes come across as being soft or emotional. So, I used to be very intentional, when I'm in meetings, on how I expressed myself and not to come across as emotional or over-caring.” (P7)*

This psychological pressure often switches into physical signs of anger and frustration, which must then be suppressed in the workplace, to avoid being labelled as aggressive or too emotional. Participant 4 described:

*“It's very frustrating. My pressure rises, my blood boils. When I do speak, my voice breaks because I'm angry. I don't get teary, but I get angry.” (P4)*

A critical element of leadership style development entails demystifying the assumption that emotional expression at work is equivalent to weakness or incompetence. Women leaders are developing a style that acknowledges communal human responses during high-pressure situations, thereby educating their colleagues and creating a more inclusive standard for leadership composure. Participant 11 described an emotional response as a way of processing, not distress:

*“A woman can shed a tear in a difficult conversation, that doesn't mean she's overwhelmed. That doesn't mean she is struggling to interpret or receive that difficult feedback. That just means that she is processing that feedback in a different way.” (P11)*

Women leaders could internally justify their actions, even when faced with disapproval, by basing their actions on objective performance requirements. Participant 14 noted this internal self-anchoring, after explaining that she is labelled

as difficult because she challenges assumptions and decisions for the purpose of seeking clarity, given her level of responsibility:

*“I acknowledge that, that's how it is, but I know why I asked the question. So as long as I understand why I'm asking, I know I'm not difficult. I don't intend to be.” (P14)*

Focussing on developing self-respect and pride in conduct and results was mentioned by Participant 6 to navigate disapproval of others and to prevent falling prey to people-pleasing tendencies that could reduce impact:

*“At the end of the day, when I reflect, am I proud of the way I've handled myself in that on that particular day?” (P6)*

The importance of learning to have difficult conversations and building skills around doing that effectively was discussed as a strategy to communicate when boundaries had been broken:

*“You cannot keep quiet. I've actually got a quote, it's always been in my office, and it says, I will not stay silent so that you can stay comfortable.” (P18)*

Participant 7 commented that often the environment was only to blame for double bind experiences, but that women who don't communicate their dissatisfaction are unintentionally allowing the behaviour to continue:

*“And then the second big thing I found is that a lot of women experience this double bind not because they are in an environment that doesn't tolerate the way they are, but because they're not willing to speak up.” (P7)*

This advice was suggested by Participant 13 as well, as a way to communicate what behaviours are acceptable, no matter how seemingly trivial:

*“You have to speak up. I think if you go into this and treat everybody with respect but use your voice. You know you have to use your voice, and it doesn't*

*mean you're being disrespectful. If somebody does tease you or makes a joke, you have to realise, what are you here to do?" (P13)*

Participant 10 noted a particular tactic to make her voice heard. Her approach was to occasionally adapt her natural style to align with acceptable leadership practice, allowing her to join various forums where she could challenge the status quo:

*"I've started to adopt more male characteristic practices because if I'm not in the room, I cannot make the impact. So, I need to make sure that I remain in the rooms so that I can then bring in this other dimension that is sometimes required, even if I just mention one or two things just to say, hang on, have you thought about this angle? People might turn around and they say, Oh, there she goes again, but someday it lands somewhere, even if it might not make an impact at that particular point in time. Somehow, it trickles down when I engage with the teams. I remind them about the dangers of the vicious circle we could put ourselves in by continuing to drive certain behaviours, thinking that that's what gets you in the boardroom." (P10)*

To sum up, strategic calibration serves as an operational strategy where women temper their persona against existing gender norms to ensure their professional intent is correctly perceived as competence, not conflict.

#### **5.4.2 Leveraging Competence and Identity**

The second strategy participants used to navigate the double bind is to maximise competence and a value-led identity as protection against gendered criticism. This strategy requires establishing a high-performance track record to ensure that any pushback is focused purely on professional deliverables, rather than gendered expectations. Participant 2 explained this dedication to delivering to a very high standard:

*"I gain my credibility by making sure I have a very good deliverable. I do all the things so you can't fault me on the execution style." (P2)*

Participant 6 emphasised a focus on outcomes, and to use that as leverage to counter the critique on the approach that is typically used as a detractor:

*“Negotiate your own space and negotiate your own style of leadership, because the most important thing is for you to understand what the delivery goal is, and if I’m delivering the goal, please don’t judge how I get there, because that is the nuance.” (P6)*

Underpinning this defensive strategy is the awareness of the operating environment. Participants stressed the importance of contextual awareness, as Participant 15 emphasised that knowing the rules of engagement is key to survival:

*“It’s an awareness, it’s really being aware of your environment, where you’re operating, how you’re operating. I think that awareness is important as you navigate these instances.” (P15)*

While women leaders possess caring instincts, a positive leadership trait, the double bind often forces them to suppress or moderate this trait to gain professional credibility; otherwise, they risk being labelled as weak and thereafter undermined. Participant 11 illustrated the natural tendency toward care for a direct report:

*“Because of the caring nature that I have, I was even going above and beyond to visit him at home, I’m just more inclined that way in terms of caring for people.” (P11)*

Participant 2 relayed a very interesting piece of feedback to her more communal and development approach with an underperforming team member:

*“There was an team member when I joined, and my boss said to me, if it doesn’t work, get rid of her. I said, I’m not transactional. I will happily work through what are, I think, ordinary problems. If I look at her now, she’s probably my biggest supporter, and when we did the latest reviews from my team, it was as my boss described it, probably the best performance review he’s ever read of a person in this business. A lot of it was around female leadership, being supportive of other women, helping other women find their voices. A lot of that is stuff that some had never experienced. So, there was quite an interesting thing where, from top down, a bit of criticism about how, but from the bottom up, some of the*

*starkest praise they've ever seen of a woman leading a team.” (P2)*

As this communal behaviour is not without professional backlash, participants learned that a crucial navigation strategy is to adopt a seemingly tougher, more agentic stance. Participant 5 underlined the necessity of this strategic shift for career survival:

*“My colleague said she's also had to adapt to being a lot harsher because otherwise you get undermined.” (P5)*

Participant 6 spoke of seeking approval from within, to counter a lack of validation from others due to perspectives, bias and opinions. She placed emphasis on self-acceptance and personal pride as a more fulfilling goal:

*“The only thing that I can win is to make myself proud. Because if I'm going to rely on other people's external validation, I will never get it because people see things through different lenses.” (P6)*

In conclusion, leveraging competence and identity is a strategy employed by women, where the leader's competence must be significant enough that it surpasses gender bias, at times necessitating the awkward trade-off of suppressing empathic leadership behaviour to maintain authority.

### **5.4.3 Cultivating Relational Safety and Alignment**

The final group of strategies employed by women leaders to navigate the double bind centres around managing the immediate interpersonal environment by setting boundaries, commanding respect, and managing social integration. This strategy is a balance to maintain a professional, safe environment and prevent gendered communication from leading to professional conflicts. The participants manoeuvre relations with their colleagues by navigating between integration into the male culture and keeping their identity. Participant 5 noted the power dynamics of the “boys club”, and the decision-making that takes place in these informal interactions that women are often not part of:

*“There's a lot of male cliques, so they've got their drinking buddies and their golf buddies. And it's very difficult as a woman to then get into those groups if you want to or not.” (P5)*

Participant 10 expressed the difficulty with this dual-identity strategy:

*“Be one of the boys and at the same time, make sure I am also surviving that space, so like I'm one of the boys. But I mustn't become the boy. And I tried at various places to keep my femininity. To some extent, I failed.” (P10)*

Participant 16 shared an anecdote of a former colleague who aligned herself with the “boys club” to maintain her power and position. However, at this stage in her life, as she approaches retirement and needs advice from someone who demonstrates care, she turns to Participant 16 for advice – someone she would not previously have sought advice from. This anecdote is a strong example of the mask some women wear to make it to the top, whilst observing other styles of leadership and engagement that they value. Out of the sight of said “boys club” and needing to perform, they gravitate to the more communal dynamics:

*“One of my former colleagues is retiring. She asked for a meeting with me once every two weeks to talk about how she's going to retire and take on this new chapter of her life. And I asked her why? And she said, because you're so willing to listen and you have the patience to hear me out, but you're also wise. But when I worked with her, she never did that. So, I gathered that this side of her that respected me for bringing out the softer side, she couldn't show it there because she was amongst the boys. She was part of that leadership and male-dominated crowd and had to put on a big, big face.” (P16)*

Establishing who one's supporters are in the organisation, those who see your capability, is something Participant 16 mentioned:

*“Be aware of who your friends are, who are the people you can trust. And there are some men in the organisation that are just amazing, that really don't see you as a woman or any different... and those are the people that I keep close.” (P16)*

Cross-functional and departmental relationships to build alliances and rapport with others across and beyond the organisation, were put forward by Participant 8 as a way to build a strong brand to garner support:

*“There's an element of working outside your own team. Being able to work across different teams, across different functions, and just creating for yourself your own management plan of how you're going to manage yourself in the role in the organisation, and how you're going to build your brand outside of the organisation.” (P8)*

Reading the room and picking up on social cues was noted by Participant 9 as an approach to assess how to reach a particular outcome and generate relational support:

*“Initially, I try to get a feel for the audience, and you try to get a sense of which approach is going to work.” (P9)*

Participant 14 echoed this sentiment of tailoring her engagement depending on the audience and her objective:

*“I do sometimes hold back depending on who I'm dealing with or what I'm trying to get out of the situation.” (P14)*

Participant 6 described communicating intent and style upfront to generate buy-in for her approach, to manage critique as a result of the double bind:

*“You're new in a place, you meet with other people, you tell them your management style. And you say, look, for me, its delivery, and they think, OK, I can get away with it. She's a female boss. And when you are firm, you get to hear from other colleagues that, hey, you are driving these people hard.” (P6)*

Contrasting the transactional and agentic environment, some participants opted to base their navigation strategy upon strong interpersonal relationships to deliberately leverage social bonds to build trust and loyalty, thus creating a different kind of safety.

Participant 2 discovered that a genuine human connection provided the most meaningful reward:

*"I connect to people on an interpersonal level more than anything else. I enjoy listening to their things, their stories. It's actually the only thing I really care about." (P2)*

Another navigation mechanism was the setting of professional boundaries. Some participants disapproved of being subjected to disrespectful behaviour, using clear language. Participant 13 highlighted the necessity of taking a firm stance:

*"I don't allow people to bully me." (P13)*

Participant 16 spoke of the importance of choosing the right people for her team:

*"I'm a very particular type of manager. I want to be friendly with you. I want to be a team player. I don't believe in micromanaging. I believe in encouraging and working with you to develop a solution. So, I'm looking for specific types of traits in people." (P16)*

She went on to emphasise the adjustment required when leading a team she did not personally pick, whereby her style had to become more direct and firmer to assert her position:

*"I don't know these people. I didn't get to handpick them myself. So, it's a little bit of a mixed bag. You have the people who really gravitate to me, and then you have the ones who are very threatened by me. So, I've had to be firmer. I've had to assert myself in ways that I didn't have to before, as I hand-picked my team in my previous role." (P16)*

Setting boundaries often necessitated confronting the tone, language, and posture of the contravening party, as Participant 3 stated:

*"I told him, I'm not your sister. I don't care how you address people. The behaviour, the tone and your posture when you said Sisi was demeaning." (P3)*

In conclusion, cultivating relational safety is a necessary process of choosing battles and setting boundaries. It requires women leaders to actively read the room, in addition to performing their professional duties through policing their language, and the behaviour of themselves and their colleagues, to secure a functional and respectful working environment.

## 5.5 RQ3 Findings: Leadership Styles in Double Bind Contexts

The third research aimed to explore how senior women leaders are developing their leadership styles in light of the double bind. The question can be recapped as follows:

*RQ3. How are South African women leaders developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations?*

Their accounts are clustered into four themes, summarised in Table 5.4.

**Table 5.4: RQ3 Themes – Leadership Styles in Double Bind Contexts**

Themes	RQ3
Authenticity and Beyond the Double Bind	Developing Leadership Styles in Double Bind Contexts
Contextual Skill Blending and the “Feminine”	
Creating Systemic Support	
Call for an Evolution of Leadership	

*Source: Author's own.*

### 5.5.1 Authenticity and Beyond the Double Bind

Participants hone their leadership styles to respond to the double bind. Authenticity and being authentic were explicitly mentioned by 13 women (72%), with one participant (6%) implying authenticity. Participant 2 described her journey through therapy to align her authentic self with her work persona, to build a sustainable approach for her career:

*“Years ago, I spent a lot of time in therapy thinking about the different sides of personality, and my therapist always said to me, the closer you can bring your home and your work personas together, the greater your level of happiness will be because you are authentic.” (P2)*

Participant 10 echoed this by advocating for the benefits of authenticity and how it is required to take a long-term view to leadership development:

*“I try to show up as close to the authenticity of myself because I feel like it makes it easier. But that's also only grown with time. I think I'm a lot more comfortable now than 10 years ago.” (P10)*

Participant 5 expanded on these statements, emphasising that authenticity is more accessible than commonly understood, and that being true to oneself is crucial for overall wellbeing:

*“You don't need to change yourself as much as you think you do. I think that's the first point, because often trying to change yourself to be something that you are not will make you worse off.” (P5)*

The benefits of an authentic leader in creating environments where people feel psychologically safe to experiment are that creativity and innovation can emerge, as described by Participant 7:

*“I think for me the overall authentic, approachable Leader, which paints a clear direction of where we'd like to go, that celebrates small wins, that displays positivity for innovation and failure.” (P7)*

However, authenticity must be carefully defined. Participants expressed that just being authentic was not enough because the phrase is often misinterpreted in the business environment. Participant 9 underlined the necessity of this self-realisation:

*“The number one thing is being authentic, which I actually do believe, but I do think you have to define what's authentic for yourself because I do think sometimes people misunderstand what authentic is.” (P9)*

Self-assertion creates a psychological safety net for followers. In demonstrating authenticity, the leader allows others to be themselves, according to Participant 14:

*“If I’m authentically me, it gives others the permission to be themselves. And I need to create that environment.” (P14)*

The ability to self-manage, which entails understanding one's own behaviour and the creation of professional boundaries to maximise professional impact, is interwoven with authenticity. Participant 11 expressed that self-awareness is the foundation of effective leadership:

*“Know yourself and know your boundaries, and I’m not saying know your boundaries in a way that is fashionable... But know how you come across, be able to lead yourself so that you can come across better.” (P11)*

The contradictory expectations for women leaders in corporate South Africa and the uneven social and business landscape, call for women leaders to develop a mindset that embraces, rather than resists, complexity and uncertainty. The ability to function and lead effectively despite a lack of well-defined data or defined roles, becomes a critical core competency. Participant 1 noted that embracing ambiguity is a requisite in the toolkit of a contemporary leadership style:

*“One of the things that is critical is to embrace ambiguity. And whether you like it or not, you’re going to have to do it. Because if you were leading in the last five years, every year has been progressively more ambiguous.” (P1)*

In conclusion, women leaders are developing their styles through self-awareness and clearly defining their authenticity. They are prioritising self-management and developing the ability to embrace ambiguity to craft a robust leadership style that alleviates the internal costs of gendered behaviour dilemmas.

### **5.5.2 Contextual Skill Blending and the “Feminine”**

The analysis of data shows that participants are building leadership styles that are defined by learning critical skills, becoming flexible under different situations, and challenging oneself. This strategic career move, often called “zigzagging”, ensures that women leaders acquire the necessary skills to engage with experts on an equal basis, as Participant 1 stated:

*"I would say zigzag through your career. Don't be afraid to acquire skills and go into places that you don't know. This is really what's going to start to build your ability to think on your feet, to sit in rooms and think at the same pace as experts." (P1)*

Participant 5 highlighted that effective leadership requires continuous assessment based on the people involved and the context:

*"I almost find that there is a spectrum with different people, because I don't think that it's a one-size-fits-all." (P5)*

Participant 1 commented on the importance of developing complementary skills for different contexts and challenges:

*"I believe that a leader has to develop a very, very wide toolbox." (P1)*

Extending the narrative of authenticity, Participant 10 mentioned blending agentic and communal approaches, acknowledging the uniquely feminine qualities she brings to her leadership, whilst observing other styles to craft an approach suitable for a particular context and an audience:

*"I am fiercely female because I think that the qualities that I bring into this world are quite valuable. I'll borrow what I need to borrow from my male colleagues in order to make me also fit in within a construct of the work environment that is still largely designed to cater for them." (P10)*

Participant 18 spoke of acknowledging and affirming communal approaches as a valued contribution to any organisation, through experience and maturity:

*"I've also learned to understand over the years that empathy and understanding are also assets that you can bring to your leadership." (P18)*

The impact of motherhood on this more empathic and communal style was described by Participant 2, who details her growth and development after having children, and how that has made her a better leader and colleague:

*“Materially motherhood changed me. I see everyone as someone's child. I think it's softened me, and I think it's softened me for the better.” (P2)*

Finally, participants are developing the ability to strategically withdraw from conflicts or arguments that prove to be difficult due to deep-rooted bias. This reflects a shift from a need to win every battle to a pragmatic recognition that managing energy and mental health is an important long-term leadership skill. Participant 13 adopted the maturity to step away:

*“I guess then you just have to walk away and not worry about what the implications are going to be.” (P13)*

In summary, style development entails the ongoing mastery of skills that blend intellectual rigour with emotional intelligence. By embracing diverse roles, reading the room, and proactively defying outdated norms around emotional expression, these women leaders are developing a robust, dynamic and effective leadership prototype.

### **5.5.3 Creating Systemic Support**

The analysis of data reveals that participants also preferred developing a leadership style that involves shifting from coping with the double bind, to establishing systemic and relational support within their organisations and South Africa at large. Participants highlighted that organisational culture and diversity efforts must be customised to confront the nuanced challenges of their specific situation, not through the use of generic global frameworks. Participant 11 stated that this awareness must permeate the entire hierarchy:

*“Different levels of the organisation do need to have that level of understanding of how women come across in different environments.” (P11)*

Participant 3 shared valuable advice for other women leaders about identifying and focusing on their strengths as well as listening to feedback, to make the right decisions about future roles that they take on:

*“One of the things that is important to me is that I don't take a job I don't know, and I say to young people, stay in your excellence. Where I'm sitting right now, I'm just as excellent as the top 10% of HR executives in this country. You know why? I stayed in my excellence. I watched my work. I listened to feedback.”*  
(P3)

A component of relational support development is confronting intra-gender toxicity, where the source of female criticism often stems from other women. In developing a sustainable leadership style, navigating this internal conflict whilst remaining committed to collective advocacy, Participant 14 shared a disappointing truth:

*“A lot of the heartache my mentees have experienced, I'm sorry to say, has come from women, actually.”* (P14)

To prevent the future generations of women leaders from facing the same dilemmas, participants are developing a style that puts talent development first. Participants emphasised that talent development must be balanced and relevant across genders. Participant 9 highlighted this dual focus:

*“Women do need more support and more mentorship, and that's lacking, and the mentorship needs to be balanced. I think there needs to be a balance between men and women mentoring women.”* (P9)

Acknowledging that men and women have not been exposed to female leaders as role models, or even examples of men demonstrating a more nuanced style, was emphasised by Participants 3 and 17. It is critical to understand and acknowledge these limitations before rushing to lay blame at a particular group or dynamic, and rather to understand the systemic barriers that have resulted in the current deficit of inclusive leadership styles:

*“Sometimes it's not even women who are bad leaders. It's that the environment allows bad leadership. I think organisations allow bad leaders of any gender, organisations promote bad leaders of any gender, organisations hire bad leaders of any gender, and for women to join an organisation that allows bad behaviour, they think it's the way things are done here.”* (P3)

*“We fight with men who know no better because they've often only worked for men, so they haven't even been exposed to female leadership. So, they don't even know what it looks like. So how do we hold it against them that they don't understand there's a different way? And also, against female leaders for the exact same reason, because they haven't been exposed to a different style of leadership. So, they have no reference point for this way that could also work.”*  
(P17)

Participants articulated preferences for developing a leadership style that moves beyond simply coping with the challenges of the double bind, to one that creates systemic and relational support within their organisations. They emphasised the importance of understanding local roots and acknowledged the intra-gender toxicity that can further hinder progress. A lack of exposure to varied leadership styles sounds the call for something more.

#### **5.5.4 Call for an Evolution of Leadership**

Participants commented on the imperative for an evolution of the type of leadership that is typically seen in their organisations: a movement towards a more balanced, blended and contextual approach, given the complexities of our time and the need for diverse and inclusive styles. Participant 3 highlighted an important point around gender stereotypes and assumptions that need to be challenged. This points to the issue of these binary views on gender that infiltrate leadership studies, that further perpetuate a stereotype that restricts women's contributions and presence in leadership roles by continuing to assume qualities of the genders through a binary lens:

*“I was doing a leadership master class for Women's Day last month, and they asked me almost a similar question. They said, you know, as a woman, you are caring, and as a man, you are fair. And I said to them, you assume women can be feminine and men can't be caring.”* (P3)

Participant 16 noted that followers and leaders are facing unique challenges, and that a more interpersonal and fluid style of leadership is required to provide guidance and direction to followers:

*“I think especially in the world that we're in right now, having come out of COVID, people are dealing with a lot more, and to be firm, but soft at the same time is something that people are drawn to.” (P16)*

The importance of different contributions and viewpoints that communal styles of leadership can bring to decision tables, was highlighted by Participant 18:

*“There are instances where I think you do need that strong woman's voice, or at least people who understand.” (P18)*

An aspiration for the type of leader she would like to be, was expressed by Participant 8, noting the use of a blended style acquired through her past experiences, along with her purpose to develop leaders of leaders:

*“I want to be able to be the kind of leader who helps build careers, and to do that, I need to consistently work on leading by example, being collaborative with my team, co-creating, being hands on when I need to, and be hands off when I need to, but ultimately keep my focus on how do I help individuals to be leaders? So when I put that kind of investment in and the experience, I gained from having the super soft, super gentle way of working at the NGO in combination with the very forceful, very strong leadership at the consulting firm, bringing the two together means I get the happy medium so that I know how to flex and how to manage.” (P8)*

Participant 1 spoke to this balance between styles, and the assumption that being agentic conflicts with being empathic. Her point emphasises the contextual nature of leadership and the responsibility to achieve results while leading in a way that ensures the wellbeing and development of followers. Her point implies that our understanding of empathy defaults to assuming it means being soft, and that rather it should include a holistic understanding of empowerment. She had qualified earlier that she is naturally assertive and direct before making this statement:

*“I'm the most empathetic leader that I know. Really, I am. I can sit with people, and I know what they're feeling and what they're experiencing, and I will come out and explain it for them and give them a lot of ease. I think the struggle for*

*someone like me is more about the balance of how you manage outcomes. Because outcomes mean that I have a Laura in my team, and she represents her family and her job here is to create value for the company, but therefore the value she can take back is to progress herself and her family. That's about being empathetic in a highly anxious environment where a lot of noise really drives people to have anxiety to such extreme states that I don't think that they can perform.” (P1)*

Participant 17 used a particularly insightful metaphor to describe the current climate as a tool to drive a new and evolved understanding of what leadership can look like. The need to amplifying women's voices and increasing their presence in leadership roles is emphasised by this perspective, not simply for quotas' sake, but for the greater good of society:

*“The world and South Africa, more specifically, weren't ready for female leadership 20 years ago. So, women, even those women who were good leaders, were not successful because they did not lead in a way that was understood to be good leadership. So, for a plant to grow, the soil needs to be ready. And I think that the soil is currently being made ready, but it wasn't ready before.” (P17)*

Interestingly, three participants who are in the earlier part of their careers (45 years and below) reflected on the decision they have made to align their style with their values and purpose, regardless of whether that results in career success in the traditional sense. Participant 5 mentioned the importance of making an impact in the lives of her followers:

*“For me, life isn't about climbing a ladder or getting promotions. It's simply about leaving people that I interact with or engage with better off than they were before.” (P5)*

Participant 17 articulated the trade-off as she sees it, between speaking up against outdated leadership styles and personal career growth. Her view is that speaking out against a transactional style of engagement will result in greater impact for future generations than any individual career advancement can achieve:

*“If you want to move the business forward so that future people have better leadership, then you will take some personal sacrifices and knocks and consequences along the way, because the greater goal is worth it. If your greater goal is personal success, then tough luck to everybody else. Then you're not going to speak up and say the unpopular things because it's not going to help you achieve your goal. But you're also not making it a better place for the next person, and then you have essentially joined the ranks of the people that you are despairing about.” (P17)*

Participant 2 echoed this statement, stating that if she complied with what's expected, she could enjoy personal career growth. However, she stated her personal ambition is not about climbing the corporate ladder, but rather to impact her followers for the better:

*“I think if I assimilated better, if I were determined to give up my values to assimilate, I would probably accelerate. But I don't care. That's not my goal. But it matters to me that people that I work with have come out of the process of working with me, having known something more, have been treated well and fairly.” (P2)*

In summation, participants spoke of the need for a transformation of leadership styles within their organisations and beyond, encouraging a more balanced, inclusive and contextually relevant approach to meet the demands of today's complex world. Perhaps a step before that, is to address the binary nature of gender stereotypes and the assumption that women are caring and men are assertive, and that the opposite is less prevalent. A particularly unique view mentioned by several of the younger participants, was that they had reflected on their commitment to align their leadership values to their purpose, with the view that the impact they have on others and society is more important than their own role progression. These findings suggest a desire for a leadership evolution that prioritises empathy, inclusivity and societal impact, over personal gain.

## 5.6 Chapter Summary

This study explored the lived experiences of women in senior leadership roles, with a specific focus on how they navigate the double bind, a phenomenon describing the conflicting expectations placed on them to demonstrate both traditionally feminine and masculine leadership traits (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Within the South African corporate context, these experiences are further shaped by intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and organisational culture. The participants' varied professional backgrounds and leadership responsibilities provided rich insight into how women at the highest organisational levels reconcile these conflicting demands while sustaining professional legitimacy and authority. The findings show that the double bind in South African leadership contexts is a significant and intrinsic challenge. It is experienced as an intense and costly tension between professional authority and gendered expectation. The data undoubtedly reveal that women leaders experience psychological toll, evidenced through anger, frustration, and the search for fit to compensate for the unconscious scepticism over their competence, authority, and professional presence.

This need for hyper-competence and constant vigilance describes the core negative experience of the double bind. The findings confirm that navigating the double bind demands that women leaders to work as strategic performers, balancing the cost of authenticity against maintaining authority. The collaboration of these three strategies, namely Calibrating Persona, Leveraging Competence, and Cultivating Safety and Alignment, is a delicate equilibrium where professional legitimacy is temporarily secured through high emotional and professional labour. The navigation process demands a level of hyper-vigilance and hyper-competence, which, while successful in the short term, can result in personal cost in the form of psychological toll. Furthermore, the tactics present themselves as the management of a broken system, putting women at risk of failing at being their authentic selves in order to effectively satisfy their leadership mandate. By prioritising context-specific education, investing in balanced mentorship, and managing the intricacies of intra-gender dynamics, these participants are working to disentangle the systemic structures that sustain the double bind, moving beyond personal survival to a focus on the greater good.

The notable elements of these discussions have revealed that some participants acknowledge the need to consider that men can demonstrate feminine leadership tendencies, and perhaps also face a double bind of their own, whereby if they don't exhibit a style that is masculine, they will also be judged. The importance of the work required to leave a legacy for future generations of effective leadership was a strong theme amongst participants. Their experience of the double bind in their leadership has highlighted struggles that they wish to avoid for their daughters and other women. The work they have done on themselves to largely overcome this, through demonstration of career success, has inspired them to help others in crafting their own leadership style. Some of the participants feel that this will require sacrifice by some individuals who are not primarily focused on their individual ambitions, but rather those who want to leave the people and organisations they interact with in a better place.

Furthermore, there was an acknowledgement that poor leadership is not confined to any specific gender, but rather it is a systemic problem related to our definition of leadership. The relational element of leadership is an emerging theme, as well as the importance of collective outcomes that include the needs of followers, which in turn improves the likelihood of team and organisational success. The contextual nature of leadership was highlighted, and the responsibility to achieve results, whilst leading in a way that ensures the wellbeing and development of followers, providing tension in participants' leadership style. The commonly understood definition of empathy defaults to assuming it means being soft, and rather, it needs to include a holistic understanding of empowerment. In addition, there is a view that a lack of exposure amongst male and female leaders has resulted in a limited understanding of effective leadership, making it difficult to recognise and appreciate different styles, including those demonstrated by women.

The issue of intersectionality was mentioned by participants, describing the impact that race and culture have on their experience and navigation of the double bind. Whilst it would be an oversight to omit these findings, as mentioned earlier, this research focused on gendered experiences of the double bind, and did not account for how race, ethnicity or culture may interact with gender in South Africa.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This study aimed to understand South African female leaders' experience of the double bind in their organisations. The primary research question was to explore how senior women leaders in South Africa navigate the double bind. Eighteen senior women leaders were interviewed to gather their experiences, their strategies for dealing with the contradictory expectations placed on them, and how they are crafting their leadership style in light of these expectations. The data from the interviews was analysed using RTA, coded into themes, and the findings were presented in Chapter 5, grouped by each of the three research questions.

The key findings revealed that the double bind is a significant challenge for senior women leaders in corporate South Africa, creating tension between their professional authority and the gendered expectations of leadership. This results in women leaders employing strategies to balance their authenticity with authority through calibrating their persona, creating safety through relationships and leveraging competence to demonstrate capability. These strategies, while often effective, can lead to a psychological toll and risk of compromising their authenticity. The findings in Chapter 5 emphasise the need for systemic change, advocating for context-specific awareness and education, balanced mentorship and addressing intra-gender dynamics. Participants described the importance of authenticity and adopting a mindset to deal with complexity and contradiction, as well as a commitment to leaving a legacy of effective leadership for future generations.

This chapter is a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 5, organised in the same order as the research questions presented in Chapter 3. The analysis and discussion in this chapter compare the findings detailed in Chapter 5 with the literature review in Chapter 2, to provide answers to the questions detailed in Chapter 3. The discussion follows the same structure as Chapter 5, which matches the order of Chapter 3, and provides insights for the research problem presented in Chapter 1.

## **6.2 RQ1 Discussion: Experiencing the Double Bind**

The first research question aimed to gather the way in which women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind. The research question can be recapped as follows:

*RQ1. How do women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind?*

This question was posed to understand the lived experiences of women navigating the double bind in leadership roles in South Africa, and why they have these experiences. In addition, this question sought to understand how these women believe their gender affects the way their leadership style is perceived, and what the double bind means to them as leaders. This explored the situations they have faced because of the double bind, the impact on their careers and their development as leaders. The sections below discuss the themes from Research Question 1:

### **6.2.1 Stereotypes, Bias and Double Standards**

This study highlighted varying opinions from the participants regarding the influence of their gender on the perception of their leadership style. Seven women felt that their gender did not have a notable impact on how their leadership style was perceived, while five participants felt that it significantly impacted the perception of their leadership style. Despite these differing views, all participants went on to share their experiences of the double bind and other examples of gender bias that had an impact on their careers, even those who were of the view that their gender didn't impact the perception of their leadership style.

A possible explanation for this can be linked to Kinnear and Ortlepp's (2016) findings that women tend to hesitate in acknowledging that they either have or lack power. Buss et al. (2025) argue that women with more power motivation are more likely to reach senior leadership status in organisations. Coupled with that, these women are also usually equipped with the drive and fortitude to navigate the challenges of the gendered view of leadership (Buss et al., 2025). Therefore, these women who approach their leadership and their careers not taking the gender role differences into consideration, consider themselves more confident, with less concern for backlash (Shen & Joseph, 2021). While some women participants downplayed the

impact of their gender on the perception of their leadership, the same women later provided stories of gender bias they had to overcome, demonstrating how they had worked to rise above challenges by inadvertently rejecting the notion of gendered perceptions of their leadership style (Shen & Joseph, 2021).

On the other hand, several of the participants discussed how the “think manager, think male” assumption permeated their careers and working experiences (Heilman et al., 2024, p.172). The participants noted how they would often be disregarded as the leader, and that they needed to compensate for this “lack” based on their gender. One participant noted that this has led to feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome. Participants also noted backlash based on their more agentic behaviours, whereby their role incongruent behaviours, such as being direct in their questioning, or more assertive in their style, led to negative outcomes. The expectation was for them to be empathic and communal, as these traditionally feminine traits are linked to being considered likeable and nurturing (Chikwe et al., 2024; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). In addition, for one participant, when there was perceived incompetence on her part, the assumption was made that she had been “mothering” her team, perpetuating the stereotype that women are nurturing and therefore incongruent with obtaining results (Triana et al., 2024). This is consistent with the literature on the dynamics of the double bind and backlash, whereby women leaders often suffer through lower salaries, slower progression, or a lack of progression and poor performance evaluations (Mitchell et al., 2023).

One participant mentioned that when she voiced her opinions assertively, colleagues would refer to her as a “feminist”, with derogatory connotations. The term “feminist”, when used as a label in a disdainful manner, reinforces a boundary to signal that assertiveness remains incompatible with expectations of femininity. It is understood that the use of the words “feminist” or “feminism” denote disdain and even fear from those who feel its objective is to dismantle the long-held order of power (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). According to Butlerian theory, gender identity is performatively constructed because of social expectations and reinforcement, and therefore, the use of the word “feminist” in this context describes how social norms restrict women from leading authentically (Round et al., 2025).

### **6.2.2 Identity and Psychological Toll**

The participants described their awareness of the gendered expectations placed on them and the conflict with other leadership styles. This impacts their leadership identity, where mention was made of the struggles to find “fit” and “place”. Participants spoke of their perception of others' judgment of their leadership style, whereby they assumed that their choice to lead with empathy was viewed unfavourably by others. This aligns with research that describes the pressure placed on women in the construction of their identity as leaders (Fox-Kirk & Egan, 2024). This evidence details how women are still influenced by societal views of gender in their leadership identity creation (Hentschel et al., 2019; Triana et al., 2024).

Participants also spoke of the psychological toll of the double bind and gender bias they face in the workplace. The impact on their mental wellbeing was described as all-encompassing, emotionally and physically, and this echoes the emotional labour that atypical leaders expend in managing a multifaceted identity (Ayaz et al., 2024). Scholars have highlighted high levels of job stress and mental health struggles of female leaders because their gender is incongruous with their leadership role (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). When demonstrating more self-sacrificial leadership styles, such as Servant Leadership, which is often linked with feminine styles of leadership, leaders are likely to experience emotional exhaustion and even loneliness (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). Understanding the impact of context that the leader finds themselves in, and the challenges for atypical leaders, in particular women, is an area of future research where there are gaps in the knowledge base (Ayaz et al., 2024; Oc & Chintakananda, 2025).

### **6.2.3 Questioned Authority, Legitimacy and Credibility**

The study revealed that participants felt that their authority, even when connected to their role and mandate, was often questioned, along with their legitimacy, forcing them to navigate through this perceived inferiority. Participants felt the need to work aggressively or harder than their male counterparts (Rovelli & Mismetti, 2025). Women also spend more time and effort proving their worth and capability, compared to their male counterparts (Schultheiss, 2021). They expanded further and provided examples of where they were challenged or dismissed based on superficial characteristics such as age and even physical appearance. This disregard for their

authority led them to consider ways to enhance their image to counteract biased assumptions made about them, such as altering their appearance to appear older or working hard to prove their capability. This demonstrates the extension of Butlerian theory into organisational studies, whereby women still employ strategic means to wear a mask of masculinity in the workplace (Round et al., 2025). Women are expected to look more powerful to be considered a leader, and a more mature appearance is associated with leadership traits (Giacomin et al., 2022).

#### **6.2.4 Exclusionary Relationships and Organisational Structures**

A common theme that emerged from participants was the inherently interpersonal dynamic of the double bind, manifesting in their interactions with colleagues, subordinates and superiors. These female leaders went on to describe how the organisational frameworks and structural limitations, at times, exacerbated these challenges. Mention was made of the “boys club” as an exclusionary element within organisational life, and the observation that often other women align with the “boys club”, to then exclude other women (Groenewald & Odendaal, 2021).

The effect of the “boys club” on the participants aligns with the literature that describes how these close-knit groups still have considerable influence within the country and within organisations, despite the economic and political transformation over the last 30 years (Barnard & Luiz, 2024). Within the “boys club”, leadership is seen as masculine and in conflict with some of the more feminine styles of engaging (Ahuja & Weatherall, 2023), placing women under pressure to adopt gender incongruent masculine traits to gain access to these networks.

#### **6.2.5 Dynamics of Intersectionality**

The specific context of South Africa was highlighted in the findings where there are cultural expectations of leaders to be cordial and respectful, in accordance with the principles of Ubuntu, a philosophy rooted in African culture which is emerging as a leadership practice within the literature (Chetty & Price, 2024). One participant noted that South Africa is a particular ecosystem, and whilst women are judged negatively when they are considered rude, men are subject to the same penalties of negative social status. Another participant commented on differing receptions of her more agentic style between Afrikaans and English colleagues. Adding to this, research has

shown that economically unequal societies value masculine traits more than feminine traits, and this can exacerbate gender stereotypes, as men are viewed as more agentic, and women are viewed as more communal (Moreno-Bella et al., 2023).

This alludes to the fact that there may be conflicting demands on certain behaviours in the South African context, whereby the Ubuntu philosophy conflicts with an agentic style, yet there is evidence to suggest this style is more prevalent in countries with economic inequality (Moreno-Bella et al., 2023). Whilst women experience judgement through perceptions of aggression, incongruent with their gender, this may be exacerbated further within the South African context, requiring them to expend more effort than women in other contexts in navigating the double bind.

#### **6.2.6 Conclusion: RQ1**

The analysis of how senior women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind demonstrates that their lived experiences are shaped by various factors, including deeply rooted cultural expectations, gender biases and organisational dynamics. The South African context provides additional complexity to the double bind, particularly given the presence of the “boys club” that remains active in corporate South Africa (Barnard & Luiz, 2024; Groenewald & Odendaal, 2021). This means the double bind and the dilemma of impossible choice may, in fact, be more deeply and structurally embedded into South African society. As well as the “boys club”, there are cultural expectations linked to the Ubuntu philosophy that still guide many South Africans' worldview (Mangaroo-Pillay, 2025), and given that those have more communal expectations, further complexity is added to the dilemma for women in South Africa. An important note is that the findings on exclusionary networks and questioned authority are not disconnected from the double bind. They form the structural and cultural context in which the double bind presents itself. They are indeed discriminatory systems that create the ‘no-win’ dilemma that penalise women for decisions or behaviours that are not in line with the traditionally accepted model of leadership.

Pressure to conform to society's expectations of leadership places pressure on women to manage their identities, leading to a psychological toll and a struggle to find belonging in their roles. The understanding of leader wellness is an emerging body of knowledge, and certainly, atypical leaders expend more energy managing

their identity, which then impacts their wellness further (Ayaz et al., 2024). At this stage, whilst the dynamics of the double bind and other gender biases in organisations are largely understood, placing attention on the impact on women in crafting careers in these contexts would be a worthwhile pursuit for organisations to craft more impactful and relevant support systems (Ayaz et al., 2024).

The frustration women experience is a result of the questioned authority, the exclusionary relationship and the psychological toll, and it pushes women to reject the binary system. Therefore, these struggles serve as the driving force to stop them confirming to this broken leadership model, and rather to place their efforts that they would have expended navigating the double bind, towards creating a new leadership model. This is explored in RQ2 and RQ3.

### **6.3 RQ2 Discussion: Navigating the Double Bind**

The second research question aimed to uncover the ways in which women leaders navigate and manoeuvre within the context of the double bind. The second question is recapped as follows:

*RQ2. How do women leaders in South Africa navigate the double bind?*

This question aimed to detail the strategies and tactics that assist women in sustainable leadership effectiveness, whilst pushing the boundaries of gendered expectations and constraints. The purpose was to explore how these women respond in professional settings when contradictory expectations are placed on them, whereby a more direct or agentic leadership style is expected of them, or a more consensual style is needed. This question sought to understand how they manage these competing demands for a positive outcome for themselves, their teams and the organisation. The study identified three strategies that these women leaders use to navigate the double bind effectively.

#### **6.3.1 Calibrating Communication, Emotions and Persona**

The participants described how they have fine-tuned their communication styles, balancing assertiveness and communal approaches to mitigate negative perceptions. Participants noted the importance of speaking up when it comes to

highlighting their experience of the double bind to promote awareness and drive more inclusive behaviours. It was noted that the hesitance to speak up potentially masks the openness of senior leaders and organisations to change their narrative and cultures when it comes to gender inclusion. Literature supports this view that women, particularly when working in male-dominated organisations, feel limited in their expressions of voice, and often detail having a voice on social dynamics of work, as opposed to more central issues, such as staffing and strategic planning, which are conversations where diversity and inclusion matters would be aired (Cooper et al., 2021).

The participants also described intentionality in their approach, reading the room, understanding the context and using that to craft a context-specific communication style and message. This intentionality helped them to manage emotional expression in professional settings, where showing vulnerability, or perceived vulnerability, can be considered weakness, or as being difficult or overly emotional. This crafting of their persona to garner respect aligns with research that demonstrates that women who desire status, in the form of respect from others, are less likely to experience backlash than those who explicitly seek power (Mishra & Kray, 2022). This also aligns with findings that describe the emotional labour that women use to manage their emotions to respond and serve others' needs to advance the goals of the organisation (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). Emotional labour is used to navigate the double bind, demonstrating that participants were not only faced with a dilemma in terms of their behaviours, but that it came with an additional personal and less visible cost.

The literature states that women in power tend to act in more prosocial ways, as they are more likely to practice emotional labour (Ayaz et al., 2024). This has a positive effect on organisations and the subordinates below; however, it places an additional burden on women, especially if it is externally motivated (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). One participant detailed her intentional practice of emotional labour for the greater good, through the concept of the trickle-down effect, whereby she adjusted her communication style to demonstrate more masculine behaviours, to remain in the rooms where key discussions and decisions are made (Ali et al., 2021, p.3). The tactic she employed was to provide an opportunity to bring different viewpoints to discussions, ultimately to change behaviour for the good of the team and the organisation. This mirrors research into the trickle-down effect, as a way for women

in senior leadership roles to drive inclusive thinking and decision making to then promote more gender inclusive practices and leadership approach (Page et al., 2024).

Scholars have demonstrated that in male-dominated industries, women in senior leadership roles tend not to actively support other women; however, at levels below that, women in middle management tend to contribute to bringing more women into male-dominated fields (Ali et al., 2021). Whilst many participants mentioned their experience of women not actively supporting other women, this aligns with the level of these participants in their organisations. However, it highlights the need for research attention to be given to lower levels of women to better understand the trickle-down effect (Ali et al., 2021). There is also scope for a broader understanding of how women at these senior levels of organisations use emotional labour to temper their typical leadership style to be included in discussions that can drive a gender-inclusive narrative (Page et al., 2024). This would be particularly relevant for South Africa, where senior leadership in organisations are still largely male-dominated.

### **6.3.2 Leveraging Competence and Identity**

The study revealed that participants used strategies to navigate the double bind that focused on highlighting and amplifying their competence as well as using a value-led identity. This approach involves building a solid and irrefutable track record of performance, to shift the focus from pushback around leadership style and approach related to an outdated and gendered lens, and onto outcomes and deliverables. Through the emphasis on outcomes over the method, these female leaders claim their right to deploy their own style of leadership that resonates with their values, identity and preferences, and ignore the expectations of a more masculine style of leadership.

This is perhaps a more novel approach to leveraging competence, where the traditional understanding is that women must perform better to be considered for promotion, given the higher expectations of performance placed on them (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). However, scholars have begun to detail how women leaders can use their competence as a shield against the backlash they experience because of employing agentic behaviours (Feng et al., 2025). This research by Feng et al. (2025) also found that whilst the traditional understanding is that there is a choice between

being competent and communal, this may not be the case, as the leaders that emerged in their study demonstrate both traits (Feng et al., 2025). By emphasising outcomes, as in competence, whilst making the choice for a more communal approach, the participants are quietly negotiating their own leadership style that is harder to critique, given positive outcomes are present.

In other words, whilst women leaders in the sample are focusing on outcomes, and this is indeed performative, their method to get to the required outcome has some variation from what is typically expected of a leader. These leaders are using this performative tactic to lead in a way that is authentic, demonstrates concern for the wellbeing of their teams, and still produces results. Ruben and Gigliotti's (2021) argument that leadership is a more nuanced social interaction co-created by leaders and followers and the context, is demonstrated amongst these participants. What emerges from the analysis is that while women leaders are experiencing the limitations of the double bind framework, they view leadership as less of a choice between agency and communality, but rather a blend of these underpinned by authenticity, aligned to their values, with a genuine regard for their followers.

Extending the competence theme, participants described a focus on internal validation as a source of motivation and pride to gather the energy required for leadership, as opposed to seeking validation externally, which often never comes. This is somewhat supported by the literature, where women don't necessarily subscribe to the notion that they are less capable (Hentschel et al., 2019). However, literature still suggests that women feel they are not as assertive or as strong leaders as men are (Hentschel et al., 2019), which was less evident in the personal accounts of the participants.

Whilst there is evidence that expectations and norms of leadership and gender are changing, and women are starting to break free from the double bind, the journey to a more contextual and inclusive understanding of leadership is just beginning. Johns (2024) argues that although the understanding of context in leadership is demonstrated in theory, and scholars are thinking about it, it is less empirically understood and untested.

### **6.3.3 Cultivating Relational Safety and Alignment**

The third strategy to navigate the double bind, as described by participants, is the management of interpersonal relationships, which includes setting boundaries, commanding respect and cultivating social integration. By balancing their integration into predominantly male cultures whilst preserving their identity, the participants are working to create a professional and safe environment for their leadership to take effect. Participants mentioned the presence of power dynamics in settings such as the “boys club”, which can exclude women leaders from participating in decision-making. Furthermore, the approach to building relationships within the organisation and alliances across departments was discussed to generate trust and improve their personal brand. This understanding of the importance of relationships and networks is echoed by scholars and is particularly relevant in the South African context, whereby, within emerging markets, personal relationships and networks are critical in the absence of strong institutions (Barnard & Luiz, 2024). Building strong relationships requires the choice of a more communal approach to leadership, demonstrating that women are leveraging social power to be a part of groups that they would normally be excluded from (Kinnear & Ortlepp, 2016).

As well as fostering interpersonal connections, the participants emphasised the importance of clear communication and setting boundaries to navigate their roles effectively. They adapt their style of leadership, based on the audience and context, ensuring they demonstrate both their authority and empathy while maintaining connection with their teams. This approach is supported by the literature on leadership resonance, predicated on emotional intelligence, whereby leaders are emotionally attuned to their followers, creating alignment that inspires commitment and collective energy to reach goals (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Mention was made of the importance of choosing one's team, so that followers align with the leaders' values, style and approach to producing outcomes. Mirroring this, resonant leadership aims to build synchronicity amongst followers (Gaan et al., 2024). Resonance needs to be cultivated from an understanding of a context, and in relation to follower expectations, and this view was highlighted by one of the participants who spoke of her struggles with the double bind in her new role, where she had inherited her team, rather than chosen them based on alignment with her style of leadership.

Participants mentioned reading cues and understanding contexts to determine the right approach to take and generate relational support. Contextual Leadership has gained popularity with scholars, as it shifts the focus from a trait-based perspective to one that considers the impact of the context in which leadership is exercised (Oc, 2018). Contextual leadership, as employed by some of these participants, suggest that leaders should adapt to environmental cues, derived from social, organisational or cultural context, to positively influence employee behaviour (Johns, 2024; Uhl-Bien, 2021). In the South African context, literature supports the view that female leaders are developing a situation-focused approach to navigating gender discrimination as part of their leadership toolkit (Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025).

#### **6.3.4 Conclusion: RQ2**

The study identified three primary strategies these women leaders are using to navigate the double bind, and these demonstrate the nuance in the approach these leaders are employing to balance the contradictory expectations placed on them, resulting in a more inclusive and effective leadership environment.

Firstly, the calibration of communication is critical for women leaders as they navigate the complexities of their roles. By adjusting and managing their communication style and emotional expression, they are able to reduce negative perceptions and promote awareness of gendered challenges and the need for diversity of thinking within their organisations. Being intentional with their interpersonal style helps them to adapt to the various contexts, enhancing their influence. This approach assists them in gaining respect, but also encourages inclusion within their teams, aligning with the literature that emphasises the importance of worker voice in driving organisational change (Cooper et al., 2021).

Secondly, leveraging competence and identity allows these female leaders to assert their unique style whilst deflecting potential backlash. A focus on outcomes, rather than traditional gendered expectations of a style of leadership, allows them to present their capabilities and cultivate psychological safety within their teams. This shift in focus from the “how” to the “what” allows them to negotiate their style of leadership on their own terms, further improving their confidence. This is supported by Ruben and Gigliotti (2021), who argue that leadership is far more complex and nuanced

than previously understood and that it is a socially co-constructed process created by leaders.

Thirdly, cultivating relational safety and alignment through building strong interpersonal relationships enhances their ability to lead in male-dominated environments. Setting boundaries, adapting to environmental cues and being attuned to their teams is supported by the literature (Johns, 2024; Uhl-Bien, 2021). Overall, the findings demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of women leaders in South Africa, evidenced by their approach, their thoughtfulness, and the success they have experienced in their careers by reaching senior leadership in their respective organisations (Buss et al., 2025).

In summary, the findings imply that the navigation strategies detailed above, are not just coping mechanism. Literature often describes tactics as defensive (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023); however, this study demonstrates they are strategic acts to reframe the choice of the double bind. Calibrating communication demonstrates less of a choice with a trade-off, and instead the use of contextual intelligence and leadership. Leveraging competence is an approach to balance critique over the how and refocus the attention on the what. These women are demonstrating that relational and agentic skills must exist together in appropriate ways, for effective leadership.

#### **6.4 RQ3 Discussion: Leadership Styles in Double Bind Contexts**

The third research question aimed to explore how senior women leaders are developing their leadership styles within double bind contexts. The question can be recapped as follows:

*RQ3. How are South African women leaders developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations?*

This question was formulated to gather information about whether women are developing their own leadership style to navigate these contradictory expectations. The question explored how, if at all, women are redefining leadership away from the traditional view that is agentic and authoritative. The objective was also to highlight the importance of feminine attributes in leadership. Gathering their advice for other

women who are faced with similar contradictory expectations sheds light on personal strategies and organisational support that can be beneficial for others in future.

#### **6.4.1 Authenticity and Beyond the Double Bind**

The female leaders in this study are actively refining their leadership styles to manage the complexity of the double bind, with an emphasis on authenticity. Most participants explicitly mentioned the importance of being authentic and their understanding of the positive impact of aligning the authentic self with the work persona. Aligning their personal and professional identities, fostering safe environments and working on their self-awareness is a tool to navigate the complexities of leadership, regardless of their gender, with confidence and integrity.

The literature detailing the double bind frames it as a dilemma, requiring a choice, with potential negative repercussions for each of the choices. It describes how women are caught between agentic expectations of decisiveness and competence, and the communal expectations of warmth and empathy (Chikwe et al., 2024; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). The emphasis participants place on being authentic suggests that instead of oscillating between being strong or nice, they are focusing on leading in ways that are aligned with their personal values and sense of integrity.

Authenticity in the context of this study has been described as assisting women to integrate agentic and communal qualities into an effective, inclusive and value-driven leadership identity. This finding extends existing literature by implying that authenticity may act not only as an individual trait, but as a strategy of contextual intelligence and synthesis, allowing women to lead assertively when required without violating relationships they have built, and to demonstrate empathy, without undermining their perceived competence. In adopting this approach and mindset, these women leaders are transforming the double bind from a restrictive and binary dilemma into a space of authentic growth. The mindset shift, whereby the double bind is no longer a binary dilemma in women's leadership, but rather a continuum of leadership grounded in authenticity that allows for effective and resonant leadership. This mirrors the literature describing how women use authenticity and mindset shift, towards adopting a paradox mindset, to navigate situations of gender discrimination

and the double bind (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023), empowering to lead beyond the double bind.

#### **6.4.2 Contextual Skill Blending and the “Feminine”**

This study shows that women leaders are cultivating leadership styles through the acquisition of crucial skills that allow them to adapt to various situations and contexts. This approach allows them to gather the necessary experiences and competencies, through roles in different functions or organisations, to build a toolkit to engage well across their organisations as effective leaders. The literature on contextual leadership recognises that effective leadership requires individual capability, but in addition is dependent on the situational demands of the tasks and environment (Oc, 2018). Therefore, contextual leadership offers a useful lens for describing how these women leaders are navigating expectations and demands in their environment, by developing their leadership through context exposure.

Furthermore, there was mention of the acknowledgement of feminine traits as valuable, as well as the value of masculine traits, to blend a new approach that aligns with their identity but takes context into account. The impact of motherhood was raised, and how this journey had 'softened' their style for the better and allowed them to be more empathic and bring a developmental approach to their leadership. Significant research has been conducted on the motherhood penalty, whereby mothers are considered unsuitable for leadership roles, another example of the stereotypical and binary assumption that leadership is agentic and women are communal (Ma et al., 2022a). Certainly, mothers are considered by society to be the epitome of communal, empathic and caring. In addition, the demands of organisational life are often at odds with the additional demands on women when they become mothers, resulting in career limitations (Ma et al., 2022a). The experience of motherhood for women often brings with it a lower sense of control, isolation and additional demands on the domestic front (Torres et al., 2024). Adding to this, organisations often have inconsiderate practices that don't accommodate any of the additional demands placed on working mothers (Ma et al., 2022a).

However, recent research using a mixed methods approach based on existing literature and interviewing working mothers in the Tourism industry in the United States revealed that there are some positive career outcomes as a result of the

motherhood journey (Torres et al., 2024). Women stated they experienced improved work relationships, better problem-solving skills, emotional intelligence, and motivation to pursue career goals (Torres et al., 2024). There is the suggestion that when women leaders bring a more positive and confident approach to dealing with the challenges of motherhood, combined with support from organisations and society at large, the benefits of the growth their experience as mothers can be brought to their leadership roles (Ma et al., 2022a). This was echoed by some of the participants upon reflection of the impact motherhood has made on their leadership.

Strategically withdrawing from conflicts that are deemed to be unproductive, reflected a shift in some of the participants towards prioritising mental health and managing their energy. This requires emotional intelligence and contextual intelligence to create a leadership framework that challenges outdated norms in empowering and mature ways. This presents a slightly nuanced approach within a double bind context from the findings of Amaro and Scheepers (2023). Their research revealed that women can leverage authenticity and a paradox mindset to address conflicts or tensions with colleagues, and in this case the participants in this study used their self-awareness to understand their levels of energy to make decisions about where to expend their emotional efforts in resolving conflict, and what to simply let go.

#### **6.4.3 Creating Systemic Support**

The study uncovered a strong desire amongst the female leaders to cultivate systemic support within their organisation and in the broader South African context. Participants discussed the importance of building a brand and expertise in a field, function or sector, and staying true to that when it comes to career moves. In addition, they are emphasising that they seek out cultures that support them and empower them to lead through their strengths, highlighting the relevance of building cultures in organisations that promote authenticity (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024).

Organisations ought to promote effective leaders and leadership styles, to build and develop positive cultures that allow for authenticity and a broad range of leadership approaches. This is confirmed by the literature, whereby a strengths-focused organisational culture, with focus placed on leveraging individual strengths rather than merely focusing on weaknesses, as well as psychological safety required for change, is crucial to developing effective leadership styles and cultures (Newstead

et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is argument for positioning women as drivers of cultural transformation initiatives to allow more attention and value placed on the purpose and direction of an organisation, which would feed more communality into organisations (Gierke et al, 2025). Given the enthusiasm of the participants to be part of more developed understandings of leadership in their organisation, there is advice to be heeded from the literature. Organisations could include women's voices and their leadership in running cultural transformation initiatives, as part of a multi-pronged effort to develop effective leadership styles and inclusive cultures (Gierke et al, 2025).

#### **6.4.4 Call for an Evolution of Leadership**

The research question to understand how these women leaders are crafting their leadership style in light of the double bind, revealed a profound shift in the understanding of leadership and the expectation of what leadership should look like. This call for an evolution of leadership demonstrates a response to contemporary challenges, requiring an emphasis on empathy, collaboration and societal impact (Vial et al., 2025). The experience of these women leaders, navigating the double bind and reaching notable success in their careers, uncovered something more: their experience with the binary expectations of leadership, the binary expectations of gender, has shone a spotlight on a broader leadership issue, regardless of gender. Their vision for the future of leadership is one that allows and values diverse contributions and focuses on the development of individuals.

The foundation of these insights and the call for more research on the topic is the recognition to challenge the entrenched and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that have shaped perceptions of leadership: moving from a dynamic of choice, agentic or communal leadership styles, to one that allows nuanced blending of styles depending on context and individual preferences. This shift was particularly resonant among the younger women who took part in this study. These women are focusing on aligning their leadership values with their purpose, placing greater value on the positive impact they can have on others, rather than relentlessly pursuing personal career goals and monetary gain. This shift represents an emphasis on leadership being relational, rather than agentic, which is supported in the literature (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). The ideal of a "good manager" has changed over the past decade, with a reduction in desire for traditional masculine styles of leadership, and

a movement towards more feminine styles, underpinned by the concept of context (Vial et al., 2025). Scholars are driving an evolved understanding of leadership, with the understanding that it is essential to understand the dynamic between leaders and followers (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). Participants echoed this, stating that the “soil” is ready for this evolution of leadership: whilst it has taken time and resulted in frustration amongst those who knew there could be a better way.

Ultimately, this demonstrates a change in perspective about the challenges faced by women, amplifying shifts in the study of leadership which transcends gender. The experience of women leaders in corporate settings and their willingness to articulate these struggles has uncovered the need to better understand the benefit of communal traits in leadership (Vial et al., 2025). A lack of exposure to inclusive leadership styles has resulted in a lack of examples for emerging leaders to learn from. However, the landscape of leadership is changing globally and in South Africa, and there is hope that there is tangible potential for meaningful change in organisations and society at large (Madsen, 2024).

#### **6.4.5 Conclusion: RQ3**

This research question explored how senior women are crafting leadership styles given the complexities of the double bind, revealing a shift in the perception and practice of leadership. The findings demonstrate that these women are navigating the contradictory expectations and embracing authenticity to craft their leadership style and elevate the standard of leadership required in their organisations. Placing authenticity at the heart of their interactions allows them to integrate agentic and communal qualities. The study highlights the importance of contextual exposure and consideration in the development of leadership styles. They are acknowledging the importance of both feminine and masculine traits as worthwhile assets (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). Their experience of motherhood, often perceived as a liability for their careers and their organisations, is being reframed through a mindset shift, as opportunities for growth and meaning.

The need for systemic support is ongoing, with participants advocating for the importance of organisational culture that promotes and develops effective leadership, regardless of gender. Their view is that by promoting leaders who bring empathy, collaboration and direction, organisations can challenge the stereotypes

that are applied to leadership, making way for more inclusive approaches. Given the enthusiasm of the participants to be part of this journey, there is an opportunity to include women in leading cultural transformation initiatives, as part of a multi-pronged effort to develop effective leadership styles and cultures (Gierke et al, 2025).

In summary, the findings for RQ3 describe the closing argument for this study. The leadership styles these women are developing demonstrate a uniquely “feminine” leadership style. They are leading through contextual skill blending, often driven by a purpose beyond personal success, and underpinned by authenticity (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023). The study argues that this is an effective model for leadership that is required in organisations of today. This developing insight extends the literature by suggesting that the double bind is becoming obsolete, because these women leaders are exposing the binary thinking as outdated. They have of course not “fixed” it themselves, but rather the “soil is ready” for these leaders to prove that a more relational, authentic and contextual approach is better for all leaders in this complex world.

## **6.5 Chapter Summary**

Experiencing the Double Bind in South Africa appears to be more complex, given the unique structural dynamics that are a result of the legacy of Apartheid, and the multicultural landscape in which society and organisations operate. This places additional pressure on women to make the difficult choice to conform to masculine leadership traits to progress or lead in ways that feel intuitively and inherently natural. This pressure to conform to traditional expectations of leadership and the psychological toll of performativity, versus the courage required to lead on their own terms, impacts their overall wellness. Understanding the impact of women in crafting their careers in these contexts would contribute to greater understanding, awareness and more appropriate support and leadership development initiatives (Ayaz et al., 2024; Oc & Chintakananda, 2025).

A unique approach to leveraging competence through a focus on outcomes was explored, whereby these women leaders are shifting their focus in their leadership, from the “how” to the “what”, with the hope that the “what” will be enough to reduce the relevance of the “how” (Feng et al., 2025). Authenticity underpins this focus as a

contextual intelligence tool to lead in a contextually appropriate and effective way, blending agency and communion whilst maintaining relationships that are seen to be crucial for success. This mindset and approach are exposing the double bind as less of a rigid and binary dilemma, but rather a fluid continuum of behaviours.

Lastly, this study highlights the need for an evolution of leadership frameworks and the understanding of what effective leadership looks like (Nyberg et al., 2025). These female leaders are advocating for a mindset shift and enthusiastic to be involved in such initiatives for organisations and society, following their own individual move beyond the double bind. Women appear to be claiming agency in the face of gender bias by emerging as advocates for authentic, values-driven and contextual leadership which centres around relationships.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Introduction

The lack of female representation in leadership roles is an ongoing issue within business, globally and in South Africa (Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Buss et al., 2025). The most significant barriers preventing balanced representation of women in leadership, are a result of behavioural and cultural dynamics and gendered perceptions of the definition of leadership (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025). Whilst there are many challenges that women leaders face, one such challenge, known as the double bind, was the focus of this research.

The double bind primarily describes the trade-off for women between the expectation to demonstrate traditionally perceived feminine traits, such as empathy and warmth, and traditionally perceived masculine traits, of competence and assertiveness. The dilemma lies in the choice between being perceived as competent but disliked, or incompetent yet likeable (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Eagly & Carli, 2018). This tightrope of choice hampers their career advancement. As such, this study explored how women in senior leadership roles in corporate South Africa experience and navigate the double bind in their careers, and how they are developing their leadership styles given these contradictory expectations. In addition, understanding their experiences provided insights beyond gender and the double bind, enhancing our understanding of leadership and challenging the view that leadership is predominantly agentic, but rather relational, requiring a careful blend of a variety of leadership behaviours.

The study was qualitative in nature, using narrative enquiry through semi-structured interviews with 18 senior women leaders in corporate South Africa, to understand their experiences in navigating the double bind and how they are using those experiences to craft effective leadership styles.

This chapter provides a conclusion for the key findings of the study, details the contributions the study has made to the current understanding of the double bind and leadership, and provides the limitations of the research and areas of future research to extend the understanding further.

## **7.2 Main Findings**

This section summarises the insights from each research question through a reflection of the analysis conducted in Chapter 6.

### **7.2.1 RQ1 Main Findings: Walking the Tightrope**

This question aimed to understand the lived experiences of women navigating the double bind in leadership roles in South Africa, and why they have these experiences. This question explored how these women believe their gender affects the way their leadership style is perceived, and what the double bind means to them as leaders. Whilst there is research into the double bind women face in the developing world (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023), there is a need to understand the South African context in which women leaders find themselves operating (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

The findings for RQ1 confirmed that the double bind women encounter, including the psychological toll and questioning of authority, is the primary driver for their leadership transformation. The study found that there are diverging opinions on how women feel their gender impacts the perception of their leadership style. Whilst some felt there was an impact, others disagreed, highlighting the complex dynamics at play, where some women minimise their challenges as a coping mechanism, or as an approach to see beyond obstacles and towards possibilities. Given the seniority level of the participants within their organisations, it can be argued that their success is a result of their resilience and a growth mindset, that has empowered them to achieve (Buss et al., 2025). Whilst scholars have researched resilience strategies of women in response to gender discrimination in South Africa, it appears that the understanding of how resilience assists women to navigate the double bind remains limited (Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025).

Experiencing the double bind in South Africa appears to be more complex, given the unique structural dynamics stemming from the legacy of Apartheid, and the multicultural landscape in which society and organisations operate. The pressure to conform to traditional expectations of leadership and the psychological toll of performativity, versus the courage required to lead on their own terms, impacts their overall wellness (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). The understanding of leader wellness

is an emerging body of knowledge, with atypical leaders expending more energy on managing their identity and consequent impact on their wellness (Ayaz et al., 2024). Understanding the effects on women of crafting their careers in these contexts, is critical to provide more appropriate support for women and leadership development initiatives in organisations (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025).

### **7.2.2 RQ2 Main Findings: Reframing the Choice**

This question aimed to gather the strategies that assist women in sustainable leadership, while pushing the boundaries of gendered constraints. The question explored how women experience others' responses when they take a gender congruent or incongruent approach, and how they navigate the bind towards effective leadership, based on the context (Ma et al., 2022b).

The experience of the double bind detailed through RQ1, compels women leaders to create navigation strategies that are in fact reframing the double bind, rather than coping with the agentic-communal trade-off. The study found that there are three primary strategies women are using to navigate and overcome the restrictions of the double bind: calibration of communication, emotions and persona; leveraging competence and identity; and cultivating relational safety and alignment. Effective communication and calibrating their interpersonal style through appropriate emotional expression, allows these women to mitigate negative perceptions of their chosen leadership approach, while building respect and promoting inclusion (Ayaz et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2021). The importance of advocating for inclusion and using their voices to speak up against backlash or negative judgments because of the double bind was emphasised. This intentional approach enhances their influence, fosters respect, and promotes inclusion, aligning with literature that underscores the significance of worker voice in driving organisational change (Cooper et al., 2021). Mention was made of the trickle-down effect, and the access these senior women have to decision makers and leadership tables to bring different viewpoints to discussions and drive different behaviours, for the good of the team and the organisation (Page et al., 2024).

A deeper understanding of this approach in the South African context, would promote collective agency amongst women leaders at all levels of the organisation, as a means to advocate for inclusion and diversity of thought.

Leveraging competence and identity to focus leadership energies on the “what” instead of the “how”, is an approach these women are taking to lead on their own terms, building their credibility and confidence in the process, and leading beyond the binary choice of the double bind. Whilst there is performativity in an outcomes-focused approach, the method has a broader purpose and impact (Round et al., 2025). Taking the view that leadership is a co-created and a social process between leaders, followers and within a particular context, appears to fuel women’s efforts to push the boundaries of leadership expectation (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Cultivating relational safety and alignment builds on this relational and contextual view of leadership, allowing these women to be considered and attuned to their environments, for personal and collective success (Johns, 2024; Uhl-Bien, 2021).

### **7.2.3 RQ3 Main Findings: Authenticity as the Anchor**

This question aimed to gather information about whether women are developing their own leadership style to navigate contradictory expectations. The question explored whether women are redefining leadership away from the traditional view that is agentic and authoritative, towards leadership behaviours that build trust, inclusion, and performance (Nyberg et al., 2025). Gathering their advice for other women who are faced with similar contradictory expectations, shed light on personal strategies and organisational support that can benefit women leaders in the future.

The strategies described in RQ2 merged into the creation of a leadership approach beyond the binary constraints of the double bind. The findings for RQ3 describe leaders embracing authenticity as foundation to create a leadership style that is purpose driven, contextually aware and challenges some of the male norms around traditional leadership (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023). The study found that these women are navigating the contradictory expectations through authentically working at crafting their leadership style to improve the practice of leadership in their organisations. Placing authenticity at the heart of their interactions allows them to integrate agentic and communal qualities without jeopardising the relationships they have built (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023; Round et al., 2025). The study highlights the importance of contextual exposure and consideration in the development of leadership styles. The need for systemic support is ongoing, with participants advocating for the importance of organisational cultures that promote and develop effective leadership, regardless of gender (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025).

A key finding, and an area for future research, is to interrogate the entrenched gender stereotypes in leadership (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). These women leaders, especially those who are younger, are prioritising leading with purpose and focusing on the positive impact they can have on others, over personal career ambitions. This demonstrates a shift in women's understanding of effective leadership away from traditional masculine styles to more feminine and blended approaches (Vial et al., 2025).

The challenges and experiences of these women leaders in relation to the double bind, place the spotlight on broader challenges faced in the understanding and study of leadership, beyond gender. Leadership scholars are driving an evolved understanding of leadership, with an emphasis on the dynamic between leaders and followers (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025). While practice has not necessarily kept pace with leadership theory, the findings suggest that these shifts are apparent. As aptly put by participants, the "soil is ready" for the evolution of leadership, and these women are eager to contribute to that understanding and pave the way for better conditions for emerging leaders.

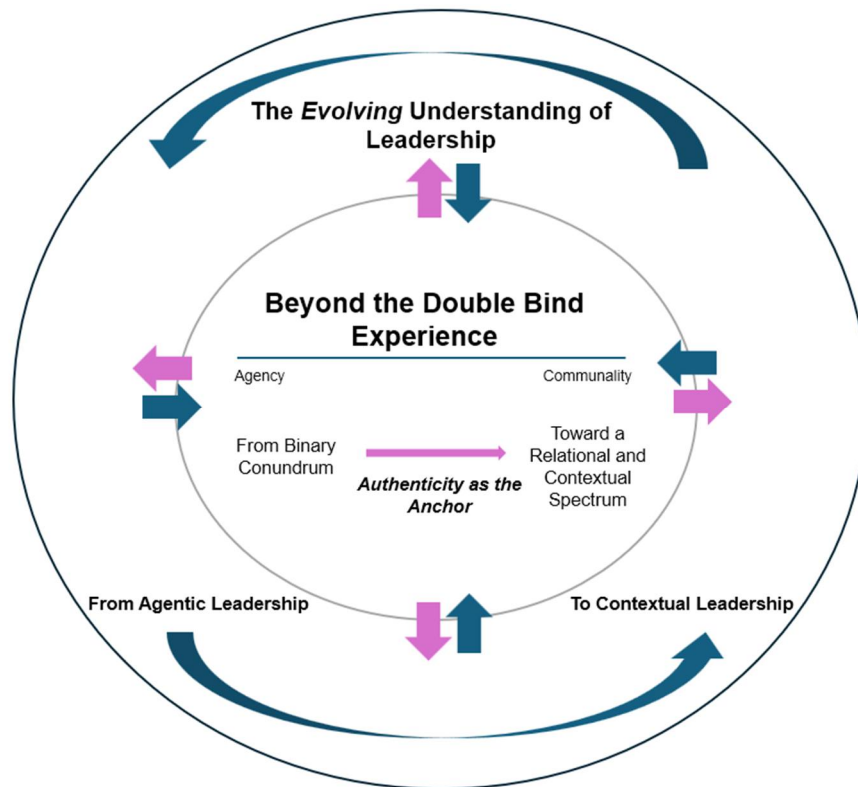
#### **7.2.4 Overall Finding: Beyond the Double Bind**

The lived experiences of these senior women in relation to the double bind, demonstrates a change in perspective about the challenges faced by women, which are in fact changes faced in the practice of leadership more broadly. The experience of women leaders in corporate settings and their willingness to articulate these struggles, has uncovered the need to understand the benefit of contextual styles in leadership (Johns, 2024; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021).

The study has highlighted that women in corporate South Africa are employing a mindset and leadership approach that extends beyond the rigid and binary conundrum of the double bind. They are crafting their leadership in line with the evolving understanding of leadership theory, approaching it as a fluid continuum of behaviours based on relationships and context, underpinned by authenticity (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023; Johns, 2024; Round et al., 2025; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Building on this, there is opportunity for organisations to include women's voices and their leadership, in running cultural transformation initiatives, as part of a multi-

pronged effort to develop effective leadership styles and inclusive cultures (Gierke et al, 2025).

Figure 7.1 below, depicts the learnings from the participant’s double bind experience in relation to the broader evolution of the body of knowledge and practice of leadership.



**Figure 7.1: Framework of Learning – Beyond the Double Bind Experience**

*Source: Author's own.*

### 7.3 Contributions of the Study

#### 7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study’s primary theoretical contribution is the “Framework of Learning – Beyond the Double Bind Experience” (see Figure 7.1), which conceptually details the ways senior leaders use authenticity to move from the binary double-bind conundrum to a contextual leadership spectrum. This framework moves beyond role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al., 2020) by proposing that there is a mechanism

whereby the double bind is not just navigated or managed, but rather “risen above”. It suggests that authenticity is the anchor that allows leaders to blend agency and communion, whereby they see leadership as a fluid and contextual spectrum rather than a binary choice. In doing so, this research challenges the current literature, proposing that the double bind is not a fixed choice imposed on women leaders, but a spark that is driving the evolution toward a better understanding of effective leadership practice.

This framework aligns with the shifts in leadership theory. Scholarship has expanded beyond the traditional agentic models of leadership, highlighting inclusive, human centric and contextual leadership paradigms as necessary for leading organisational complexity in an ever-changing business landscape (Eva et al., 2024; Johns, 2024; Leroy et al., 2025; Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025; Vial et al., 2025). The findings that describe how these leaders are emphasising relational skills, psychological safety, and purpose driven leadership are supported by scholars in recent studies on leadership and the importance of these elements in the extension of the understanding (Gaan et al., 2024; Wunderlich & Løkke, 2025). Grounding these theories in the lived experiences of South African leaders in corporate, provides a timely impetus to better understand what effective modern leadership practice looks like.

### **7.3.2 Practical Contributions**

The need for systemic support for women in leadership roles is ongoing, with participants highlighting the critical role organisational culture has on their integration and success (Athanasopoulou et al., 2025). Organisational cultures that promote and develop effective leadership skills, regardless of gender, would work towards women feeling supported so that popular advice such as “lean in” when it comes to their careers, could produce a culture that provides them with something to effectively “lean towards” (Phipps & Prieto, 2021, p. 247). This would continue to move the problem from the focus being on women as the problem to solve, towards the context that provides them with these challenges in the first place (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Emphasis on the importance of the relationship and dynamic between leaders and followers should be emphasised in leadership development training, and within organisational cultures and languages, to facilitate contextual, blended and nuanced leadership that improves outcomes for both parties (Ponce de Leon & Bailey, 2025).

This study further highlights the importance of identity work for women to develop an authentic leadership style so that they can lead beyond the double bind, as these women participants have done. As such, women leaders in corporate would do well to spend time and effort understanding their strengths, development needs, personal attributes and incorporate feedback from others, to craft their leadership on their own terms, for effective outcomes (Zheng et al., 2021).

#### **7.4 Areas for Future Research**

Similar studies into women's experience of the double bind in leadership amongst younger Millennial female leaders, could provide an understanding of how the double bind is being experienced at more junior levels and amongst a generation that have been found to be more vocal when dealing with oppression they experience (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Lyons et al., 2015). Research examining differences across generations in terms of gender bias and discrimination is lacking (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). This study highlighted that younger participants are using distinct career strategies that may significantly impact their experience of the double bind and how they are crafting their leadership style. Understanding more about the younger generation of leaders' motivations and personal ambitions and the importance they place on their impact on followers and colleagues over personal career progression, would be a worthy pursuit.

Research into the double bind, with an emphasis on intersectionality and the relationship between race, culture and gender, would close the gap in this study, given the cultural and racial context in South Africa (Wessels, 2020). While issues relating to intersectionality were noted in the findings, the focus on race and culture remained outside of the scope of this study. However, the double black bind emphasises that the double bind is far more complex for black women, compared to white women, and given that there is evidence of white domination and black subordination in South Africa to this day, understanding the double bind experience for black South African women is crucial (Pirtle, 2022). Research conducted by a researcher with a different racial and cultural identity than that of the researcher in this study, may yield different interpretations of findings pertaining to intersectional identities.

Similarly, whilst this study considered the double bind as it is experienced by women and treated gender in binary terms (male and female), the current gender revolution demonstrates that gender is moving beyond the binary (Martin et al., 2022). Understanding how other identities experience the double bind would ensure inclusion and contribution of the range of experiences to theory building around leadership expression and practice.

## **7.5 Study Limitations**

The study sample consisted of senior women leaders sitting on the executive committees of their organisations or reporting to those sitting on the executive committee. As such it would be helpful to conduct a similar study at lower levels in organisations, where women leaders are in the earlier stages of developing their leadership style. In addition, women at these levels may experience different challenges due to their organisational reach, or lack thereof and their seniority.

As mentioned, this study did not consider the impact of race, age or other identities that intersect with gender and the experience of the double bind. This research focused on the experiences of women leaders and treated gender in binary terms (male and female), as it is most defined in organisational research and business structures. The research did not consider the complexity of sex and gender, nor did it consider transgender or non-binary identities. The intention was not to minimise the importance of these contributions, but rather to reflect the scope and delimitations of the project, and the alignment with the existing body of knowledge on the double bind, which is historically discussed through a gender binary lens. As such, the scope of this study focused on gender, specifically as experienced by the participants interviewed.

In addition, the researcher is a white female who grew up in South Africa, and part of her youth was experienced under the racially oppressive Apartheid regime. As such, the researcher recognises the potential bias that may occur given her context, and the fact that she has insider status given she meets some of the sample criteria. There are indeed benefits to insider status, such as bringing an ability to connect and understand the perspectives of participants; however, it has also been found that there is room for bias in interpretation (Ademolu, 2024). While attempts to mitigate this bias through a reflexive approach to data collection and analysis was employed

(Ademolu, 2024), it is important to recognise that the researchers' position influences the findings and should be considered when this research.

## **7.6 Study Conclusion**

This study has provided a nuanced exploration of the experiences of women in South Africa in their navigation of the double bind in their leadership roles. The findings revealed that whilst some acknowledge the challenges posed by gender stereotypes, others have a more optimistic approach, focusing on possibilities that their gender presents for effective leadership, rather than the limitations. These variances imply that the relationship between gender and leadership is multifaceted, and that there is a role that resilience and a growth mindset play in their ability to lead effectively in the light of significant systemic barriers (Buss et al., 2025; Kinnear & Mareletse, 2025). This study emphasises the complex dynamics in the context of South Africa's unique social and cultural landscape that underpin their experience, given the legacy of oppression and the broad array of cultures and ethnicities (Barnard & Luiz, 2024).

Three strategies were identified that participants employed in navigating the double bind: calibration of communication, leveraging competence and identity and cultural relationship safety and alignment. These strategies enable women to mitigate backlash because of the choices they make in their leadership approach, but more importantly, they empower them to assert their leadership in ways that are impactful, authentic and values driven (Ayaz et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2021). By placing focus on effective communication, these women are working to cultivate a more inclusive environment for themselves and other women in their organisations. Their ability to leverage their competence and identity allows them to lead on their terms, rather than conforming to outdated expectations (Round et al., 2025).

As a result of these strategies, these women are highlighting the need for a more fluid, contextual and relational understanding of leadership, which is matched by the broader evolution of leadership theory. Furthermore, the study emphasises the crucial role of organisational support and culture in women's leadership development, and the need to promote and develop effective leadership, regardless of gender (Franczak & Margolis, 2022; Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). This aligns with

the argument that the “fix the women” approach is simplistic and significantly slows the efforts towards gender inclusion workplace (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024, p.556).

The implications of this research contribute to challenging the notion of the double bind and how women view it, implying that they see it as perpetuating the underdeveloped definition of leadership, rather than limiting their personal effectiveness in their role. Future research should explore the lived experiences of younger women leaders, who are more inclined to advocate against oppression, and those from racial and cultural groups, to allow for all voices to be heard in understanding the double bind and its impact (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019; Lyons et al., 2015). This research uncovered changing motivations amongst younger women leaders, and their deliberate choices against performativity in relation to the double bind, for the purpose of personal success. Understanding how they view their purpose in their roles as leaders would contribute to the body of knowledge around how the double bind continues to evolve across generations, and whether younger women's personal motivations imply a move towards leadership that values community, connection and shared success.

In conclusion, this study provides details of the challenges faced by women in South Africa in navigating the double bind, whilst highlighting their resilience, adaptability and commitment to effective leadership practice. Embracing a more inclusive and contextual understanding of leadership can provide a legacy to empower future generations of leaders to challenge gender and leadership stereotypes. Given disruption is at an all-time high, the inevitable complexity requires a deeper understanding of the full spectrum of leadership excellence for improved societal outcomes (Bosch, 2024; Uhl-Bien, 2021).

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# APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Seeking Your Advice for Female Leaders



Tue 8/19/2025 3:41 PM

You replied to this message on 8/25/2025 12:55 PM.

Dear

I hope this message finds you well.

As I may have mentioned, I am currently completing my MBA at Gibs and would appreciate your help with my thesis. I am conducting research on the experiences of women leaders in corporate South Africa, with a focus on how women navigate the **“double bind”**—the paradox of being expected to display both traditionally “agentic” leadership traits (e.g., decisiveness, authority) and “communal” traits (e.g., empathy, collaboration), often under conflicting expectations.

The purpose of my study is to better understand:

1. How women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind in their professional roles.
2. The strategies women use to navigate these expectations while sustaining effective leadership.
3. How women are shaping and developing their leadership styles in light of these challenges.

I would like to invite you to take part in this research, as your experience and perspective as a woman leader in the South African corporate sector would provide invaluable insights. Participation would involve a confidential interview of approximately [45–60 minutes], at a time that is convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be recorded for accuracy, and all responses will be kept strictly confidential.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any point without any consequence. The findings of this research will be reported in my Master’s thesis and may be used in future academic publications, but no identifying information will be shared. If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email.

Thank you for considering this invitation. I would be honoured to learn from your experiences and leadership journey.

Regards,



## APPENDIX B: CONSENT LETTER

### Individual consent letter

#### Introduction:

Good day and thank you for your participation in the study being undertaken by this Researcher. The Researcher is presently enrolled for a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) at the Gordon Institute of Business Sciences. Currently, we are collecting data for a study in fulfilment of the requirements for the qualification, MBA, focusing on the role of empathy and collaboration in women navigating the double bind in the workplace in South Africa.

This interview will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will include questions regarding your experience navigating the double bind (conflicting expectations related to gender and leadership) in your professional role in corporate South Africa. The researcher would like to confirm your permission to record our conversation so that the researcher may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to inform the interviewer accordingly. All your responses are confidential and will remain so after the conclusion of the study. Your responses will be used to develop a better understanding of the participation of your experience navigating the double bind in your leadership role. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

Considering all the above, should you be willing to participate in the study, and if so, you are requested to sign this informed consent letter in the space provided below.

By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

- The interview to be recorded.
- The recording to be documented by an AI transcribing tool
- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation.
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher:  
Email:

Research Supervisor:  
Email:

We understand that participation in this research is voluntary, and that the principle of informed consent will be applied to everyone involved in the data collection process. We confirm that the researcher will protect the identity of the organisation and that of the individuals involved in the research by keeping this information confidential in any stored data, reports or publications that may emanate from this research.

We also confirm that this permission is granted by a person duly authorised to do so.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

<b>Demographic Information:</b>	
Name:	
Province:	
Race:	
Current Role:	
Team size (number of direct reports):	
Industry:	
Years of experience:	
Highest level of Education:	
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>The double bind in women's leadership describes the contradictory expectations women face in their roles based on gender norms and expectations. If a woman displays traditionally strong leadership traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness, she may be seen as competent but unlikable. If she instead leads through consensus and empathy, she may be liked but perceived as weak or ineffectual. This creates a contradictory set of expectations on women, where they are often then penalised regardless of how they lead, making it harder for them to advance in their careers.</p> <p>Please tell me about yourself and your current position.</p>	
<p><b>RQ1</b></p> <p>How do women leaders in South Africa experience the double bind?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you believe your gender affects the way your leadership style is perceived?</li> <li>2. What does the double bind mean to you as a leader in your context?</li> </ol>

	<p>3. Please share some of your personal experiences of the double bind as a leader.</p>
<p><b>RQ 2</b> How do women leaders in South Africa navigate the double bind?</p>	<p>4. How do you feel when contradictory expectations are placed on you in your role as a leader?</p> <p>5. What do you do as a leader to manage these contradictory expectations?</p> <p>6. How do others (peers, managers, team members) respond to you when you take on an assertive leadership style? How do you react to that?</p> <p>7. How do others (peers, managers, team members) respond to you when you take on a consensus-driven leadership style? How do you react to that?</p>
<p><b>RQ3</b> How are women leaders in South Africa developing their leadership styles given these contractionary expectations?</p>	<p>8. How would you like to develop your leadership style given these contradictory expectations?</p> <p>9. What support do you believe you need from your organisation to develop your own leadership style in the face of contradictory expectations?</p> <p>10. What advice would you give to other women who are faced with similar contradictory expectations in their careers?</p>

## APPENDIX D: LIST OF CODES

### RQ1. Experiencing the double bind

Code	Themes (5)
<p>Aggressive label requiring impression management</p> <p>Approval of female directness</p> <p>Assertiveness is misunderstood as aggressive</p> <p>Deviation from gendered expectations is penalised</p> <p>Double standard in behavioural feedback</p> <p>Empathy is read as ineffective</p> <p>Expectation of mothers to be empathic</p> <p>Gender impact dismissed</p> <p>Gendered communication dynamics</p> <p>Humour as an undermining tool (minimisation via jokes)</p> <p>Initial shock and underestimation of a female boss</p> <p>Results-focused approach misread as aggression</p> <p>Unexpected success creates shock</p> <p>Varying reception of identical questions (gendered double standard)</p>	<p>Stereotypes, Bias and Double Standards</p>
<p>Adopting a masculine professional persona</p> <p>Anger and public composure tactics</p> <p>Building trust to counter initial doubt</p> <p>Creation of a dual persona to survive a hostile environment</p> <p>Cultural appropriateness in professional clothing</p> <p>Early-career assimilation in a male-dominated environment</p> <p>Emotional cost of suppressing the self</p> <p>Emotional display as a professional risk</p> <p>Frustration in leadership</p> <p>Industry-dependent assertive leadership style to signal strength</p> <p>Navigating external perceptions</p> <p>Openness can be weaponised</p> <p>Physical strain and exposure to threats</p> <p>Reputation creates a fear narrative</p> <p>Responding to stereotypes via emotional control</p> <p>Selective assimilation within male-dominated environments</p>	<p>Identity and Psychological Toll</p>

<p>Suppressing authenticity to gain buy-in</p> <p>Use of language to enforce boundaries</p>	
<p>Assertiveness and timing in communication</p> <p>Assertiveness labelled negatively</p> <p>Assertiveness to enhance authority</p> <p>Authority challenged by perceived lack of gravitas</p> <p>Calibrated toughness</p> <p>Competence is used to create legitimacy and to counter gender effects</p> <p>Misunderstanding of status</p> <p>Must prove worth as a woman</p> <p>Prove self again pressure</p>	<p>Questioned Authority, Legitimacy, and Credibility</p>
<p>Cutthroat and unfair climate</p> <p>C-suite mandate, assumption of authority</p> <p>Challenges are not gendered; mainly technical</p> <p>Exchange of expectations</p> <p>No notable backlash</p> <p>Motherhood penalty (recruitment and selection bias around availability)</p> <p>Organisation sees pregnancy as an operational burden</p> <p>Organisational culture reduces bias</p> <p>Overworking to compensate for the team's shortfall</p> <p>Peer gatekeeping vs. team acceptance of authentic style</p> <p>Positive ExCo engagement</p> <p>Respectful feedback</p> <p>Societal influence on leadership values</p> <p>Tokenism without actual power (quota hire given low autonomy)</p> <p>Trust and openness</p> <p>Validation of human values as part of culture</p>	<p>Exclusionary Relationships and Organisational Structures</p>
<p>South Africa is a cultural box</p> <p>White men are automatically considered the leaders</p> <p>Men can also be judged as rude</p>	<p>Dynamics of Intersectionality</p>

## RQ2. Navigating the Double Bind

Code	Themes (3)
<p>Acknowledge perception without adopting it</p> <p>Agency over motherhood/career</p> <p>Assertive style rewarded by the current (legacy) culture</p> <p>Authentically balancing direct style</p> <p>Authenticity commitment vs. organisational loyalty</p> <p>Avoid tokenistic career fast-tracking before readiness</p> <p>Awareness that other styles can be effective</p> <p>Boundary-setting confrontation</p> <p>Care-first identity</p> <p>Compliance to feedback at face value</p> <p>Desire for respectful interactions</p> <p>Female upward leader unpredictability</p> <p>Hard language as a defence mechanism</p> <p>One of the boys while maintaining femininity</p> <p>Over-deliver to offset criticism of style</p> <p>Respectful engagement</p> <p>Same question, different response (male vs. female)</p> <p>Self-selection of what feedback to implement</p> <p>Selective contribution and participation</p> <p>Self-definition beyond gender</p> <p>Self-perception of fit with masculine styles in earlier career before motherhood</p> <p>Strategic awareness and coalition-building to advance women</p> <p>Sticking to one's opinion even after hearing others</p> <p>Top-down criticism vs. team praise for style</p>	<p>Calibrating Communication, Emotions and Persona</p>
<p>Assimilation would accelerate a career</p> <p>Bias for action over words ('from dreaming to doing')</p> <p>Bottom-up praise for an empathic, empowering leader</p> <p>Career incentives to conform to the accepted leadership style</p> <p>Chronic judgment fatigue</p> <p>Culture overrides bias</p> <p>Custodian of people and performance</p> <p>Decision action under ambiguity</p>	<p>Leveraging Competence and Identity</p>

<p>Derogatory apology by manager to direct report</p> <p>Due diligence questions read as “putting people on the spot”</p> <p>Learned empathy used for team wellbeing</p> <p>Manage perceptions through intentional persona presentation</p> <p>Combining “kumbaya” leadership with pure strategy</p> <p>Personal pride as motivation</p> <p>Presumption of incompetence</p> <p>Rejection of the clinical/transactional “up or out” model</p> <p>Visible emotion from female peers is seen as “too much”</p> <p>Women's policing of other women's vulnerability</p>	
<p>Belonging and service focus in early career</p> <p>Belonging and psychological safety increase with tenure</p> <p>Deliberative compassion</p> <p>Desire for respectful interactions</p> <p>Empathy expectations</p> <p>Energy cost of emotional suppression</p> <p>Energy cost for authentic authenticity</p> <p>Expectations of accountability</p> <p>Expertise and gender dynamics</p> <p>Fair boundaries and expectations</p> <p>Intentional empathy</p> <p>Intentional slow start to read the audience</p> <p>Invest in capability-based development</p> <p>Maternity leave penalty via client/relationship losses</p> <p>Perception management</p> <p>Uncertainty/ambiguity avoidance</p> <p>Upward/downward peer culture-fit critique (positive, active listening)</p>	<p>Cultivating Relational Safety and Alignment</p>

### RQ3. Developing Leadership Styles in Double Bind Contexts

Code	Themes (4)
<p>Assertiveness normalised by industry</p> <p>Authenticity as a trust lever</p> <p>Be intentional about goals and impact</p> <p>Bias-aware hiring and interview practice</p> <p>Context-enabled authenticity</p> <p>Define authenticity for yourself</p> <p>Developing others as the core objective</p> <p>Diversity benefits are dependent on authenticity</p> <p>Early-career anti-assimilation advice</p> <p>Embracing ambiguity</p> <p>Emotional exhaustion</p> <p>EQ and executive maturity</p> <p>Female-led toxicity awareness</p> <p>Governance-first, gut-led risk assessment</p> <p>Higher purpose/spiritual compass</p> <p>Identity anchoring / not owning others' labels</p> <p>Learn from leaders you disliked—don't become them</p> <p>Tangible results as an argument against soft critiques</p> <p>Mindset—don't manifest the problem</p> <p>Normalise emotional processing</p> <p>Organisation-wide gender diversity education</p> <p>Reframe and detach</p> <p>Reframe differing opinions as a discussion, not an attack</p> <p>Self-definition beyond labels</p> <p>Set boundaries to counter over-extension of self and team</p> <p>Shift from external blame to self-responsibility</p> <p>Speak up early, as silence is read as consent</p> <p>Stay authentic and expect a gradual generational transition</p> <p>Thick skin builds resilience</p> <p>Understanding purpose</p>	<p>Authenticity and Beyond the Double Bind</p>
<p>Authenticity as permission</p> <p>Balanced cross gender mentorship and sponsorship</p>	

<p>Candid advisors and self-funded upskilling</p> <p>Coaching and mentorship</p> <p>Conditional engagement and planned exit</p> <p>Contextual calibration of style</p> <p>Developing others as the core objective</p> <p>Intentional presence and perception management</p> <p>Lead with kindness</p> <p>Negotiating leadership style</p> <p>Quality measure implementation</p> <p>Respectful voice vs. being liked</p> <p>Style shift for CEO trajectory ambitions</p> <p>Self-leadership and boundary clarity to avoid identity erosion</p> <p>Senior level intra gender support gap</p> <p>Staged communication and emotion shielding of the team</p> <p>Zigzag skill building to build agility and context</p>	<p>Contextual Skill Blending and the “Feminine”</p>
<p>Consensus leadership is contested for both genders</p> <p>Cultural understanding and connection</p> <p>Educate leaders on interpreting gendered signals</p> <p>Entrenched culture blocks growth</p> <p>Need for institutional recognition to sustain momentum</p> <p>Need safe forums</p> <p>Pre-meeting trigger-mapping and selective voice</p> <p>Retention first approach</p>	<p>Creating Systemic Support</p>
<p>Attraction to less traditional leadership styles</p> <p>Cultivating soil for effective leadership</p> <p>Environments can foster bad leadership</p> <p>Women leaders purpose in society</p> <p>Trade-off between career advancement and impact on followers</p> <p>Breaking the cycle of bad leadership and gender discrimination</p> <p>Leaving people better off</p>	<p>Call for an Evolution of Leadership</p>