

## Article

# Promoting Equal Access and Gender Equity in Leadership Positions in Eswatini's Universities and Colleges

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores perceptions of gender equity and leadership in three higher education institutions in Eswatini. The research involved nine senior management members—deans, registrars, and bursars—and eighteen lecturers (nine women and nine men). Employing narrative inquiry, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, capturing rich individual stories and social dynamics. The study explores how gender influences access to leadership roles, the barriers faced, and potential strategies for fostering inclusive environments. Guided by social role theory, the analysis was deductive, examining how cultural norms and stereotypes shape perceptions of leadership and reinforce gender disparities. Women occupy only 22% of senior management roles, while among lecturers, women constitute 50% of the workforce but only 30% of leadership positions, illustrating persistent under-representation. Findings reveal that despite existing policies, cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity continue to impede gender equity, with organisational biases and societal stereotypes maintaining male dominance in leadership. Participants emphasised that policies must be actively enforced, and cultural change initiatives are essential to challenge stereotypes and reshape societal narratives about gender roles. The study underscores the importance of institutional support, mentorship programmes, and visibility initiatives to empower women and promote gender-inclusive leadership. Engaging men as allies is also critical in transforming organisational culture. These findings contribute to advancing understanding of gender dynamics in Eswatini's higher education sector and highlight the need for comprehensive, context-specific interventions. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts involving policy enforcement, cultural transformation, capacity building, and ongoing evaluation to ensure sustainable progress toward gender equality in academic leadership.

**Keywords:** gender equity; leadership; cultural norms; hegemonic masculinity; mentorship



Academic Editor: Benedetta Siboni

Received: 23 April 2026

Revised: 23 June 2026

Accepted: 25 June 2026

Published: 28 June 2026

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## 1. Introduction

Gender equity and equality are essential components of inclusive leadership in higher education [1]. Despite global efforts, disparities persist, especially in leadership roles within Eswatini's tertiary institutions. Women remain under-represented in senior management positions, often due to cultural and institutional barriers. Eswatini's higher education system is characterised by deeply rooted patriarchal traditions and cultural norms that reinforce gender hierarchies, which are distinct from those in many other African or Global South contexts. These norms are reinforced by socio-political structures that uphold male dominance in decision-making roles, making Eswatini's context unique. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of both male and female leaders is crucial to addressing

these inequalities. Leadership in higher education influences policy and organisational development, making gender balance vital for effective decision-making [2]. Traditional norms and stereotypes continue to shape leadership opportunities, limiting access for women. This study investigates how gender influences access to leadership roles in Eswatini's universities and colleges. It emphasises the importance of fostering environments that promote gender fairness. The research gathers perspectives from senior management and lecturers to provide a comprehensive view. Narrative inquiry is employed to explore personal stories and institutional practices deeply. The study also identifies a significant empirical gap: limited qualitative research exists on the lived experiences of women and men in Eswatini's higher education leadership and how societal norms intersect with institutional policies to produce gender disparities. This study extends social role theory by applying it within the specific socio-cultural context of Eswatini, revealing how hegemonic masculinity sustains gender hierarchies. The findings aim to inform strategies to promote gender equity and equality in higher education leadership.

## 2. Background to the Study

Higher education institutions are critical drivers of societal progress, requiring diverse leadership to reflect societal values and needs [3]. While efforts to close gender gaps in academic leadership have been made globally, Eswatini's unique socio-cultural fabric sustains resistance to gender parity. Eswatini's socio-cultural context is distinguished by a strong adherence to traditional gender roles, customary norms, and a deep-seated respect for authority structures rooted in Swazi cultural values, which influence perceptions of leadership and gender roles differently from other regional contexts. The country's deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, reinforced by socio-political institutions, distinguish Eswatini from other contexts [4]. Cultural norms and traditional gender roles often restrict women's career advancement, especially into senior management. While policies promoting gender equity are in place, deep-seated stereotypes and biases persist, influencing perceptions of leadership capacity based on gender. Women are under-represented in senior roles such as deans, registrars, and bursars, limiting organisational diversity and decision-making effectiveness. Men predominantly occupy these leadership positions, perpetuating gender imbalances. This under-representation impacts organisational culture and institutional development. It is essential to understand how perceptions and institutional practices influence gendered access to leadership. Previous research indicates that cultural norms and hegemonic masculinity uphold male dominance in leadership, often resisting policy reforms [5]. This study specifically explores these dynamics within Eswatini's higher education sector, contributing contextually grounded insights. It fills a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth, qualitative account of how societal norms, institutional policies, and individual perceptions intersect to shape gendered access to leadership—an area underexplored in Eswatini. The research aims to inform policy reform and cultural change initiatives that address these specific socio-cultural barriers.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

Despite policies aimed at promoting gender equity in Eswatini's higher education sector, women remain under-represented in senior leadership roles such as deans, registrars, and bursars. Cultural norms and societal stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of leadership suitability based on gender. This is further compounded by Eswatini's unique cultural landscape, where traditional authority structures, respect for elders, and community-based decision-making processes reinforce gendered expectations and hinder progressive change. This under-representation hampers organisational diversity, decision-making quality, and institutional progress. Eswatini's socio-political system is characterised

by traditional masculinities that uphold male dominance and marginalise women's leadership aspirations [4]. Limited understanding exists about how institutional practices and personal perceptions shape gender dynamics in leadership. Most existing research has not sufficiently explored the lived experiences of both male and female leaders in Eswatini's universities. The study compares perspectives between senior management, such as deans, and lecturers, to examine how roles influence perceptions and influence change. This study addresses this gap by examining how hegemonic masculinity and societal norms sustain gender disparities and how institutional policies are enacted in practice. Therefore, this research seeks to understand perceptions of gender equity and equality, identify barriers, and suggest strategies for fostering inclusive leadership.

#### 4. Objectives

- To explore perceptions of gender equity and equality in leadership among senior management personnel and lecturers in Eswatini's higher education institutions.
- To identify institutional practices and cultural factors influencing gender access to leadership roles within these institutions.

#### 5. Research Questions

- How do senior management personnel and lecturers perceive gender equity and equality in leadership within their institutions?
- What are the perceived barriers and facilitators to achieving gender-equitable leadership in Eswatini's higher education sector?

#### 6. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts social role theory, which posits that gender differences in behaviour and societal roles are socially constructed and maintained through cultural norms and expectations [6]. This theory provides a foundational lens to understand how societal norms shape perceptions of leadership and gender roles and how these norms are reinforced or challenged within institutional contexts. How the theory structures the research is reflected in the formulation of research questions that focus on exploring perceptions of gender roles, societal stereotypes, and norms influencing leadership. The deductive coding process was informed by key themes derived from social role theory, such as societal stereotypes, cultural norms, and gendered perceptions of leadership. This approach facilitated interpreting how social sanctions, expectations, and organisational routines sustain gender disparities and influence perceptions of leadership roles. The framework underscores that gender roles are socially constructed and can be reshaped through collective effort, social learning, policy enforcement, and cultural transformation. The framework supports the understanding that gender roles are socially constructed and reinforced through repeated social interactions, media portrayals, community norms, and organisational routines [6]. It emphasises that transforming social roles involves challenging societal narratives, promoting cultural change, and fostering collective agency, which are essential for achieving gender equality in leadership. The application of social role theory underscores that gender inequality is a social construct that can be reshaped through collective effort, social learning, policy enforcement, and cultural transformation. This aligns with the study's aim to develop contextually relevant strategies for gender equity. This approach highlights that gender roles are dynamic and subject to change through social learning and collective action, providing a robust foundation for understanding and addressing gender inequality in Eswatini's higher education leadership.

## 7. Research Methodology

### 7.1. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate given the exploratory nature of examining perceptions, experiences, and cultural norms around gender and leadership [7]. Qualitative research enables the exploration of complex social phenomena, such as societal norms and personal attitudes, central to understanding gender dynamics. It allows participants to articulate their experiences freely, capturing nuanced perceptions often overlooked by quantitative methods. The approach supports a detailed exploration of institutional and societal influences on gendered leadership access. It aligns with the narrative inquiry design, facilitating storytelling and contextual understanding.

### 7.2. Research Design: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was selected because it emphasises understanding individual stories and lived experiences, allowing participants to reflect on their personal journeys with gender and leadership [8]. This approach supports capturing rich, contextualised data, especially on sensitive topics such as gender disparities. The design facilitates understanding how societal norms, institutional policies, and personal identities intersect to produce gendered perceptions of leadership. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which enabled participants to articulate their perceptions and experiences in a manner aligned with narrative inquiry. The analysis integrated narrative and thematic methods, with narrative analysis interpreting individual stories and thematic analysis identifying common patterns across data [9]. The dual analytical approach provided both depth and systematic rigour, facilitating nuanced interpretation of social phenomena within the study's context.

### 7.3. Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), chosen to capture both personal perceptions and shared social norms related to gendered leadership in the HEIs. The individual interviews were conducted with senior managers, deans, bursars, and registrars, while the focus groups were used to gather insights from lecturers. Participants included nine administrators and 18 lecturers from diverse institutions, recruited through purposive sampling based on experience and heterogeneity. The focus groups were designed with specific stimuli to elicit rich discussions on gender norms, leadership perceptions, and institutional practices. These stimuli included open-ended questions and prompts such as “Can you share a personal story or experience related to gender and leadership in your institution?”, “What cultural norms or societal expectations influence perceptions of leadership roles for women and men?”, “Describe any instances where cultural norms have either supported or hindered gender equity in leadership.”, and “What strategies or initiatives have you observed or experienced that promote or challenge gender stereotypes?”. Participants included nine administrators—three bursars, three deans, and three registrars—and 18 lecturers (nine males and nine females) from three diverse institutions. The selection of institutions was purposive, based on criteria such as typology (public and private), location (urban and rural), size (small, medium, large), socio-economic context, and region, to ensure transferability and contextual richness. Participants were recruited through institutional invitations, with inclusion criteria requiring at least one year of leadership or academic experience, and efforts were made to ensure heterogeneity regarding gender, age, and experience. Operationally, three mixed FGDs were conducted—one per institution—each comprising six participants, with groups composed of 3 males and 3 females to promote openness and facilitate diverse perspectives. The mixed groups encourage richer discussions by allowing participants to share insights

across gender lines, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the topics [10]. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min, while FGDs ranged from 60 to 90 min. All sessions were conducted in English, facilitated by experienced moderators using a semi-structured interview guide developed and pilot-tested to explore leadership roles, gender dynamics, and institutional practices. Sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, complemented by field notes to capture contextual nuances. Throughout, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, creating a conducive environment for candid discussions [11]. These carefully planned and detailed procedures ensured comprehensive, coherent data collection aligned with qualitative research standards.

#### *7.4. Data Analysis*

The analysis involved a combination of narrative and thematic methods using NVivo software (version 12), employing open coding followed by axial and selective coding to develop core themes [12]. Narrative analysis focused on individual stories, examining how participants constructed their identities and perceptions around gender and leadership. This involved detailed coding of personal narratives to identify how societal norms and cultural contexts shape individual experiences. Thematic analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding to identify patterns across the dataset, such as perceptions of policy enforcement, cultural norms, and strategies for change. Themes included “active enforcement of policies”, “cultural norms and hegemonic masculinity”, “engaging men as allies”, “societal stereotypes”, and “mentorship and visibility”. The analysis compared perspectives between senior management and lecturers, noting differences in perceptions and influence. This dual analytical approach provided a comprehensive understanding of both individual and collective social phenomena, aligning with the study's aim to explore how societal norms and institutional practices intersect to produce gendered perceptions of leadership.

#### *7.5. Researcher Reflexivity and Bias*

The researcher's gender and cultural backgrounds were acknowledged as potential influences on data collection and interpretation. Ongoing reflexivity was maintained through peer debriefing and member checking, which helped mitigate bias. The researcher acknowledges that their cultural background may influence their understanding and analysis of hegemonic masculinity and gender norms. He emphasises the importance of maintaining transparency and practicing critical self-awareness throughout the research process.

#### *7.6. Findings and Discussion*

This study captures the perspectives of senior management personnel and lecturers from three higher education institutions in Eswatini. The senior management team includes deans, registrars, and bursars, with both male and female participants. Specifically, the female deans are referred to as WPD (Women Participant Deans), and the male deans as MPD (Men Participant Deans). The female registrars are denoted as WPR, while the male registrars are MPR. Similarly, the female bursars are WPB, and the male bursars are MPB. The study also involves lecturers, with equal representation of women and men, providing a well-rounded view of perceptions related to gender and leadership roles across the institutions. In the sample, women occupy only 22% of senior management roles, compared to 78% occupied by men. Among lecturers, women constitute 50% of the workforce but only 30% of leadership positions, indicating significant under-representation, especially at senior levels.

## 8. Themes from Senior Management

### *The Need for Active Enforcement of Policies and Cultural Change*

Participants consistently highlight that policies aimed at gender equity are only effective when actively enforced and supported by a cultural shift within the institution. Despite the existence of these policies, there is a pervasive gap between policy formulation and practical implementation, revealing entrenched cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity. While the data show that policies exist, participants' narratives do not necessarily reflect their personal reflection on hegemonic masculinity; rather, the interpretation that social norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity continue to impede progress is based on thematic analysis of their statements. Therefore, the interpretation remains within the bounds of the data, emphasising the need for cultural transformation alongside policy enforcement. In the context of Eswatini, this cultural resistance is influenced by traditional values that emphasise male authority and societal expectations that uphold male leadership as the norm. Achieving meaningful progress requires deliberate strategies that not only enforce policies but also challenge and transform the social and organisational norms that sustain gender hierarchies.

Participants consistently highlight that policies aimed at gender equity are only effective when actively enforced and supported by a cultural shift within the institution. Despite the existence of these policies, there is a pervasive gap between policy formulation and practical implementation, revealing entrenched cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity. In the specific socio-cultural context of Eswatini, this resistance is deeply intertwined with traditional values that emphasise male authority, respect for elders, and community-based decision-making—norms that collectively uphold hegemonic masculinity as the ideal standard of leadership. WPD 1 notes, “Our institution has policies aimed at promoting gender equity, but their implementation often falls short because of a lack of active enforcement.” This gap underscores a fundamental disconnect: policy frameworks alone cannot alter deeply entrenched social norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity, which social role theory [6], identifies as the socially constructed dominance of males and associated leadership traits. The participant's observations suggest that without active enforcement, policies risk becoming “paper tigers”, unable to challenge the social narratives that sustain gender hierarchies. MPD 2 emphasises, “While policies exist on paper, there's limited support in practice, and senior management rarely prioritises gender issues,” exposing a lack of leadership commitment. Such apathy reflects a broader cultural resistance to change, where hegemonic masculinity remains the implicit standard—one that defines leadership as inherently masculine [13]. This reveals how societal norms sustain a hierarchical view of gender roles, where male authority is the default, and women are seen as secondary or subordinate in leadership spheres. The narratives exemplify how deep-seated cultural norms—such as respect for elders, the importance of traditional authority structures, and community expectations—serve to uphold male dominance, often resisting change even when formal policies are in place. Participants advocated for continuous monitoring, accountability, and cultural transformation initiatives, recognising that social norms are reinforced through repeated social practices [14]. Swazi cultural values uphold a hierarchical social order where male authority is sacrosanct, and deviation from this norm is often met with resistance or social sanctions. Participants also pointed out that cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity—characterised by male dominance, traditional authority, and societal expectations—continue to impede progress. As MPR 1 asserts, “Policies are in place, but what really matters is whether the leadership is committed to translating them into action.” This underscores that the challenge is not only policy but also the cultural and social reinforcement of these norms that define leadership as inherently masculine. The social sanctions and expectations serve to uphold these norms, discouraging women

from aspiring to or attaining leadership roles. These insights line up with the social role theory's premise that social roles, especially gendered ones, are maintained through social sanctions, expectations, and organisational routines [6]. These quotes highlight a recurring gap between policy formulation and actual practice, indicating that formal policies alone are insufficient to change organisational culture.

Deans, bursars and registrars, as senior managers, perceive their role as pivotal in policy implementation and cultural change. Their perspectives differ from those of lecturers; deans tend to see themselves as agents of organisational change and cultural influence, while lecturers focus on societal stereotypes and the importance of visibility. Deans' perspectives are more aligned with organisational change, whereas lecturers see societal stereotypes as the main barrier.

Additional data demonstrates that these norms are reinforced through social sanctions, traditional rituals, and organisational routines, aligning with social role theory's assertion that gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through repeated social practices [6]. WPB 2 emphasises that institutional support alone is insufficient without addressing the underlying cultural norms that undermine policy efforts. Her perspective underscores the importance of cultural change, noting that "support from the institution is crucial, but often it's the cultural norms that undermine formal policies on gender". This indicates that cultural norms—such as the cultural imperative for men to be decision-makers and women to fulfil caregiving roles—are deeply embedded in organisational routines and societal expectations, making policy enforcement insufficient without cultural transformation. This analysis aligns with social role theory by highlighting how societal expectations and normative beliefs about gender roles influence organisational practices, often resisting change even when policies are in place [15]. Her insight suggests that fostering a culture of genuine gender inclusivity requires transforming these normative beliefs and practices embedded within organisational routines. MPB1's perspective demonstrates a pragmatic understanding that effective policies require cultural commitment. He states, "The policies are good, but unless there's a cultural shift, they won't make much difference in increasing women's representation," emphasising that policy alone is insufficient without a supportive cultural environment. This analysis complements the existing narratives by reinforcing that leadership must champion cultural change, often by challenging existing hegemonic masculinity norms that define leadership as inherently masculine [16]. His perspective indicates that sustainable gender equity hinges on aligning policy enforcement with active cultural transformation efforts at all levels of the institution.

From a theoretical perspective, these narratives suggest that deeply ingrained cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity—the socially constructed dominance of males and associated leadership traits—persist within institutions [13]. Social role theory [6], posits that societal expectations and cultural narratives sustain gendered power relations. The data imply that organisational practices are influenced by these norms, which reinforce male dominance in leadership roles. Achieving meaningful change, therefore, requires not only policy enforcement but also deliberate efforts to transform these social and cultural narratives that uphold gender hierarchies. Participants' calls for cultural change underscore that policies alone are insufficient; transforming social norms requires deliberate, sustained efforts to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and reshape societal narratives about gender and leadership. Challenging the cultural fabric that sustains gender hierarchies, which socialisation, media, and institutional routines reinforce, is essential. The participants' insights suggest that genuine progress depends on embedding gender-sensitive practices in organisational routines and fostering a culture of accountability—an approach aligned with social role theory's emphasis on the social construction of gender roles through repeated social interactions [17].

## 9. Engaging Men as Allies to Shift Organisational Culture

Participants recognised that male involvement as advocates and allies is crucial for changing organisational culture. Engaging men in gender equity efforts promotes shared responsibility and helps challenge patriarchal norms. In Eswatini, this strategy is particularly significant given the societal expectations of male authority and the cultural importance placed on traditional masculinity, which influences perceptions of leadership and gender roles. Deans, especially male deans, often see themselves as key agents in modelling gender-inclusive leadership, though their effectiveness varies depending on personal commitment and institutional support. Lecturers, while aware of societal stereotypes, tend to see their male colleagues' active engagement as necessary but lack the organisational authority to effect change alone. Strategies include training, awareness campaigns, and visible endorsement of gender initiatives by male leaders. This approach is vital for creating an inclusive environment where women's leadership aspirations are supported and normalised.

Participants' perspectives reveal a nuanced understanding that the transformation of institutional culture cannot be achieved without actively involving men as allies. MPR 2 states, "Encouraging men to be allies and advocates for gender equity can help shift institutional culture," recognising that hegemonic masculinity not only privileges male dominance but also constructs masculinity as linked to leadership and authority [18]. Engaging men is viewed as a strategic move to challenge the social narratives that associate leadership solely with masculinity, thus destabilising the gendered social roles reinforced through social sanctions. WPD 1 emphasises, "Promoting the engagement of men as allies and advocates plays a crucial role in driving cultural change within the institution to support gender equity," highlighting that male participation is not just supportive but transformative. She emphasises the importance of male involvement, viewing it as a key driver for cultural transformation. This reflects an understanding that transforming organisational culture involves redefining what it means to be a man in Eswatini—moving away from the hegemonic ideals of dominance and control towards models of shared leadership, empathy, and support for gender inclusivity. This perspective aligns with the understanding that gender equity requires collective effort; women's leadership alone cannot fully change entrenched norms without male allies actively participating in advocacy and support. The statement underscores that fostering male engagement is not merely about support but about creating a shared responsibility for gender equity, which can catalyse broader institutional change [19]. Women leaders see their role as facilitating this engagement through advocacy and dialogue, helping to challenge traditional gender roles and fostering an inclusive organisational climate [20].

However, the process must be deliberate and encompass education, behavioural change, and incentives. As MPB 1 reflects, "Leadership must lead by example—when senior managers prioritise gender equity, it encourages others to follow suit." This embodies the social role theory's assertion that social norms are reinforced through exemplars and modelling behaviours [6]. Importantly, the participants acknowledge that engaging men involves redefining masculinity itself—moving away from hegemonic ideals that equate masculinity with dominance and control. It requires creating spaces for dialogue, reflection, and accountability, which can gradually reshape the social narratives about gender and leadership [21]. WPB 2 emphasises the critical role of men's involvement in creating a more inclusive environment, recognising that sustainable change depends on their active participation. This perspective echoes the social role theory's emphasis on the importance of role models and normative behaviours in shaping organisational culture [6]. By fostering men's involvement, organisations can challenge traditional gendered expectations and promote shared responsibility for gender equity initiatives. The statement also suggests that this engagement helps dismantle social sanctions that uphold hegemonic

masculinity and gender hierarchies, thereby transforming the institutional culture to be more equitable and inclusive. The participant sees this approach as vital for embedding gender-sensitive behaviours into organisational norms and practices, ultimately supporting women's leadership aspirations and advancing organisational diversity.

These insights align with social role theory, which posits that leadership roles are shaped by social norms and expectations [6]. The perceived limited impact of individual leaders underscores the challenge of dismantling hegemonic masculinity, which is reinforced through social sanctions and cultural routines [13]. The recognition that men's active participation can catalyse cultural shifts aligns with the global discourse on gender transformation, emphasising that sustainable change involves collective effort across societal and organisational levels [22]. The participants' insights underscore that addressing hegemonic masculinity is essential not only for promoting gender equity but also for fostering organisational cultures that value diversity, inclusion, and shared leadership. Ultimately, the active engagement of men as allies becomes a powerful lever for challenging and dismantling the social roles that sustain gender hierarchies, as social role theory would predict.

## 10. Themes Emerging from the Lectures

This presentation explores the critical theme emerging from participant discussions on gender and leadership, focusing on how societal norms and stereotypes challenge women's advancement into leadership roles. Participants are designated as WLP1–WLP9 for women lecturers and MLP1–MLP9 for male lecturers.

## 11. Challenging Societal Norms and Stereotypes That Undermine Women's Leadership

Participants vividly depict how societal norms serve as the bedrock of gender inequality in leadership. WLP1 states, "Many colleagues still see leadership as a male domain, and that bias affects the opportunities women get," illustrating how hegemonic masculinity shapes organisational perceptions. This reflects the internalisation of hegemonic masculinity, which links leadership qualities—assertiveness, dominance, and control—inseparably to masculinity, reinforced through social sanctions and community support of male authority. Societal stereotypes are reinforced from childhood through socialisation, media, and community practices; these norms are resistant to change because they are embedded in the cultural fabric. These perceptions are reinforced by socialisation, media, and cultural practices that embed gender role expectations from childhood, aligning with social role theory's view that gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through repeated social practices [6]. In Eswatini, societal stereotypes about gender roles are reinforced from childhood through socialisation, media, and community practices. MLP4 highlights, "Cultural expectations often see women as carers, which makes it harder for them to be taken seriously in leadership roles," pointing to the deep-rooted societal narratives that confine women to domestic spheres. This stereotype—that women's primary role is domestic and nurturing—originates from long-standing cultural narratives that valorise male strength and authority, positioning leadership as a masculine trait. Such narratives are reinforced through community rites, traditional laws, and media portrayals that depict women as carers and men as decision-makers. These stereotypes are reinforced through media portrayals, community norms, and organisational routines that valorise masculinity as a sign of leadership and authority [23]. Participants emphasise that these norms are resistant to change because they are embedded in the cultural fabric, making transformation complex and slow. WLP6 asserts, "Biases about gender roles are deeply ingrained, and changing these perceptions requires deliberate effort," emphasising that addressing stereotypes involves cultural transformation. Such deeply rooted beliefs influence colleagues'

attitudes, decisions, and women's self-perception, creating a cycle of marginalisation and self-doubt. Both groups underscore the importance of systemic interventions—awareness campaigns, gender sensitivity training, and cultural dialogues—that challenge and reshape these entrenched stereotypes [6].

In Swazi culture, initiations and rites of passage often emphasise male strength and authority, subtly reinforcing the idea that leadership is a masculine attribute. As [4], notes, Swazi cultural practices celebrate male elders as custodians of tradition and authority, while women are expected to uphold domestic roles. These norms are embedded in community practices, influencing perceptions of leadership within institutions. Participants highlight that challenging these stereotypes requires more than policies; it demands cultural revolution. MLP7 states, "Even when women are qualified, societal expectations sometimes undermine their confidence and chances of promotion", emphasising how societal perceptions diminish women's self-efficacy and career advancement. WLP3 echoes this by noting, "Society's stereotypes about women being emotional or not assertive enough continue to undermine their leadership potential," highlighting the persistent stereotypes that distort perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. This underscores that stereotypes are not only external perceptions but also internalised beliefs that diminish women's confidence and agency, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalisation. These insights reveal how societal narratives not only influence external attitudes but also impact women's self-perception, reinforcing a cycle of marginalisation. Both voices underscore the importance of deliberate cultural change, advocating for systemic interventions—awareness campaigns, gender sensitivity training, and cultural dialogues—that challenge and reshape these entrenched stereotypes. Addressing these norms requires collective efforts to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and promote narratives that valorise women's leadership, aligning with social role theory's view that social roles are dynamic and reshaped through social learning and collective agency [6]. Only through sustained, systemic efforts can these barriers be dismantled, paving the way for genuine gender equality in leadership positions.

These perceptions reflect social role theory's assertion that gender roles are socially constructed through repeated social practices [6]. The internalisation of hegemonic masculinity perpetuates stereotypes that associate leadership qualities with masculinity, undermining women's confidence and acceptance in leadership roles [13]. Participants advocate for sustained interventions—awareness campaigns, gender sensitivity training, and cultural dialogues—that challenge these narratives at their roots. These efforts must be systemic, involving multiple actors and institutions, to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and reconstruct alternative narratives that valorise women's leadership [24]. The process demands patience, resilience, and a collective commitment to cultural transformation, recognising that norms are social constructs that can be reshaped through collective agency. The insights indicate that addressing societal norms requires transforming the social fabric behind gender hierarchies—an urgent and challenging task aligning with social role theory's view that social roles are dynamic and change through social learning and collective action [6]. In sum, participant voices reveal that societal norms and stereotypes are powerful barriers but also opportunities for transformative interventions. Challenging hegemonic masculinity and entrenched beliefs requires a sustained, systemic approach that involves education, advocacy, and cultural redefinition. Only then can gender roles be reconfigured, paving the way for genuine equality in leadership and organisational culture.

## 12. The Importance of Mentorship and Visibility of Women Leaders

Lecturers highlighted that mentorship and visibility are critical strategies for empowering women and increasing their leadership participation. Mentorship programmes provide guidance, confidence-building, and networking opportunities, which are vital for career ad-

vancement. Recognising women's achievements through awards, media, and institutional platforms helps normalise women's leadership and inspires others. These approaches help challenge stereotypes, boost confidence, and foster a supportive environment for women's leadership ambitions. Women lecturers see mentorship and visibility as essential, but male colleagues' active support and institutional recognition are crucial. Visibility through awards, media, and leadership platforms serve as social cues, reinforcing that women are equally capable of leading and inspiring others. Women lecturers see mentorship and visibility as essential, but male colleagues' active support and institutional recognition are crucial. In Eswatini, cultural emphasis on community and recognition makes visibility strategies particularly effective in challenging the view that leadership is mainly men.

The participants stress that mentorship and visibility are vital to shifting gender dynamics in leadership. WLP9 (Women Lecturer) states, "Mentorship programmes targeted at women could significantly improve their chances of reaching leadership positions," emphasising that role models and guidance are essential for confidence-building and navigating organisational barriers [25]. Mentorship in Eswatini carries cultural significance, where elders and community leaders serve as role models. Mentors help women develop leadership identities that challenge stereotypes, providing social proof that women can embody leadership qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. Mentorship can serve as a social learning mechanism, challenging stereotypes and demonstrating that women can embody leadership qualities traditionally associated with masculinity [6]. In Eswatini's cultural setting, collective recognition and community validation are highly valued, which makes visibility especially impactful. WLP4 (Women Lecturer) adds, "We need to actively promote women's achievements and make visible role models in leadership," highlighting the power of recognition and storytelling in reshaping social narratives. In this context, visibility through awards, media, and institutional platforms acts as a social cue that women are equally capable of leading—challenging the hegemonic narrative that leadership is a masculine domain. These role models serve as counter-narratives embedded within the social fabric, inspiring other women and transforming collective perceptions. Visibility of women leaders through awards, media, and institutional platforms can normalise women's presence in leadership roles, thereby disrupting hegemonic masculinity's association of leadership with masculinity. Participants argue that visibility strategies serve as social cues that reinforce the idea that women are equally capable of leading, which is vital for fostering social change [26]. From a theoretical lens, these strategies align with social role theory's emphasis on exemplars and social modelling as mechanisms for social influence [6]. The presence of visible women leaders acts as counter-narratives to hegemonic masculinity, providing social proof that women can lead effectively. Such visibility not only challenges stereotypes but also inspires future generations of women to pursue leadership roles, thus creating a positive feedback loop for social learning. The insights reveal that systemic efforts to promote women's achievements must be institutionalised, making role models accessible and celebrated within organisational routines.

MLP2 highlights that even highly qualified women may be reluctant to step into leadership due to the absence of visible role models and supportive networks. This reflects the importance of mentorship and visibility in providing social proof—that women can and do succeed in leadership roles, which in turn inspires confidence and ambition [27]. When women see others like themselves leading, it diminishes feelings of isolation and reinforces the belief that leadership is attainable. MLP8 emphasises that shifting societal perceptions is a deliberate process requiring proactive efforts: "Changing societal perceptions about women's leadership requires intentional efforts to showcase women leaders and challenge stereotypes in public discourse." By elevating women's achievements publicly, institutions send strong social signals that leadership is attainable regardless of gender, thus gradually

reshaping societal expectations. This aligns with the concept that visibility strategies—such as media campaigns, awards, and public recognition—are essential for disrupting stereotypes that associate leadership with masculinity [28]. Such efforts serve not only to elevate individual women but also to reshape collective narratives about gender and leadership.

These strategies support social role theory's emphasis on exemplars and social modelling as mechanisms for social influence [6]. Visible women leaders act as counter-narratives to hegemonic masculinity, facilitating social learning and reshaping perceptions about gender and leadership [13]. Critically, visibility and mentorship are interconnected; mentorship nurtures confidence, while visibility affirms societal acceptance of women's leadership. The participants' perspectives suggest that these strategies are essential for dismantling the social narratives that confine women to subordinate roles. They call for a deliberate and sustained effort—integrating awards, media campaigns, and leadership development programmes—to embed women's leadership into organisational culture. Ultimately, these strategies serve as catalysts for cultural change, challenging the hegemonic masculinity that sustains gender hierarchies and fostering a more inclusive social fabric where gender roles are fluid and adaptable [29].

Comparing the perspectives, deans (especially women) tend to be more vocal about cultural barriers they face, and they see themselves as pivotal in influencing cultural change, although their influence is often limited by societal norms. Lecturers' insights primarily highlight societal stereotypes and visibility issues and tend to see change as a collective process involving multiple actors.

### 13. Recommendations

Based on the deep analysis of participant insights and the theoretical framework, it is evident that addressing gender disparities in higher education leadership in Eswatini requires a multifaceted approach. Institutions should prioritise the active enforcement of existing policies by establishing clear accountability mechanisms, regular monitoring, and evaluation systems that ensure tangible outcomes. Cultural transformation initiatives must be integrated into institutional strategies, targeting the dismantling of hegemonic masculinity and challenging societal stereotypes through continuous awareness campaigns and gender sensitivity training. Given Eswatini's unique cultural context, these initiatives should be tailored to incorporate local customs, traditional leadership structures, and community engagement to ensure relevance and sustainability. Engaging men as allies and advocates should be institutionalised through leadership development programmes, recognising that sustainable change depends on collective responsibility and redefinition of social norms. Mentorship programmes tailored for women, along with deliberate efforts to increase visibility, are vital for empowerment and challenging stereotypes. Promoting ongoing dialogues about gender issues, shared responsibility, and creating safe reflection spaces are also crucial. Policymakers, institutional leaders, and stakeholders must collaborate to embed these strategies into organisational routines, making gender equity a lived reality, not just an aspiration.

### 14. Conclusions

This study reveals that despite existing policies, deep-seated cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity continue to impede progress toward gender equality in Eswatini's higher education sector. Participants' narratives underscore that policy enforcement alone is insufficient without active cultural change and societal norm transformation. The stereotypes depicting leadership as male and women's caregiving roles reinforce gender hierarchies, limiting women's leadership opportunities. Eswatini's distinct socio-cultural landscape—characterised by traditional authority and community-based

decision-making—further complicates efforts. The perspectives of deans, as senior managers, demonstrate their potential influence on cultural change, whereas lecturers often see societal stereotypes as barriers. Engaging men as allies, promoting mentorship, and increasing the visibility of women leaders emerged as critical strategies for challenging these norms and fostering inclusive organisational cultures. The findings align with social role theory, emphasising that gender roles are socially constructed and can be reshaped through collective effort and social learning. Ultimately, sustainable progress requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both institutional practices and societal narratives, ensuring long-term transformation of gendered social roles. Only through deliberate, coordinated efforts can Eswatini's higher education sector realise its potential for inclusive and equitable leadership.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee (Approval No. 12338), with documentation available upon request. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with detailed explanations of voluntary participation and confidentiality measures. Anonymisation involved pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information, with special care taken in small institutional settings to prevent indirect identification. Confidentiality in focus groups was emphasised by requesting participants to respect each other's privacy and not disclose identities. Sensitive topics such as gender-based violence or discrimination were handled ethically by providing support resources and allowing participants to skip questions if desired.

**Informed Consent Statement:** In this study, all human subjects provided informed written consent prior to their participation. Participants were explicitly informed about the purpose of the research, their rights, and the use of their data for publication purposes. Additionally, consent was obtained from parents or guardians on behalf of minors or dependent participants. Efforts were made to anonymise all data; identifying information was masked or concealed in transcripts and any published material to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. No images or photographs of participants were used in the publication.

**Data Availability Statement:** This article contains the original contributions given in this work; for further information, please contact the corresponding author.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to acknowledge all the participants who voluntarily took part in this study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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