KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry Vol. 14. No. 2. (2026) • 87–110.
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.of.41

ARTICLE

Let's Talk about Gender and Leadership

Women Leaders' Experiences on the Croatian Business Portal *Women in Adria*

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Global statistics confirm a growing number of women in leadership roles, yet gender gaps and underrepresentation persist. This paper reviews feminist literature addressing traditional, contemporary and alternative leadership models, noting that leadership is still predominantly conceptualised through traditional gender categories. Compared to men, women face many gender-based barriers and challenges in developing their leadership careers. In Croatia, efforts to increase gender equality and promoting gender awareness in the business sector are visible through the specialised online portal *Women in Adria.* The paper analyses mediated meanings and experiences of leadership, gendered challenges, and inequalities in the business sector from the perspective of women leaders from different industries and sectors. A thematic analysis of 38 articles published on the portal in 2024 identified four key themes: women on the leadership path, forms of gender (in)equality, work–life (im)balance and motherhood.

Keywords: leadership, gender, gendered barriers, thematic analysis, Women in Adria

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Article received on 29 December 2025. Article accepted on 21 April 2026.
Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Introduction

Historically, women have been excluded from leadership positions, so there is still a 'tendency to view leadership synonymously with men' (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 162). Today, more than ever before in history, women have the opportunity to attain positions of leadership (Keohane, 2020; Madsen, 2017) but the 'gender gap in leadership is a persistent issue' (Women's Resource Centre, s. a.). Although global statistics indicate an increase in the number of women in leadership positions, much research indicates the underrepresentation of women in high-level positions, as well as the persistence of gender disparities and gender stereotypes related to leadership (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023; Keynton & Lee, 2024).

Despite some progress in terms of gender policies, Croatia remains 'among the lowest-ranked EU countries for overall gender equality' (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 6). In the context of professional life and the acquisition of decision-making power, women in Croatia have a less favourable position compared to men (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 19). In addition to the fact that the employment rate for women in Croatia is among the lowest in the EU, they bear the burden of caring for others (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 12), and there is a persistent gender gap relating to 'family planning, childbearing, and child-rearing' (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 9). Moreover, Croatia is characterised by 'the widest gender gap in the EU' related to 'time spent on unpaid work' (women spend 'nearly 20 hours more per week than men on unpaid activities' (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 13). It is especially important to highlight the unfavourable and limiting position of women of reproductive age on the labour market, as well as the relevant issues of protecting pregnant women from discrimination by employers (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, pp. 9, 11). Women in Croatia earn about 17% less than men, and their access to high-paying jobs is limited (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 15). When it comes to power, the data indicate that women have relatively strong influence in the political sphere, but their influence in the economic and social sphere is smaller. Considering the absence of women in 'powerful positions in the economy' (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 18), the importance of EU directives encouraging greater representation for women in 'leadership and high-power positions, including mentorship, sponsorship, and targeted training' (Nguyen & Recher, 2024, p. 20) is highlighted.

Leadership is not gender neutral, neither conceptually nor in practice. Notions of leadership have long been shaped by traditional gender expectations, norms and ideas that have supported and maintained oppressive structures, which is why leadership is a genuinely feminist topic. Recent approaches to leadership critically question hierarchical relations and oppressive structures, where it is important to shed light on relations of inequality as well as to open space for the voices of women leaders. Women on the labour market and in leadership roles are faced with numerous obstacles and challenges along the way to realising their career and professional aspirations. Due to contradictory expectations and double standards, many give up their professional ambitions. Women who have managed to position themselves in leadership positions have travelled long, complex and circular paths to reach the top. Their experiences and professional stories are important in various ways, for example, both in sharing that experience with other women and for the further development of theoretical and research horizons and the articulation of specific gender sensitive policies and business models. Given the lack of visibility for the topic of women's

leadership as a gendered and feminist issue in the Croatian academic community, this paper represents a research contribution to its further development.

The focus of the analysis is the mediated experiential narratives of women leaders from different sectors (IT, banking, healthcare, pharmacy, logistics, etc.) and organisational systems (small businesses, medium-sized businesses and corporations) represented and published on the online business platform: *Women in Adria*. This online business platform has specialised in promoting gender equality and women's voices in various business domains in Croatia. In what way are leadership narratives constructed from the perspective of women leaders from Croatia and how do they understand them? What are the gendered meanings created and career experiences presented by women leaders? What kind of challenges and obstacles have they faced on their career paths? Representations of these experiences are understood in the context of feminist considerations of leadership and existing research on gender discrimination and gender inequality in the leadership sector.

Literature review: Leadership as a feminist issue

According to Watterston and Ehrich (2024, p. 159) 'leadership is a gendered concept', while Batliwala (2022, p. 6) highlights the importance of feminist perspectives that emphasise 'power' in 'the heart of leadership, especially power over'. Considering the different types of leadership, according to one of the broader definitions (Keohane, 2010, cited in Keohane, 2020, p. 236) 'leaders define or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to pursue those goals'. Batliwala (2022, p. 6) emphasises that feminism analyses the ways in which power structures operate, and in the sphere of leadership 'seeks to move away from [...] oppressive use of power towards forms that are empowering, enabling, inclusive, and collective – power with, to, and within'. Women leaders are not only exposed to discrimination in practice. In theoretical considerations, they are mainly understood and assessed in relation to their difference from men (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021, p. 233). Feminist theories critically questioning the 'stubborn linkage between leadership and maleness' (Keohane, 2020, p. 238), structural gender inequalities in the leadership sector, also offer alternative models for theory and practice.

Kark and Buengeler (2024) connected feminist waves ('gender reform feminism'; 'gender resistance feminism'; 'gender rebellion feminism'; 'gender revolution feminism') with their themes and goals to leadership theories, and indicated their contributions and limitations in the research of gender aspects in leadership (Table 1). It is important to point out that while this division functions as an ideal type or an analytical tool (Weber, 1992), in reality, feminist waves have overlapped and do not function in a linear way.

Gender reform feminism and gender resistance feminism correspond to a binary understanding of gender as a fixed category, which is also reflected in the understanding of leadership, the desirable characteristics of a good leader, and the manner of leading. For example, gender reform feminism resonates with traditional heroic leadership theories such as the Great Man Theory, which are male-centric and insist on a hierarchical relationship between the leader and subordinates (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 249). In this context, men are defined

Table 1:
Waves in Feminism and gender aspects in leadership

Feminist wave	Characteristics	Leadership type	Critique of the feminist wave
Gender reform feminism	Liberal feminism Gender balance and equal rights Gender as a 'fixed characteristic of the individual' (p. 248)	Traditional heroic leadership theories Male-centrism Leader as charismatic and autocratic man Leader vs. followers Toxic/negative leadership	Primary focus on gendered obstacles, rather than a quality solution Women are suggested to adopt masculine leadership styles Contradictory position of women leaders (masculine expectations vs. feminine ideals)
Gender resistance feminism	Radical feminism Women's experiences Celebrating stereotypical feminine qualities	Post-heroic leadership theories Transformational/servant/ shared leadership 'the female advantage' (p. 250)	Reinforcement of gender stereotypes Homogenisation of women's experiences Maintaining the gender status quo
Gender rebellion feminism	Intersectionality Gender as a fluid and flexible category/beyond gender binarism	Recent theories of (paradoxical/inclusive/ intersectionality) leadership Questioning traditional gender divisions and stereotypes Complexity due to the coexistence of contradictory elements	The door to 'less conventional' and 'less binary' leadership has not yet opened (p. 253) Importance of silenced and inaudible voices in leadership research
Gender revolution feminism	Online/digital feminism Challenging and criticising misogyny and sexism in the digital space	Virtual leadership Intersectionality related to gender and leadership Power relations and sexual harassment Questioning stereotypes and gender essentialism Importance of social media for leadership and mobilisation of employees (p. 254)	Commercialisation of feminism; Simplification of movements Excessive emphasis on individual identities 'undermining collective power' (p. 254) 'Reducing feminism to personal achievements' (p. 254)

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Kark & Buengeler (2024).

as the natural leaders (Keohane, 2020, p. 238) and stereotypical masculine characteristics (e.g. dominance, aggressiveness, self-confidence, independence, etc.) are declared to be norms for quality leadership (e.g. 'think manager – think male') (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 368). Exception from masculine norms has been treated as weakness in practice, so women have been expected to adopt a masculine leadership style (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). In this way, power structures have not been questioned, nor was a solution of quality sought to dismantle the system of inequality, but rather women were expected to adapt in a manner that supported gender asymmetries. Pullen and Vachhani (2021, p. 235) point to 'the contradictory' or 'the impossible position' of women leaders because on the one hand, masculine performances are expected of them, and on the other hand, they are 'still being subject to feminine ideals' (2021, p. 233). Gender resistance feminism builds on radical feminism and resonates with 'post-heroic leadership theories' (e.g. transformational/servant/shared leadership) that, on the one hand, represent deflection from the traditional male leader figure but on the other hand, affirm stereotypical feminine qualities (e.g. collaboration, empathy, care, intuitiveness, relationality, etc.) as key to effective leadership (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 250). Although the focus has shifted from patriarchal ideas of leadership to 'womanhood' (Keohane, 2020, p. 246), women's realities and experiences of what constitutes a good leader are still rooted in traditional gender paradigms and gender stereotypes. Watterston and Ehrich (2024, p. 163) recall more recent approaches that emphasise how (stereotypically) 'feminine' qualities are important for achieving prosperity and successful leadership (Jaiswal & Rao, 2019). Affirming 'the female advantage' in leadership variously reinforces gender stereotypes, maintains the status quo, does not remove career barriers for women leaders, and homogenises women's experiences (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 250).

Gender rebellion feminism and gender revolution feminism introduce an intersectional perspective in understanding power and gender issues while rejecting gender binarism and gender essentialism (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, pp. 251, 252). Such approaches also affect the understanding of good and desirable leadership, which distances itself from the traditional hierarchical model and devolved leadership. Gender rebellion feminism resonates with recent theories of (paradoxical/inclusive/intersectionality) leadership that questions traditional gender divisions and accepts complexity (e.g. paradoxical leadership is based on managing dualities such as integrating 'agentic and communal behaviours') (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 252). In addition to emphasising the importance of the 'multiple faces of leadership' (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 161), gender rebellion feminism insists on inclusiveness, diversity within the team, and the mindsets of team members (see Jaiswal & Rao, 2019), while the intersectional perspective points to the importance of gender and other dimensions of identity (e.g. ethnicity, race, age, etc.) that influence leadership as well (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 252). Critics point out that paradoxical leadership has not yet opened the door to theorising about leadership in a 'less conventional' and 'less binary' way and, in a methodological sense, that it is important to use innovative research methods that will enable silenced voices to be heard in leadership research (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 253). *Online feminism* introduces theories of virtual leadership focused on more complex aspects of intersectionality related to gender and leadership; power relations and sexual harassment; questioning stereotypes and gender essentialism; and the importance of 'leadership and mobilisation of employees

via social media' (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 254). Critics emphasise the risks related to online feminism such as commercialisation of feminism; simplification of movements and excessive emphasis on individual identities; 'undermining collective power' and 'reducing feminism to personal achievements' (Kark & Buengeler, 2024, p. 254).

New leadership models have the potential, through their approaches and value systems, to initiate deeper changes within traditional hierarchies and corporate structures based on different types of inequality. Batliwala (2022, pp. 7, 8) emphasises importance of the 'transformative feminist leadership' model based on idea that 'feminist leadership is no longer about biological women (or those who identify as women) playing leadership roles, but about integral changes in the way leadership is practiced' (2022, p. 7). Feminist leadership includes processes of transformation at the micro, mezzo and macro level that dissolve 'discriminatory structures of power' and strengthen the values of sustainability, equality, peace and well-being for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. (2022, p. 7). At the level of the work organisation, transformative feminist leadership is practiced as leadership based on (2022, p. 9):

- the alignment of the leader's personal rhetoric and his practice ('the personal is political')
- principles of equality and equal treatment for all
- power sharing and rotating leadership
- democracy, openness, transparency of work and business
- ensuring leadership training for all employees
- support for young employees and development of their leadership
- 'low levels of disparity in salaries' of employees at different positions
- supporting 'wellbeing and resilience' (e.g. work–life balance, childcare support, paternity leave, rest areas, subsidising meals, rotating responsibilities, etc.)
- transparency of recruitment, reward, conflict resolution practices
- clearly articulated procedures for issues of abuse and 'hidden power dynamics'
- (in)formal 'systems of feminist mentoring' at individual/organisational level

On the way to the top: Gendered barriers and external challenges

Many women in leadership roles have witnessed or experienced specific obstacles, challenges and barriers that have prevented and/or slowed down their career progress and maintained gender inequalities in the working environment (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Topić, 2023). Research and statistics show that gender bias is 'pervasive, invisible, and harmful bias that demeans, discourages, and disadvantages women at work' (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023, p. 1). To overcome the gender leadership gap, it is necessary to identify the barriers and promote solutions (Madsen, 2017). Many research in the field of psychology have focused on finding an explanation for why there are fewer women in top positions, emphasising 'the role of gender differences in psychological attributes' (e.g. gender differences in attitudes toward competition, negotiation and risk) (Bertrand, 2018, p. 8). However, in addition to gendered psychological attributes, structural and institutional inequalities that do not support equality

in the advancement of male employees and female employees must be taken into account – women in leadership positions are just as ambitious as their male counterparts but face more challenges than they do (McKinsey & Company, 2022, p. 5). The 'sticky floor' is a metaphor used to describe various obstacles that keep women in low-level jobs and discourage their vertical mobility, or advancement to higher-level positions (Sabharwal, 2013; Ciminelli et al., 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). In the literature, 'glass metaphors' (Kumra, 2017, p. xxvii; see Jakobsh, 2004; Sabharwal, 2013; da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2022) are used to describe the challenges faced by women who try to attain high-level positions in their work organisation. The 'glass ceiling' is a well known phenomenon that describes: 1. 'vertical discrimination against women' within the company; and 2. 'subtle but persistent barriers/obstacles, underpinned by discriminatory' (un)conscious practices, and attitudes that prevent women from advancing to top positions (Babic & Hansez, 2021, p. 2; see Sabharwal, 2013; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). On the other hand, a 'glass cliff' (Mashele & Alagidede, 2023; Sabharwal, 2013) occurs in cases of promoting women to 'a perilous leadership position' (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023, p. 10) associated with increased possibilities of negative consequences (e.g. risks of criticism and failure are increased).

In addition to glass and sticky metaphors, during their leadership careers women also face other external challenges that indicate the persistence of gender biases, gender stereotypes/prejudices and discriminatory practices that support 'male privilege' (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023, p. 7) and the presence of gender inequality in work environments (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Heilman, 2012). Women leaders also face specific gender stereotypes such as 'female leadership prototypes' or 'general stereotypes and images of leadership styles' for women leaders (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 368) and the stereotype that women cope better with crisis situations and challenges ('think crisis–think female') (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 372).

Many women in top positions face a 'double bind' or contradictory gender-based expectations because, on the one hand, they are expected to have stereotypical masculine characteristics that will mean they are perceived as competent but not likable, and on the other hand, if their behaviour is assessed as 'too feminine' they will be perceived as 'likable but incompetent' (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 373; see Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023; Topić, 2023) or 'not tough enough to make hard decisions' (Keohane, 2020, p. 243).

Contemporary successful women are in a 'schizophrenic situation' which can be identified as 'generic syncretism' because they are expected to be traditional and modern at the same time (for example, women have been criticised for being like men and for neglecting their traditional gender roles as wives and mothers) (Lagarde, 2000, cited in Medina-Vicent, 2015, p. 70). If a woman performs stereotypically masculine behaviours and qualities, a hostile social reaction or backlash is possible (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 368; Keohane, 2020; Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

In the last two decades, the glass ceiling metaphor has been replaced by the labyrinth metaphor, which describes the complex and circular route women take on their career journeys to the top (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). On the journey through the career labyrinth a woman with leadership aspirations may encounter 'insufficient support based on gender' (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023, p. 7). One of the forms

of denial of support is limited access to mentoring, which prevents their career growth and development, and training for the quality performance of a leadership role (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Jakobsh, 2004). Research has shown that traditional mentoring was a key barrier in the career development of many women because male senior managers preferred to mentor and sponsor younger male candidates in whom they saw their younger selves (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Keohane, 2020; Jakobsh, 2004). To question this type of 'homo-social reproduction' that maintains the 'old boys' club culture' (Kanter, 1977, cited in Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 166), it is important to encourage the development of relationships and networks with the aim of developing women leaders (Madsen, 2017, p. xxxi).

Unlike men's career paths, which are 'typically linear, upward trajectories' (Bierema, 2016, cited in Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 168), women's career paths are often described as 'detours' and 'diversions' (Bierema, 2016, cited in Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 168) due to family obligations, motherhood and care for significant Others. In addition to interrupting their careers due to motherhood or caring for others, women were often denied a leadership position because the employer questioned their commitment (ATA, 2020, as cited in Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 168), which ultimately had a negative impact on their professional growth, promotion and advancement. Childless women in leadership positions have career paths similar to those of their male colleagues. Work–life conflict affects the career choices of many women, especially those who aspire to leadership positions (Morgenroth et al., 2021, p. 448; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023). Much research again indicates the impact of work–life conflict in some life stages (Morgenroth et al., 2021, p. 449; Polić & Holy, 2020; 2021). Women are still more involved in household and caring activities than men, which ultimately results in a higher degree of conflict or imbalance between the work and private spheres for women than for men (Morgenroth et al., 2021, p. 449; Geiger Zeman et al., 2024; Geiger Zeman et al., 2025). Many women abandon actualising their leadership potential because of challenges in balancing their work and home-life, systemic obstacles and (un) conscious bias (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024). Keohane (2020, pp. 242, 243) highlights the importance of establishing 'flexible pathways through the labyrinth' and 'family-friendly workplaces' so that working mothers can more successfully balance parenthood and career advancement while successfully continuing their careers.

On the way to the top: Gendered internal challenges

It is important to emphasise several key internal factors or 'inner barriers' (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 164) that women with leadership aspirations face. According to Watterston and Ehrich (2024, p. 168), these are most often about a lack of self-confidence, feeling unprepared for a leadership position and imposter syndrome. Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023, p. 369) expand the catalogue of internal barriers and point to: 'Self-gender stereotypes', tokenism 'gender stereotype threat', and internalising gender stereotypes.

'Self-gender stereotypes' indicate the 'unconscious development of gender stereotypical attitudes and behaviours' (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 369). Research has shown that gender stereotypes are important for 'women's self-evaluation, career choices, and self-efficacy' (e.g. women leaders in male-dominated sectors tend to underestimate their own leadership abilities) (see Tremmel & Wahl, 2023; Toheed et al., 2019), and also points out that due to the internalisation of gender stereotypes, women tend to accept 'discrimination and prejudice toward women' (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 377). Gender-based tokenism can also negatively affect women who are tokens in their work organisation in such a way that they assess the atmosphere at work to be unfavourable and unfair, which increases the possibility of them seeking new employment (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 378). The literature mentions the 'gender stereotype threat' phenomenon in situations where women, most often in male-dominated sectors, feel fear and anxiety about confirming negative gender stereotypes, which leads them to give up on leadership status (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 378). The internalisation of gender stereotypes affects attitudes, values, choices, behaviours and self-evaluation, for example, due to gender biases that women are not good negotiators, women negotiate less, and less frequently than men. Women tend to underestimate their leadership abilities, and with a lack of self-confidence they maintain inequalities in the work organisation (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 379). The abovementioned 'inner barriers' (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024, p. 168) combine with institutional opportunities and power structure to influence 'the career development of women leaders' (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 379). Medina-Vicent (2015, p. 71) points to the limitations of approaches that are focused on individual psychological characteristics because the responsibility for the obstacles that women face is shifted from institutions that support gender inequalities to individual women. Individualising women's problems reinforces structural inequalities and masks the symbolic and material structures that create gender asymmetries (Medina-Vicent, 2015, p. 71).

Methodology

There is a lack of feminist research-based work on leadership and the experiences of women leaders employed in Croatia. This paper and its analysis of articles published on the business platform *Women in Adria* – specialised in promoting gender equality and women's voices in various business domains – represents a contribution to the inauguration of new approaches in research and reflection on leadership in the Croatian business sector and academic community.

Women in Adria is the 'largest women's business network in the region' founded in Zagreb in 2012 (Women in Adria, LinkedIn, s. a.). This empowering business network, which advocates for a better status for women entrepreneurs and corporate women in the region, organises education and conferences, provides mentoring, networks and creates space for women's voices from various sectors (Women in Adria, s. a.). In addition to connecting and networking women in the Croatian and regional economy, *Women in*

Adria continuously (re)produces and (re)constructs the discourse of empowering women in leadership and opens space for the representation and promotion of female leadership in Croatia and the region. The analysis is focused on interviews and presentations by women leaders at conferences organised by *Women in Adria* that are subsequently published and represent a contribution to creating a business culture based on gender equality and respect for diversity. This is precisely why *Women in Adria* represents an analytically relevant media space. The texts analysed are mediated produced narratives that offer significant insight into the ways in which women leaders talk about their experiences and how they represent them publicly in the context of 'women's media' (Yoong 2020, p. 18). Such journalistic media texts have been selected, stylised, edited and shortened in such a way that they represent the experiences and narratives of female leaders in a specific mediated manner with the aim of affirming and supporting female leadership in Croatia. This type of texts is produced '*for* women' and '*by* women' (original italics) (Yoong, 2020, p. 18). In the analysed texts, it is possible to identify three levels: 1. the personal narrative of the women leader; 2. journalistic interventions in the construction of the media text; and 3. application of the discursive framework of empowerment. Earlier research points to the ambivalence and complexity of women's media, for example Yoong (2020, p. 18) points out that women's media create space for feminism and question patriarchal hegemony, but at the same time: 1. create specific discourses that focus on individual transformation, experience and success without addressing gender inequality as a structural problem that requires structural change; and 2. mediated stories of professional women, whose experiences and career advice are based on 'neoliberal feminist and postfeminist logics' (Yoong, 2020, p. 17). Critics point out that the media is important in promoting gender equality and creating space for women's voices, but the intersectional perspective is neglected. Media research shows that highly educated women with higher-income backgrounds have greater access to the media and a greater chance to tell their story (Bracho et al., 2026, p. 12).

The goal of the study was to capture the recent representations and narratives about experiences of women leaders published on the *Women in Adria* portal. The formation of the corpus was started in February 2025, so it was decided to limit the analysis and focus on (during the analysis period) the most recent representations of female leadership on the *Women in Adria* portal. In accordance with the defined research questions, the term 'women leader' (in Croatian: *liderica*) was entered into the search engine. The search strategy was based on this keyword in order to avoid semantic ambiguities and to make the keyword consistent with the terminology used in the theoretical part of the paper. In the analysed articles under the term women leader, different types of female leadership are indicated, for example from entrepreneurs and managers to directors. The formation of the analytical corpus took place in two phases. A search based on the word 'women leader' yielded 143 results, which included texts published in January 2025 and earlier. An insight into these materials revealed that articles addressing the representation of women's leadership experiences were published in the section 'Career/Building a career', so a further selection was made based on a time restriction (2024) and an additional search of the mentioned section. A total of 38 articles published in 2024 were included in the analysis. All 38 of the articles analysed were written in Croatian. Data analysis and interpretation were conducted in Croatian and subsequently translated into English during the writing phase.

The analysis is based on the application of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which includes a gender perspective and feminist theory as a critical orientation that enables the examination of the social construction of gender and gendered meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1). Key research questions are based on feminist approaches and gender perspective. In the focus of the analysis are mediated representations of: 1. meanings and experiences of leadership as gender issues; 2. gendered experiences of leadership; and 3. gendered (in)equalities in the business sector.

Thematic analysis was conducted according to the conventional protocol or 'the six-phase analytical process' (Byrne, 2022, p. 1398) defined by Braun and Clarke (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3354). Both authors participated in all phases of thematic analysis. Articles were copied into Word documents, read several times for the authors to familiarise themselves with the articles. Both authors independently made the initial inductive coding, after which the initial codes were discussed, questioned and redefined in relation to the research questions. Given that the research questions were posed from the position of a feminist leadership body of knowledge, both an inductive approach and a deductive approach were used (Byrne, 2022, p. 1396). This mixed approach is most frequently applied in research practice (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019, 2020 cited in Byrne, 2022, p. 1397) because it enables reflexivity but also offers 'a clear direction' (Giles & Harrison, 2023). The process of defining themes and sub-themes was long-lasting and dynamic: the relationships between the codes and their shared meanings were jointly considered and commented on, and on the basis of which themes and sub-themes were defined that 'communicates something meaningful that helps answer the research question(s)' (Braun & Clarke, 2013 cited in Byrne, 2022, p. 1403). The authors independently determined a number of themes and sub-themes, which were then discussed in several online meetings, following several revisions, until the final list was determined. In the end, the final themes and sub-themes were named based on the consensus thus reached, keeping in mind the feminist-rooted framework. Analytical rigor was ensured by collaborative work with data, constant comparisons of individual analytical activities, joint discussions, and the questioning of empirical material, and collaboration in the development of codes, and emerging themes and sub-themes.

Findings: Analysis and discussion

The analysis of the articles identified four themes and six sub-themes:

- Theme 1: Women on the leadership path
  - sub-themes: becoming a leader, being a leader, gendered styles of leadership
- Theme 2: Forms of gender (in)equality
  - sub-themes: perspectives of gender equality, challenges of external barriers, gendered internal barriers
- Theme 3: Work–life (im)balance
  - Theme 4: Motherhood

Theme 1: Women on the leadership path

The first theme includes three sub-themes: becoming a leader, being a leader and gendered styles of leadership. The business background of women leaders (for example, multinational corporations, domestic companies, small or family businesses, public sector, own company) and experiences of becoming a leader are very heterogeneous. For some women leaders, advancement was realised in the different stages of their careers. Therefore, some of the women leaders emphasise the unconventionality of their career trajectories, while some point to a gradual, linear, conventional career development. On their paths to leadership positions, women faced various obstacles and challenges: 1. *personal* (e.g. financial difficulties, unemployment, personal tragedies, etc.); 2. *work* (e.g. facing inconveniences in business, failures, global trends that cause changes in the sector, etc.); and 3. *professional* (for example, changing professions due to new business opportunities, inter-sectoral migration, etc.). However, personal/work/professional challenges, difficult experiences and career setbacks have not been interpreted as losses, but as motivation for progress, an opportunity for growth and personal empowerment, whereby the importance of a personal attitude and a positive and optimistic outlook, quality mentoring support, continuous education and training, networking, etc. are especially emphasised.

Despite all abovementioned differences, there are common denominators that connect all experiences and specific qualities on the leadership path: expressed ambition; clear business vision; the desire to make a difference and leave a positive impact; strong work ethic; navigating (unexpected) changes and uncertainty; risk acceptance; willingness to make sacrifices (e.g. time, private life, etc.); optimistic outlook on life; engaging in lifelong learning and in self-improvement. Women talk about their leadership qualities and professional goals in a gender-neutral manner. All the women leaders emphasised their satisfaction with their current position, salary, working conditions and business engagement in their work environment/organisation and status in the sector (e.g. networking, awards, positions in professional associations).

Based on the analysis of the articles, it is possible to catalogue the key premises of leadership philosophy (based on personal experience or well-known models from the literature on leadership or beyond), and the key values/qualities promoted and practiced by women in leadership:

- leadership is a skill that is learned and continuously developed
- the leader has integrity and acts in accordance with personal values that are in line with the values of the organisation in which she works
- they create positive changes in the team, organisation and community
- they recognise the importance of their team and respect team members
- they have a clear vision, set goals and define direction
- they are moving away from direct and control-based leadership and prioritise indirect, collaborative, transformational and relationship-based leadership that affirms empathy, trust, job satisfaction, joint learning and information/knowledge sharing

The preferred idea of leadership and everyday working practices indicate deflection from traditional heroic and hegemonic leadership, deconstructing the essentialist idea of a born leader and opening up to new models of leadership such as in gender rebellion feminism (Kark & Buengeler, 2024) and feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2022) – diversity, teamwork, harmony of rhetoric and practice, support for young employees, mentoring, etc. (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Jaiswal & Rao, 2019).

Although all women talk about leadership and their own leadership path in gender-neutral terms, some women leaders emphasise 'women's skills' and gendered characteristics, as an important part of new leadership models that resonate with new business and work realities (see Jakobsh, 2004):

> [...]teams led by managers focused on relationships and people have greater satisfaction, greater engagement, people are ready to put in extra effort, when necessary, feel connected to what they do and are much more innovative and creative. So, we don't have to change our 'female' leadership style to a 'male' one. This kind of data gives us the right to be leaders and be women. The two really go together (Maltarić-Dujnić cited in Orešković, 2024).

Speaking about their experiences, some women leaders engaged an essentialist perspective specific to gender resistance feminism (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021) in interpreting the quality and specificity of women's leadership. In this context, the revaluation of traditional women's characteristics is evident: intuition, empathy, emphasis on relationships, 'soft skills', etc. This approach is both empowering and limiting (Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Medina-Vicent, 2015). On the one hand, the traditional male-centred idea of leaders is rejected and power is associated with women and their concrete experiences, but on the other hand, traditional gender divisions and gendered stereotypes are supported, and women's experiences are homogenised (Medina-Vicent, 2015). This approach opens space for women and highlights the importance and relevance of specific women's experiences; however, it still does not call into question the current establishment and dominant power structures that support gender inequalities.

Theme 2: Forms of gender (in)equality

In the context of the second theme, three sub-themes have been identified: perspectives of gender equality; challenges of external barriers; gendered internal barriers.

Women are increasingly entering traditionally coded 'male areas' and, with their business successes, are proving that leadership does not exclude women. Moreover, many companies are increasingly emphasising the importance of diversity, the share of women in leadership roles is increasing, and the promotion of gender equality policies is perceived as important. Some women leaders emphasise working in companies that move away from gender stereotypes and dominant gender norms (e.g. some companies in traditionally 'male industries' strive to include as many women as possible in their business; women are enabled to advance, etc.). The opening of space and the entry of women into traditional

'masculine' areas (e.g. management positions, etc.) (see Wharton, 2012) and the increasing visibility of gender equality issues indicate positive developments (Keohane, 2020); however, a number of crucial issues and challenges that women face in the workplace still remain invisible (e.g. the issue of a gender pay gap, various forms of gender-based abuse) or are only mentioned in passing.

In accordance with the ideas of gender reform feminism and gender resistance feminism (Kark & Buengeler, 2024), the following is evident: 1. the idea that women and men have equal abilities, which abolishes traditional beliefs about the fixed division of male and female domains (Wharton, 2012; Kramer, 2011); 2. positive gender identification that celebrates the importance of 'women's qualities' and skills. Despite positive developments in equality in leadership positions and positive gender identification that questions traditional gender narratives and affirms women's abilities, various forms of gender inequality and an insufficient number of women in top positions persists in work organisations (EIGE, 2016). Experiences and attitudes towards gender inequality are polarised. There are some women leaders who advocate a position of gender neutrality and emphasis on meritocratic principles; however, this position is based on the denial of gender divisions, generalisation of the individual approach in such a way that gender (in)equalities are interpreted solely based on personal experience, attitude, effort and commitment. From this position, gender inequalities are not viewed as a systemic problem but rather an individual problem whose effective solution depends on personal engagement, hard work and attitude. This approach perpetuates gender (and other social) inequalities. Clarke et al. (2024) highlight the importance of critically questioning the discourse on meritocracy, because by emphasising gender neutrality and individualisation, structures of gender inequality are negated and become invisible. Emphasising gender neutrality and meritocracy: 1. homogenises and generalises the experiences of women in business; 2. does not indicate the importance and necessity of structural and institutional changes towards gender diversity in top positions (McKinsey & Company, 2022; EIGE, 2016, p. 8).

Other women leaders, however, point to the existence of visible gender inequalities primarily in the persistence of gender stereotypes, prejudices, double standards and gender biases that favour men (e.g. men's resumes are assessed as more competent, the glass escalator phenomenon, women have to prove themselves more, men are tolerated in everyday business situations for things that women are criticised for because they represent deflection from the stereotypical gender image, etc.).

Some women leaders emphasised the importance of mentoring for women as a form of intergenerational transfer of knowledge and institutionalised support for women's advancement by the institution but also by other women. It is not uncommon for the literature to define mentorship as 'the missing link in female leadership' because through mentorship, women receive guidance and support in managing the 'complexities of career progression', develop their skills, network and empower themselves (Women's Resource Centre, s. a.). Based on the articles analysed, mentoring should be viewed in an intersectional method because it intertwines two important social categories: gender and age. In the context of women's relationships in the working environment there are, on the one hand, examples of supportive women's relationships without the experience of the Queen Bee syndrome (Polić & Holy, 2021), and on the other hand, a lack of healthy examples of assertive women

leaders, which points to the problems that women leaders face every day in trying to balance the 'schizophrenic situation' (Lagarde, 2000 cited in Medina-Vicent, 2015, p. 70) due to double standards regarding gender and attempts to manoeuvre between opposing gendered expectations:

> I think that women often do not have healthy women's examples and role models of assertiveness in organisations. Sometimes women want to succeed in a 'masculine' way and slip into aggression, which is particularly resented by women, and sometimes they cocoon themselves in the traditionally expected submissiveness and become passive (Maltarić-Dujnić cited in Orešković, 2024).

Internal barriers that prevent women from advancing are also highlighted. This is a series of generalised assumptions based on which systemic gender inequalities and power relations in the workplace are explained by women's personal shortcomings and insecurities, and in some cases the explanation is sought in essentialist appeals to 'nature' and 'natural innateness' (e.g. women are 'naturally' too responsible). According to some women leaders, internal barriers (see Watterston & Ehrich, 2024; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) are one explanation for why women are underrepresented in top positions, for example, women are represented as:

- more inclined to imposter syndrome
- unwilling to discuss their own promotion on their own initiative
- more inclined to fearing success
- more self-critical, over-responsible
- obsessed with productivity and unrealistic expectations
- being insecure in communication
- underestimating their abilities, etc.

This approach should be understood in the context of gender socialisation, internalisation of gendered restrictions, culture (not nature), working environment, and broader societal context. From a sociological and feminist perspective, the approach that explains persistent structural problems and asymmetric power relations with individual characteristics and shortcomings perpetuates gender inequalities and hinders the finding of quality institutional solutions (Medina-Vicent, 2015).

Theme 3: Work–life (im)balance

Issues of work–life (im)balance are evident in all the articles analysed, which indicates their relevance and urgency (EIGE, 2016; Geiger Zeman et al., 2024; Geiger Zeman et al., 2025). In the analysed articles work–life balance is defined as the right of every employee and as one of the fundamental values of a supportive corporate culture. In this context, work–life balance is related to mental health and self-care, because overwhelming and overworking lead to burnout.

In addition to gender inequality, women leaders in the earlier stages of their careers also experienced ageism, which manifested itself in their facing obstacles and a lack of opportunities for professional growth, as well as being exposed to pressure due to high expectations and the ambition to prove and advance. Many women leaders in the initial stages of their careers or in the stages of changing jobs invested a lot of effort and time, which resulted in sacrificing their personal life and blurring the line between work and private life.

The gendered dimension of work–life (im)balance is particularly highlighted, as indicated by feminist leadership perspectives (Batliwala, 2022). Namely, all women leaders pointed out that achieving a balance between business and private obligations and time management are the biggest challenges for women in top positions. Research results show that the (im)balance between work and life is a gendered issue (Geiger Zeman et al., 2024; Geiger Zeman et al., 2025; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2023). While some women have entered exclusive 'male space', their traditional gender roles and incumbent cultural expectations have not yet been redefined – women leaders define themselves with a series of roles, of which career roles are gender non-traditional, while marital, family and maternal roles remain a part of traditional gender expectations. This is precisely why work–life (im)balance represents efforts to balance the various roles that women simultaneously try to perform in excellent ways. Some women leaders highlight the great challenges of generic syncretism (Lagarde, 2000 cited in Medina-Vicent, 2015, p. 70), that is, contradictory cultural expectations (see Pullen & Vachhani, 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) – on the one hand, women are still positioned within the traditional space of the household, caregiving, family and private life in general; while on the other hand, in the domain of work the expectation is of maximum dedication to work, efficiency, productivity and excellence. Some women leaders also recall having dealt with guilt, self-doubt, and subsequent regret because in certain phases of their career/private life they prioritised work, i.e. over family obligations:

> It is more difficult for women to grow up because [...] we live in a time where women still have a lot of obligations. If they go on a trip, they must cook for a few days, iron, prepare the children [...] while this is not often the case with male colleagues (Smolić cited in Paušić, 2024).

Many women leaders are still struggling to find a formula for work–life balance because leadership responsibilities and the type of work they perform often make it difficult to draw a strict line between the two domains. Some of them accept work–life integration, while others prefer a clear separation between work and private life.

With work–life (im)balance issues being an important topic of much discussion in business circles, women leaders shared the strategies they themselves practice to achieve work–life balance, such as:

- time management techniques based on planning and careful organisation of weekly activities and responsibilities
- work flexibility and remote work
- sharing tasks and obligations
- redefining success and deconstructing the myth of the superwoman
- prioritising time with family during the weekend
- investing in personal growth and self-care

Most women leaders in the later stages of their careers have found a satisfactory formula for maintaining balance. Although women leaders emphasised: 1. the importance of career, business success, and the passion they feel for the work they do; 2. the importance of family, marital and parental roles, which also represent important dimensions of their identity. In the context of career development and work–life (im)balance, they particularly emphasised the support of their partners, as well as the sharing of joint family and parental responsibilities, despite which, the analyses show that women experienced work–life (im)balances due to lack of time, lack of or insufficient support from their employers, etc.

Although the dominant power structures are not questioned, the analysed narratives indicate the persistence of an organisational culture that requires employees in upper positions to be constantly available, to work overtime and resist flexible working hours. However, shifts in employee expectations and the opening of space for employer flexibility in matters of working time organisation, sensitivity to mental health, and employee needs in general are also indicated:

> People no longer intend to tolerate companies that treat them as profit-making machines rather than as individuals. 21st century employees demand to be understood – their desires, thoughts and potentials. You will have no more loyal employee than the one to whom you have provided a quality private life and a balance between work and private life (Dusper Sušić cited in Women in Adria, 2024).

Theme 4: Motherhood

Motherhood is an important topic that all the women leaders who had children talked about. The experiences of motherhood represented point toward a research-interesting ambivalence and a dynamic tension: between on the one hand, motherhood as a limitation and a factor that generates professional/career challenges; but on the other hand, as a valuable, transformative experience that brings maturation and empowerment, which in turn positively affects a person's career. For many women leaders, motherhood was an experience that presented a challenge to them in their own careers in creating a new schedule and balancing new personal obligations, which confirms the results of previous studies that have highlighted the differences between the career paths of women and men (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024). Some women leaders have positive experiences in the work environment because they progressed during maternity leave and had employer support after returning to work, while others made new (un)satisfactory career choices due to motherhood and changed employers in order to find a job in a healthy work environment that ensured advancement and also supported motherhood. Integrating motherhood into career aspirations was a challenge for many and a source of motivation in finding new strategies to balance personal work and life fulfilment. In this context, the importance of partner support and an equal sharing of parental tasks and duties was particularly emphasised. The experience of motherhood has highlighted the challenges faced by working mothers: 1. financial penalties for pregnant entrepreneurs and unjust maternity benefits; 2. lack of employer support; 3. discrimination against women by

employers due to pregnancy and maternity leave; 4. women being overburdened with work and family obligations; 5. cultural gender expectations rooted in patriarchal tradition that attribute parental responsibilities exclusively to women:

> I have heard many times: 'You are a mother, your place is at home with your children.' Many times, I have been 'rebuked' for leaving sick children at home with their father, instead of staying home with them. Yes, I am a mother, and I am always there for my children, but I also have a wonderful husband who is equally dedicated to our children and participates in every aspect of their lives (Jelić cited in Povijač, 2024).

Issues of balancing maternal and business obligations are crucial for achieving gender equality in the sphere of work and leadership. Based on the analysis of the articles, it is evident that (un)realised motherhood can be a source of discrimination against women by employers (EIGE, 2016). The articles analysed showed that women leaders describe their personal experiences of balancing motherhood and career as their greatest challenges. This shows that neither the challenges of gender reform feminism, gender resistance feminism, nor the ideals of feminist leadership have yet been fully realised in practice (Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Batliwala, 2022).

Conclusion

The feminist perspective enables the illumination of power structures and forms of inequality that still persist and thwart/impede women on successful leadership career paths. The *Women in Adria* portal makes a valuable contribution to the empowerment of women in the business sphere in the entrepreneurial, public and corporate sectors by educating, empowering and informing them about women's rights issues and gender inequality. The narratives of women leaders who shared their experiences and advice with other women in the articles analysed understand their own leadership experiences, as well as the issues of women and leadership in general in terms of gender neutrality and meritocracy, gender reform feminism and gender resistance feminism; however, most of the relevant topics dealt with by gender rebellion feminism have remained invisible, while gender revolution feminism is a topic that will most likely be added to the repertoire of new generations of women leaders.

Leadership is represented through a distance from traditional male-centred leadership and essentialist ideas about born leaders; and that women leaders are open to new models of leadership that affirm diversity, teamwork, mentoring and age-friendly approaches. As a counterweight to traditional heroic leadership, the importance of specific women's leadership is emphasised, which is observed in places through a romanticised essentialist lens. This approach provokes ambivalence because, on the one hand, it gives importance and value to women's leadership experiences, and on the other hand, it perpetuates traditional gender divisions/stereotypes and dominant power structures. Formerly exclusively 'male spaces' are opening up to women, but gender gaps still exist. Through the mediated narratives women leaders point out positive moves towards gender equality and positive gender identification; however, the persistence of tendencies to deny the importance of gender issues and generalise

individual approaches that do not question gendered hierarchies is evident. In addition to gender-neutral approaches, important contributions should be emphasised in addressing gender inequalities based on gender stereotypes, double gender standards, gender biases and contradictory expectations (traditional gender expectations versus career demands) (see Pullen & Vachhani, 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Medina-Vicent, 2015). In addition to external barriers, internal barriers based on individual characteristics or gendered generalisations, some of which are interpreted in essentialist categories, were also emphasised in the narratives analysed. This maintains gender stereotypes and hinders actions to find institutional solutions and structural changes. The research is interesting in its findings on the ambivalent position of motherhood, which is simultaneously interpreted as a career obstacle but also a transformative experience that contributes to personal fulfilment and encourages career success.

The thematic analysis confirms the knowledge from earlier studies about: 1. the double standards that shape the career paths of female or male leaders; 2. the daily challenges of balancing work and life/career and private life being further intensified by motherhood, which affects the career of a woman in a leading position in a variety of ways; 3. that mentoring is important; and 4. of the effects of perpetuating the idea of meritocracy and emphasising individual efforts in achieving career goals. Given that this is the first analysis of media representations of the experiences of female leaders in Croatia, it is important to point out that even in the post-socialist context characterised by gender segregation of the labour market and gendered leadership structures, specific discourses and narratives are repeated. Despite the persistence of male-dominated structures and traditional gender expectations in media representations, the insistence on meritocracy, personal engagement, individual responsibility and gender neutrality is evident. While intersectionality is an important perspective in the analysis, it is insufficiently visible. Apart from gender and age, other relevant social categories (for example, ethnicity, non-normative gender identity, etc.) are not visible in the texts analysed.

The authors are aware of the limitations of the study: 1. the focus of the analysis is on media-represented and edited narratives published on a platform that has a clearly articulated orientation and focus on empowerment, success and support. In this sense, the narratives are selected and refined, which potentially has an impact on the insufficient articulation of a more clearly critical position; 2. the sample is limited to articles published during 2024, which, on the one hand, ensures the recency of the leadership narratives, and on the other hand, lacks analytical insight into earlier representations and discursive constructions of female leadership. These limitations represent guidelines for future research into gendered leadership experiences, which, in addition to analyses of media representations, should certainly include empirical material obtained through qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Although the analysis is limited to media representations of the experiences of women leaders and their professional paths on a specialised online business platform, the findings of the research show the ways in which women leadership identities are constructed narratively, and which meanings are produced in the representation of leadership in women-oriented business media. Within a socio-cultural context that still supports gender differences and reinforces limiting gender expectations, the experiences of women leaders signal the use of narrative strategies for presenting and interpreting their own business success. There is an

evident tension between neutralising structural gender inequalities and emphasising the importance of individual efforts, which supports the idea of meritocracy.

The findings of the analysis suggest directions for future debates and organisational policies focused on formalising supportive forms of mentoring, promoting gender equality, well-being as a value, ensuring job satisfaction of employees in all hierarchical positions, flexibility in work methods, support in balancing career and life. In this context, it is important to highlight the potential for the transfer of academic knowledge into organisational spaces, whereby feminist models of leadership with the values of democracy, respect for diversity, rotating responsibility, and deconstruction of the dominant structures of gendered power can create new spaces of freedom, inclusiveness and gender equality.

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