

Leadership, Aspirations and Coping Mechanisms of Female Leaders

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Abstract

Female leadership is crucial for diverse and balanced economic sectors, and understanding the factors that influence women's leadership aspirations is essential for fostering their development. But despite increasing awareness, there remains a significant gender disparity in leadership roles across public, private, and regulatory sectors. Therefore, this study explored the aspirations of female leaders and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting these aspirations. Using a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire for data triangulation, alongside the grounded theory method to enhance both internal and external validity, we found that early leadership behaviors and recognition by supervisors are key indicators of leadership aspiration development. Intrinsic motivations, such as decision-making and autonomy, are more valued than extrinsic factors like power or status. Notably, the aspiration to “engage in work that positively influences people and the community” emerged as particularly significant. Numerous coping mechanisms were identified, with a strong emphasis on those of an intrinsic nature, categorized into 33 distinct groups. However, the only category exceeding 50% representation was extrinsic, specifically “support from family members”. The study offers practical implications for education and human resources management in supporting female leadership development. Proposed initiatives include programs to cultivate leadership identities in girls and young women, as well as efforts targeted at parents to dispel misconceptions about leadership and raise awareness of the importance of support and encouragement. This research is pioneering in its exploration of women's aspirations and coping mechanisms in leadership across public, private, and regulatory sectors.

Keywords: women, leadership, aspirations, coping mechanisms

1. Introduction

The 2022 World Economic Forum report anticipates that, if conditions persist as they are, it will take 155 years to resolve gender inequality in political power, 151 years in the areas of participation and economic opportunities, and 22 years in the educational field. In the European context, the Gender Diversity Index report (European Women on Boards, 2021) indicates that 30% of women hold leadership positions, 35% are board members in companies, 19% occupy executive roles, and 9% preside over councils or commissions. These ratios are slightly higher than the underrepresentation reported in Latin American and Caribbean countries (7%) and the Arab states (8%) by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017).

The deficit in women's aspirations has been pinpointed as the primary cause for the imparity in leadership positions globally, favoring men over women (Hartman & Barber, 2020; Netchaeva, Sheppard, & Balushkina, 2022). This gender contrast in aspirations seems intrinsically linked to the perception that younger women favor less demanding, more routine jobs, influenced by increased risk aversion and expected gender discrimination (Deschacht, De Pauw, & Baert, 2017). Moreover, it manifests before individuals graduate from college and venture into the workforce (Powell & Butterfield, 2022; Netchaeva et al., 2022).

This exploratory research studies the topic through the lens and experience of female leaders across the public, private, and economic regulatory sectors, who are well-versed in the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the aspirations driving female leadership. To accomplish this, qualitative methods were utilized, including semi-structured interviews with 33 women holding middle to senior management positions. This included a non-probabilistic, purposeful, and contrasting sample and a questionnaire for data triangulation. Additionally, a grounded theory approach was employed for enhanced internal and external validity (Nobre, et al., 2017).

This manuscript is organized into four sections. The first section addresses the literature review, while the second presents the methods and sample. The results and discussion are disclosed in the third section, and the fourth section offers the conclusions.

2. Literature Review

This research draws lessons from various theories such as the coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which centers on strategies used by individuals to handle stress and adversity. This theory highlights cognitive and behavioral alterations. Concurrently, the locus of control theory by Rotter (1966) discusses how individuals perceive the sources of their achievements and failures, differentiating between internal and external loci of control. Both the coping and the locus of control theories are vital for understanding how individuals face challenges and stress, influencing their leadership effectiveness and personal resilience, which varies based on culture and context (Jogulu & Franken, 2023).

More insight into leadership dynamics is provided by McClelland's theory of achievement (McClelland, 1961, 1985; McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982), the goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). McClelland's framework organizes the need for achievement, affiliation, and power. Each plays a significant role in leadership behaviors and motivations. Locke and Latham's goal-setting theory highlights the significance of specific, challenging goals in enhancing performance through aspects such as direction and persistence. The role congruity theory underscores the influence of gender stereotypes on leadership perceptions. In this context, women often encounter bias due to the perceived mismatch between their gender and leadership roles. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of the motivational, cognitive, and social factors that determine leadership effectiveness and development.

2.1 Women Leadership Aspirations

Women's most profound aspirations often center around purpose and calling. Aspirations for status, increased salary, or vocational success may be present, but a spiritual or transcendent call often defines their purpose (Longman, 2021). This call extends to the intention of making a positive impact, helping others, and fostering personal development and growth (Nakitende, 2019). Motivating factors include receiving feedback on talents and skills (Longman, 2021), family and organizational support (Offermann, Thomas, Lanzo, & Smith, 2020; O'Brien & Apostolopoulos, 2023), and exposure to counter-stereotypes and feminism (Leicht, Gocłowska, Van Breen, de Lemus, & Randsley de Moura, 2017). These perspectives can be reinforced within female networks (Papafilippou, Durbin, & Conley, 2022). Influential relationships during childhood and youth significantly contribute to elite career success (Dixon et al., 2023; Jones-Morales & Konrad, 2018).

Women's leadership aspirations can be attributed to three analytical components: a) the perceived characteristics of the leader, including personality traits, intelligence, and competence; b) perceptions of self-efficacy; and c) a cost-benefit assessment of leadership (Singer, 1989).

Perceived Characteristics of the Leader: Stereotypes reflect our internalized social perceptions of the attributes (agentic) considered appropriate for effective leadership and senior positions. These are typically associated with men and include rationality, assertiveness, independence, dominance, power, and career orientation (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Generally, women are more likely to secure high leadership positions via internal promotion rather than external hiring (Lyness & Judiesch, 1999). This could potentially be due to the availability of privileged internal information on performance, which may render sex stereotypes less influential (Deschacht et al., 2017).

Perceptions of Self-Efficacy: Men and older managers often overestimate their leadership effectiveness, whereas, women seem to assess their capabilities more realistically (Vecchio & Anderson, 2009). Consequently, men tend to undertake initiatives to further their careers, sometimes without the requisite knowledge or experience. On the other hand, women prefer to feel confident in their competency before seeking professional opportunities (Hartman & Barber, 2020). This issue is exacerbated by diminished self-confidence and worries about patriarchal structures, affecting their perceived access to leadership roles (Shinbrot, Wilkins, Gretzel, & Bowser, 2019).

Cost-Benefit Assessment of Leadership: Women are less likely to aspire to leadership roles if they associate them with negative aspects, including role conflict, work-life balance, and organizational factors (Ellinas, Fouad, & Byars-Winston, 2018). If leadership positions seem accessible and attractive, women will desire them; otherwise, they may rationally decide to abstain from these aspirations. The difference in ambition between genders is not due to inherent characteristics or motherhood, but to daily experiences shaped by the prevailing organizational culture (Abouzahr, Krentz, Taplett, Tracey, & Tsusaka, 2017). Women are regarded as architects of their careers, making choices to balance security and financial prosperity with the ambition to impact their organizations positively (Shapiro, Ingols, O'Neill, & Blake-Beard, 2009).

3. Methods

To comprehend the perceptions of women executives regarding aspirations, coping mechanisms, and potential differences between public, private, and regulatory economic sectors, a qualitative method was chosen. This approach has advantages including the exploration of less-studied topics that expand the theoretical domain (Rego, Pina, & Meyer Jr, 2018), and enables a deeper insight (Rahman, 2017). By selecting women from these three sectors, the study captures a broad range of career paths, reducing potential biases in the analysis.

The sample chosen was non-probabilistic, purposeful, and contrasting, predominantly utilizing the snowball methodology, along with email, due to the challenges of accessing women in leadership positions across the three economic sectors. The success of this approach was dependent on referral chains (Nobre et al., 2017; Vinuto, 2014). For the sake of comparability, we included middle and senior managers in the recruitment process.

In compliance with confidentiality and the snowballing process, an email was sent by a senior leader in the public administration sector to various public entities. The aim was to encourage the participation of women leaders at the intermediate and top levels of management and administration. This yielded the participation of 12 individuals. An additional 18 were procured from the private sector after an email was sent to two networks of executive women. Three participants from the regulatory sector were secured directly via email, and indirectly through referrals.

The sample comprised 33 participants (Table 1). For the first two categories, we aimed to recruit intermediate and senior managers at the first and second levels. In the private sector, we sought to include managers, executives, and/or women serving on boards of directors or committees. Additional selection criteria included experience, given the likelihood of acquiring more data about the motivations for pursuing and/or accepting leadership roles and factors motivating respondents to persevere amidst challenges and difficulties in advancing and maintaining leadership positions. Furthermore, age was considered to evaluate potential generational differences in perception.

Table 1. Participant demographic data

		Sector		
		Priv.	Publ.	Reg.
No.		18	12	3
%		55	36	8
Level leadership position	M1	6	2	0
	M2	7	4	0
	S1	4	3	1
	S2	1	3	2
Leading experience (years)	>10	9	5	3
	10 to 20	7	1	0
	≤ 20	2	6	0
Age group	> 40	7	0	0
	40 to 49	9	5	1
	≤ 50	2	7	2
Academic qualifications	Grad.	3	2	2
	MD.	8	2	1
	Ph.D.	7	8	0
No. Children	0	6	4	0
	1 to 2	9	8	3
	≤ 3	3	0	0
Marital status	Married	8	5	3
	Union	2	1	0
	Sing.	8	6	0

Notes. M - Middle Level; S - Senior Level; Priv. - Private; Publ. - Public; Reg. - Regulatory.

Aiming to ensure extensive diversity, the public sector sample included participants from areas such as the Presidency, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Culture, Territorial Cohesion, Infrastructure, and Parliamentary Issues.

Conversely, the private sector comprised participants from Multimedia, Telecommunications, Asset Management, Food Industry, Civil and Mechanical Metalworking Industry, Automotive Glass, Legal, Insurance, and Consulting. The regulatory sector included three leaders from three different activity areas. Due to a limited universe of 11 entities, these participants will not be identified to maintain anonymity.

Primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews, guided by a script (appendix A), that provided structured guidance while maintaining flexibility to incorporate relevant points as they emerged (Amado, 2017). This data collection approach was further supplemented by a questionnaire focusing on the participants' career objectives and leadership aspirations, aiming to leverage complementary triangulation. The main goal of this multi-faceted approach was to assess and compare the participants' most highlighted career and leadership aspirations with the statements they made during interviews and to gauge the extent of their alignment with scientific literature norms. Data collection ceased when the research reached theoretical saturation (McDonald & Gao, 2019).

The questionnaire (Table 2) includes sociodemographic data and an adapted table featuring the 16 career objectives identified by Shapiro et al. (2009), along with seven leadership aspirations identified by Singer (1991) and two by Longman (2021), all on a quantitative scale of increasing importance (4 points).

Table 2. Career objectives/leadership aspirations set

No. Obj.	Career goals and leadership aspirations	Authors
1	Carry out work that positively impacts people and the community	Shapiro <i>et al.</i> (2009)
2	Doing work that I'm passionate about	
3	Be a role model for other people	
4	Be intellectually challenged	Singer (1991); Shapiro <i>et al.</i> (2009)
5	Develop my skills and knowledge	
6	Working with people I like	
7	Receive recognition for my contribution	Shapiro <i>et al.</i> (2009)
8	Having time to reconcile personal relationships	
9	Having time to combine other interests (hobbies, etc.)	
10	Pay attention to geographic location when making career decisions	
11	Being able to reconcile personal and family life, in order to have children	
12	Increase status through progression to a prestigious position	Singer (1991); Shapiro <i>et al.</i> (2009)
13	Have the opportunity to contact people of high status	
14	Gain visibility and public recognition	
15	Progress to top leadership positions	Singer (1991)
16	Ascend to positions of power and authority	
17	Ascend to positions that allow you to reward or punish subordinates	
18	Ascend to positions that influence decision-making	Singer (1991)
19	Earn the highest salary as a measure of my success	
20	Have the opportunity to assume administrative responsibilities	
21	Have the opportunity to fulfill personal aspirations	Singer (1991)
22	Have the opportunity to exercise my own leadership style	
23	Not having to report to superiors	
24	Having the opportunity to follow my calling	Longman (2021)
25	Have the opportunity to fulfill a purpose	

Source. Adapted from Singer (1991); Shapiro et al., 2009; Longman (2021).

To ensure the internal (confidence level) and external (transferability) validity of the study, aside from data triangulation, the collected data was meticulously detailed. This approach allowed for the results to accurately represent the reality under study and determine if they can be transferred to new contexts (Nobre et al., 2017). The chosen approach for achieving theoretical saturation of the identified categories and the necessary sample sizes was grounded theory.

The interviews each lasted an average of one hour, after which they were transcribed and analyzed. Initially, a thorough reading was done to get a broad understanding of the responses. Irrelevant personal details that might compromise participant anonymity were then editorially removed from the interviews. Afterward, using Bengtsson's (2016) approach, the transcripts were subjected to a content analysis during the second phase. The coding logic is illustrated in appendix B.

4. Results and Discussion

The interviews were conducted both in-person, remotely (via Teams), and over the cellphone. Participants unanimously granted authorization for audio recording, after which a questionnaire was presented to each participant upon completion of their interview. Those completing the form in-person handed their response directly to the interviewer, while those participating remotely returned their questionnaire via email. Of the 36 interviews conducted, three were omitted from consideration due to the non-return of their questionnaires. These included two from public sector participants and one from a private sector participant. Content analysis of the interviews, executed as per the methods outlined by Bengtsson (2016), revealed three central themes: leadership, aspirations, and coping mechanisms as discussed by Amado (2017).

4.1 Content Analysis: Thematic Group - Leadership

This thematic group comprises four themes: 'family context and childhood stimulation', 'perceptions regarding the presence or absence of leadership skills', 'beliefs and actions related to career and career planning', and 'procedures for procuring leadership positions'. These have been broken down into 11 subthemes and 24 categories, as outlined in Table 3.

From Table 3, it can be seen that 15% of participants acknowledged possessing leadership characteristics or traits ('self-identified leadership'), while 27% mentioned the contrary ('non-self-identified leadership'). This was particularly evident among public respondents, 50% of whom demonstrated support for the notion discussed by certain authors (Hartman & Barber, 2020; Netchaeva et al., 2022) that there is a lack of aspirations for leadership positions among women.

However, there seems to be an indirect admission of leadership profile (39%) when respondents assert that their invitations to leadership positions were due to superiors recognizing necessary leadership traits in them ('external identification'). This was especially observed among public sector participants (67%). These perceptions may have arisen from an implicit association between the notion of leadership and the autocratic style from which respondents distanced themselves, or possibly a culturally ingrained modesty. Exhibiting behaviors and attributes typically socially associated with men, such as ambition, protagonism, and leadership, may be seen as potentially discriminatory. One participant's observation is telling: '*my office colleague told me, you are very ambitious (...). However, the tone was critical*' (Interview ID12). This observation aligns with the role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Although only a few reported possessing leadership traits, 33% indicated they had exhibited leadership behaviors such as initiative, organizational skills, or academic leadership roles during their youth ("early behaviors"). Meanwhile, 42% mentioned self-confidence, stating that it strengthened with increased experience and training (Hartman & Barber, 2020). This contradicts the argument presented by Netchaeva et al. (2022), which suggested that women's self-confidence diminishes as they age due to increasing self-stereotyping.

Regarding the topic of 'beliefs and behavior regarding career and career planning', only one participant (who worked privately) mentioned that her professional career was the result of planning. This statement reveals an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966). In each sector, 33% were focused on their current project, and 18% pointed to an undecided future. Of the responses, two participants expressed negative beliefs about (un)predictability and (a lack of) control over implementing their career plans. This led to the avoidance of establishing and committing to long-term objectives and goals. Interestingly, most participants (67%) revealed that the majority of leadership positions were obtained by invitation from the same entity where they were working. This confirms Lyness and Judiesch's (1999) findings that internal promotion is the most likely path for women to secure high leadership positions, as opposed to external hiring. This makes gender stereotypes, as long maintained by Eagly and Karau (2002) and publicized by the ILO (2015), appear less important in recruitment (Deschacht et al., 2017).

Table 3. Thematic group of leadership - categories frequency table

Themes	Subthemes	Categories	PRIV.		PUBL.		REG.		TOTAL		
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Family context and childhood stimulation	Family encouragement/support	Family encouragement/support	5	28	2	17	1	33	8	24	
		Early behaviors	7	39	4	33	0	0	11	33	
		Self-identified leadership	3	17	2	17	0	0	5	15	
Perceptions about the (in)existence of leadership skills	Self-identification of leadership skills	Non-self-identified leadership	2	11	6	50	1	33	9	27	
		Self confidence	8	44	5	42	1	33	14	42	
		Overcoming competency deficit	3	17	1	8	1	33	5	15	
	Identification of leadership skills by third parties	External identification	4	22	8	67	1	33	13	39	
		Informal leadership	3	17	5	42	0	0	8	24	
	Career planning beliefs	Planning - negative belief	1	6	0	0	1	33	2	6	
		Career planning behaviors	Career planning	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3
			No career planning	5	28	5	42	2	67	12	36
	Beliefs and behaviors regarding career and career planning	Conduct towards professional opportunities	Opportunities seized	-	1	6	0	0	0	1	3
			Opportunities self-limitation	-	1	6	3	25	1	33	5
Cost-benefit analysis			3	17	3	25	1	33	7	21	
Protean decisions			9	50	8	67	1	33	18	55	
Quota			0	0	0	0	1	33	1	3	
To be decided			3	0	2	17	1	33	6	18	
Future - expand the business			2	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	
Professional predictions		Focus on current project	6	0	4	33	1	33	11	33	
		Return to original career	0	0	1	8	1	33	2	6	
		Application and invitation	1	0	3	25	1	33	5	15	
Procedures for obtaining leadership positions	by application	0	0	1	8	1	33	2	6		
	by invitation	13	0	7	58	2	67	22	67		
	by election	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3		

Notes. Priv. - Private; Publ. - Public; Reg. - Regulatory.

Moreover, careers are characteristically non-linear and are often influenced by ‘protean’ decisions (55%) (Shapiro et al., 2009). Such decisions could mean postponing management or executive positions, regressing in position level, or returning to the original career. This figure rose to 76% when responses from the ‘cost-benefit analysis’ category were included, assuming that both occur within a temporal continuum. This reflects what some authors (Singer, 1989; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019; Abouzahr et al., 2017) have reported, especially when addressing family demands (Shinbrot et al., 2019).

A pertinent point to note is that, although only eight participants (24%) mentioned some type of family support or encouragement during their childhood and/or adolescence, seven of them held senior leadership positions. Additionally, one participant even suggested adding a career objective to the questionnaire - ‘to achieve something that would make my parents proud’. This suggestion corresponds with other research (Dixon et al., 2023; Jones-Morales & Konrad, 2018).

4.2 Content Analysis: Thematic Group - Aspirations

The thematic group of aspirations consists of two themes - 'set of intrinsic aspirations' and 'set of extrinsic aspirations' based on the typologies presented by Kasser and Ryan (1996). Each theme integrates two subthemes, further disaggregated into categories. The expressed aspirations were identified and illustrated in Table 4 using a career objectives/leadership aspirations questionnaire. From this data, a 'top 5' list of the most commonly expressed goals/aspirations and a 'top 4' list of the least common goals/aspirations were derived.

Table 4 illustrates that the categories of aspirations with higher scores are predominantly intrinsic, markedly overshadowing extrinsic ones, primarily from the 'achievement-oriented' subtheme (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). Four out of seven categories garnered responses exceeding 25%, specifically: 'new challenges' (48%), 'learning' (33%), 'contributing to the organization' (27%), and 'doing what one likes' (27%). The subtheme 'aspirations of a relational/affiliation nature' was largely overlooked, except for the category 'helping people', which garnered emphasis solely from private sector respondents. Among the set of extrinsic aspirations, two categories are noteworthy: the focus on 'career' from the 'other extrinsic aspirations' subtheme and 'deficit of leadership aspirations' from the 'power needs' subtheme (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982).

Table 4. Thematic group of aspirations - categories frequency table

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	CATEGORIES	PRIV.		PUBL.		REG.		TOTAL	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Set of intrinsic aspirations	Achievement-oriented	New challenges	5	28	8	67	3	100	16	48
		Contribute to the country	0	0	0	0	2	67	2	6
		Contribute to the organization	3	17	6	50	0	0	9	27
		To create	4	22	3	25	1	33	8	24
		Learning	5	28	5	42	1	33	11	33
		Identification (with work)	3	17	1	8	0	0	4	12
		Do what one likes	7	39	1	8	1	33	9	27
	Aspirations of a relational/affiliation nature	Helping people	4	22	1	8	0	0	5	15
		Develop people	7	39	0	0	0	0	7	21
		Motivate people	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3
		Share knowledge	3	17	1	8	0	0	4	12
		Work as a team	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3
		Remuneration	2	11	3	25	0	0	5	15
		Other extrinsic aspirations	Stability	1	6	1	8	0	0	2
Set of extrinsic aspirations	Power Needs (McClelland)	Projets	0	0	2	17	1	33	3	9
		Career	9	50	3	25	3	100	15	45
		Deficit of leadership aspirations	4	22	5	42	3	100	12	36
	Achievement-oriented	Achieve goals	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6
		To manage	2	11	0	0	0	0	2	6
		To Lead	4	22	2	17	0	0	6	18
		Decision-making power	1	6	3	25	1	33	5	15
		Make a difference	2	11	2	17	0	0	4	12
		Ambition	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3
		Visibility	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3
Own business	4	22	0	0	0	0	4	12		

Notes. Priv. - Private; Publ. - Public; Reg. - Regulatory.

In addition to the findings from content analysis, the questionnaires on 25 career objectives and leadership aspirations (table 1), where leaders ranked their career and leadership goals, allowed for the identification of the five highest and four lowest scores.

Regarding the 'top 5' in descending order, objective 1 - 'perform work that positively impacts people and the community', gathered almost complete consensus, from 32 of 33 participants (97%). In second position was objective 4 - 'being intellectually challenged' with 82% of respondents, followed by objective 5 - 'developing my skills and knowledge' with 73%. In the fourth position is objective 2 - 'doing a job that I am passionate about'

with 70%, and with the same percentage of 70% objective 25 - 'having the opportunity to fulfill a purpose'. The leaders from the private and public sectors selected the same options of the 'top 5', but the ones from the regulatory sector highlighted two different ones, namely, objective 11 - 'being able to reconcile personal and family life, to have children' (100%), and objective 18 - 'ascend to positions that allow decision-making' (100%).

Regarding the career objectives and leadership aspirations that scored the lowest, these were objective 17 - 'ascend to positions that allow you to reward or punish subordinates' (87%), objective 13 - 'have the opportunity to meet people of high status' (55%), objective 12 - 'enhance status through advancement to a prestigious position' (41%), and objective 20 - 'have the opportunity to undertake administrative responsibilities' (36%). Leaders from both the private and public sectors showed considerable similarity in their responses, emphasizing three out of the top four options. Conversely, those from the regulatory sector notably highlighted only two of these objectives.

Considering the two categories of aspirations characterized by authors Kasser and Ryan (1996), and the data from the content analysis of the interviews, it was discovered that participants placed more importance on intrinsic aspirations geared towards achievement. These included: 'new challenges', 'learning', 'contributing to the organization', and 'doing what one likes'. Some differences were noted, such as in the regulatory (100%) and public sectors (67%), both of which placed the most emphasis on the importance of 'new challenges'. The regulatory sector is unique in its focus on 'contributing to the country'; whereas 'contributing to the organization' was noted by 50% of public sector participants, but largely undervalued by other sectors. Meanwhile, the private sector most prominently identified with the aspiration of 'doing what one likes' (39%), and was the only sector to emphasize the aspiration of 'developing people' (39%).

Similarly, the results from the 'career objectives and leadership aspirations' questionnaire emphasized intrinsic aspirations over extrinsic ones. The most chosen career objective and leadership aspiration was 'performing work that positively impacts people and the community' (objective 1). However, interview data revealed that only the private sector highlighted the 'developing people' category, contradicting the ideas presented by Nakitende (2019). Additionally, only participants from the regulatory sector identified with the category, 'contribute to the country'.

In the top five subsets of the questionnaire, Objective 1 was succeeded by 'being intellectually challenged' (Objective 4), congruent with the interview category 'new challenges'. This was followed by 'developing my skills and knowledge' (Objective 5), which highlights the importance of feeling competent for the role and aligns with the 'learning' category. This is consistent with the category suggested by Hartman and Barber (2020). Next, 'performing work that I am passionate about' (Objective 2) was paralleled to the category 'doing what one likes', reinforcing the views of Shapiro et al. (2009). Finally, 'having the opportunity to serve a purpose' (Objective 25) was highlighted, an idea noted by Longman (2021).

Regarding extrinsic aspirations, the category which garnered the most agreement through content analysis (Table 4) was the aspiration to progress in one's 'career'. This was especially noted by regulatory (100%) and private (50%) sectors. However, 'power needs', as classified by McClelland and Boyatzis (1982), were largely disregarded. All regulatory participants and 42% from the public sector cited a 'deficit of leadership aspirations', stating they never harbored a desire to lead. Only one participant from the public sector expressed having 'ambition', and one from the private sector confessed to always wanting 'visibility'. These perspectives align with previous findings (Singer, 1991; Shapiro et al., 2009). However, a portion of participants, comprising 33% regulatory and 25% public, placed a high value on 'decision-making power', or the autonomy that higher-level positions offer.

These results are consistent with the four least scored objectives/aspirations found in the questionnaire, all of which are extrinsic. These include 'ascending to positions that allow for the reward or punishment of subordinates', 'having the opportunity to connect with high-status individuals', 'advancing status through progression to a prestigious position', and 'the opportunity to assume administrative responsibilities'.

The collected data did not fully align with the leadership profile proposed by the authors of the Achievement Needs Theory (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982). This theory emphasizes high motivation for achievement, low affiliation, and moderate-to-high power needs - however, the data revealed high motivation for achievement, moderate affiliation, and low power needs (Table 4). Moreover, the questionnaire data indicated consistent responses between the private and public sectors. This consistency was prominent in the top 5 highest-scoring respondents (Figure 1) and the top 4 lowest-scoring ones (Figure 2), with a higher disparity observed within the regulatory sector.

In summary, intrinsic aspirations predominated, both in the content analysis of the interviews and in the questionnaire, showing considerable consistency between the two instruments. Out of the most frequently selected objectives/aspirations in the questionnaire, three were comparable to the most underlined categories from the interviews (Table 4), pertaining to challenges, learning, and passion for work. However, Objective 1, 'perform

work that positively impacts people and the community’, only partially matched, and there was no match for Objective 25, ‘having the opportunity to serve a purpose’. The lack of correspondence to what was spontaneously mentioned in the interviews can be attributed to the Role Congruence Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002, 2007). Since the respondents are highly educated professional women, the list serves as a facilitator for them to position themselves in a way they anticipate to be socially or scientifically aligned with female gender attributes. This is in line with some of the difficulties highlighted by Ma, Seidl, & McNulty, (2021), including the tendency to mirror management theories and manage impressions during interviews.

4.3 Content Analysis: Thematic Group - Coping Mechanisms

Numerous coping mechanisms were identified, particularly of an intrinsic nature, represented in 33 categories. However, the only category that had a percentage higher than 50% was extrinsic - ‘support - family members’ (55%). Out of the four categories scoring above 25%, two were intrinsic - ‘resilience’ (48%) and ‘persistence’ (33%) - and the other two were extrinsic, specifically ‘training’ (48%) and ‘recognition’ (27%). Conversely, in the categories within the subthemes ‘communication skills’ and ‘relational and interaction skills’, there were fewer responses, ranging from 0 to 2 across the three sectors (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. Thematic group of intrinsic coping mechanisms - categories frequency table

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	CATEGORIES	PRIV.		PUBL.		REG.		TOTAL		
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Set of intrinsic coping mechanisms	Characteristics of Perseverance	Self-discipline	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3	
		Self motivation	1	6	2	17	0	0	3	9	
		Determination	3	17	0	0	0	0	3	9	
		Persistence	3	17	7	58	1	33	11	33	
		Resilience	9	50	4	33	3	100	16	48	
	Characteristics of Positivity	Good mood	1	6	0	0	1	33	2	6	
		Optimism	4	22	0	0	1	33	5	15	
		Trait - energetic	2	11	2	17	1	33	5	15	
		Assertiveness	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3	
	Communication skills	Dialogue	1	6	1	8	0	0	2	6	
		Diplomacy	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6	
		Listening	1	6	1	8	0	0	2	6	
		Oratory	1	6	1	8	0	0	2	6	
		Conflict management	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6	
	Set of Management intrinsic coping mechanisms	Time management	2	11	2	17	0	0	4	12	
		Negotiation	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3	
		Organize	3	17	3	25	0	0	6	18	
		Perfectionism	2	11	1	8	1	33	4	12	
		Pragmatism	2	11	0	0	0	0	2	6	
		Guidance skills	Focus on objective/goal	5	28	3	25	0	0	8	24
			Focus on (re)solution	2	11	1	8	1	33	4	12
		Relational and interaction skills	Patience	1	6	2	17	1	33	4	12
			Competence - relational	1	6	1	8	0	0	2	6
			Team spirit	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3
	Adaptation		2	11	0	0	0	0	2	6	
	Behaviors when facing ambiguity and risk perception	Common sense	1	6	1	8	0	0	2	6	
		Balance	1	6	1	8	1	33	3	9	
		Flexibility	1	6	0	0	0	0	1	3	
		Uncertainty management	3	17	3	25	0	0	6	18	
		Intuition	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3	
	Professional value of commitment	Proactivity	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6	
		Commitment to the entity	3	17	4	33	1	33	8	24	
		Commitment to people	4	22	1	8	1	33	6	18	

Notes. Priv. - Private; Publ. - Public; Reg. - Regulatory.

Respondents from the private sector displayed the highest percentage of psychological capital (Ferreira, Potgieter, & Coetzee, 2021). This value was achieved by adding the percentages of the corresponding categories: ‘good mood’, ‘optimism’, and ‘energetic traits’ under the subtheme ‘characteristics of positivity’ (Table 5).

Concerning the theme related to the ‘set of extrinsic coping mechanisms’, the categories ‘support - family’ (Offermann, et al., 2020; O’Brien, & Apostolopoulos, 2023) and ‘training’ are notable. This is in line with the demographic data from the questionnaire, revealing that 76% of participants held a master’s or doctorate degree (Table 6).

The acquired data includes the following: i) 33% of respondents from both the public and regulatory sectors reported having no ‘family constraints’, meaning they had no dependents, either ascending or descending, or their children were adults; ii) over 25% of participants from all sectors value ‘recognition’ (Longman, 2021); and iii) the private sector has the most extensive support network. Besides the previously mentioned ‘family support’, 33% have either ‘husband/partner support’ or ‘organizational support’. Also, 28% reported having a ‘positive organizational climate’ (Offermann et al., 2020) (Table 6).

Table 6. Thematic group of extrinsic coping mechanisms - categories frequency table

THEMES	SUBTHEMES	CATEGORIES	PRIV.		PUBL.		REG.		TOTAL	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Set of extrinsic coping mechanisms	Positive organizational climate	Organizational climate positive	5	28	2	17	0	0	7	21
		Training	11	61	3	25	2	67	16	48
	Financial and/or domestic freedom	No family constraints	1	6	4	33	1	33	6	18
		No financial constraints	2	11	1	8	0	0	3	9
	Reference models	Model - pairs	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3
		Model - superiors	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6
	External recognition and contact network	Networking	3	17	1	8	0	0	4	12
		Recognition	5	28	3	25	1	33	9	27
	Support network	Support - friends	2	11	1	8	0	0	3	9
		Support - family members	11	61	4	33	3	100	18	55
		Support husband/partner	6	33	2	17	0	0	8	24
		Support - medication	0	0	1	8	0	0	1	3
		Support psychotherapist	2	11	0	0	0	0	2	6
		Support organizational	6	33	0	0	0	0	6	18
		Support - peers	0	0	2	17	0	0	2	6
Support - superiors	2	11	3	25	0	0	5	15		

Notes. Priv. - Private; Publ. - Public; Reg. - Regulatory.

Numerous coping mechanisms were identified in the interviews, aligning with those predicted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), especially ‘resilience’, a concept supported by Duchek, Foerster, & Scheuch, (2022) and Jogulu and Franken (2023). Interestingly, it was the private sector that emphasized recent highlights in the scientific literature, namely coping mechanisms like professional agility, and in particular, professional well-being. A noteworthy finding was that this sector emphasized the category ‘performing what one likes’ at a rate of 39%, which is higher than the global rate of 27% identified in the thematic group ‘aspirations’ (Ferreira et al., 2021).

5. Conclusions

The key contribution of this research is that, to our knowledge, this study is the first to utilize data from Portuguese leaders to investigate the perceptions of women who hold leadership, executive, or administrative positions in the public, private, and regulatory sectors regarding their aspirations and coping mechanisms. Another central theme

is the reinforcement of the research stream that proposes women and men perceive leadership differently.

Women often fail to recognize their leadership traits, waiting for an invitation from other leaders to assume a leadership position. They tend to perceive leadership roles as rewards for a career dedicated to high performance.

In this study, aspirations manifest as a complex construct, influenced by various intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to their conceptualization. This is particularly apparent when considering the thematic groups of 'leadership' and 'coping mechanisms', which suggest explanatory factors of both a moderating and potentially mediating nature.

The results indicate that career objectives and leadership aspirations are primarily intrinsic, particularly "seeking new challenges", "learning", "contributing to the organization", "pursuing personal interests", and almost universally, the desire to "perform work that positively impacts people and the community". Extrinsic factors were less valued, especially those related to power and status. The exception was the recognized autonomy in decision-making that comes with leadership positions.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Although they did not self-identify as leaders or express a desire to become one, they indirectly admitted their aspirations for leadership. This was evident when they reported exhibiting leadership behaviors in their youth, and acknowledged that their appointments to leadership positions were the result of superiors recognizing the required leadership characteristics in them.

Another takeaway from this study is that women often feel inspired to lead due to an intrinsic desire to prove themselves. This study lends support to the notion that female leadership differs from male leadership.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study holds practical implications for education and human resource management. Education programs aimed at fostering leadership identities in girls and young women, as well as programs for parents, should work towards dispelling false beliefs about leadership. These programs can also emphasize the necessity for support and stimulation. Such insights can provide organizations with guidelines to i) bolster (gender-blind) policies, practices, and procedures of impartiality, transparency, and equality in recruitment, promotion, and selection for leadership positions, and consider both masculine and feminine traits as desirable leadership qualities, thus averting the pressure for women to take on masculine behaviors and attributes; ii) launch leadership development programmes encompassing leadership training, chances for hands-on leadership (i.e., projects), and pre- and post-position coaching; iii) ascertain that selection methods and instruments are scrutinized to prevent biases based on associating leadership with male traits, or risk procedural unfairness in Human Resources Management; iv) foster investment in specific and academic training, which not only enhances soft and hard skills but also bolsters women's self-confidence; v) ensure that the appraisal system recognizes leadership traits and effectively pinpoints opportunities to promote the "right set" of characteristics, circumventing the reliance on invitation; and vi) deliver life-work balance strategies and family-friendly aids, especially significant for women workers, managers, and future leaders, given the evident link between parental support and successful attainment of leadership positions.

5.3 Future Research and Limitations

For future research, the suggested approaches include: a) investigating the potential correlation between early family support/stimulation and the success of female leadership. In our sample of 33 participants, 14 held senior positions, with eight highlighting such circumstances. This was particularly common in the private (4 of 5) and public sectors (2 of 4), and one-third in the regulatory sector (1 of 3); b) comparing the meaning that women attribute to the concept of leadership and their self-identification of leadership attributes and skills while assessing the moderating or mediating potential of (il)literacy regarding the concept and leadership styles, and/or perceptions of socially accepted gender roles. Considering the difference between implicit and self-attributed motivations, where the former refers to consistently spontaneous behaviors over time, and the latter to immediate responses to socially structured situations (McClelland et al., 1989), an ideal approach would be a study using qualitative observation, triangulated with a 360° assessment.

This study does present certain limitations. Firstly, we faced difficulty in securing suitable participants for the study, a hurdle we overcame by utilizing the snowball method. Secondly, there was reduced sample diversity, with factors such as ethnicity and disabled leadership, or the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation with gender that may influence women's leadership aspirations and experiences, being associated with the previous limitation. Our third limitation was the use of cross-sectional research as opposed to a longitudinal study. Fourthly, a challenge was encountered in the self-reflection process, as identifying and expressing beliefs and perceptions about one's personal attributes proved difficult. Finally, data collection could

have been enriched by having more than one participant from a company listed on the stock exchange.

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Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal and publisher adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Interview script

In order to ensure the most rigorous treatment of the data collected, it will be extremely important to record the interview, therefore, authorization is requested, guaranteeing, for this purpose, confidentiality in the processing of data and the anonymity of the people interviewed.

It is estimated that the interview will last 60 minutes, so we would like to thank you in advance for your participation and contribution.

Date: _____

Do you authorize the recording of the interview?

Yes	
No	

- 1) Describe your leadership aspirations, what motivates you to hold leadership positions?
- 2) From what age did these aspirations manifest themselves? Have they changed over time?
- 3) Was there ever a time when you considered giving up? If so, what are the internal factors (characteristics, values, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, behaviors) and/or external factors (contextual, family, organizational) that contributed to persisting in a professional leadership path?
- 4) If not, what internal and/or external factors do you consider would contribute positively?
- 5) Can you, please fill this questionnaire? (a questionnaire is present to the participant)

Appendix B

The coding logic

Partic. Code	Units/Excerpts	Summary/Meaning	Domain/Thematic Group	Categories	Subthemes	Themes
ID1	Recognizing merits that I didn't even see in myself at the time	recognizing merits	Leadership	External recognition	Identification of leadership skills by third parties	Perceptions about the (in)existence of leadership skills
		that I didn't even see in myself	Leadership	Non-self-identified leadership	Identification of leadership skills by third parties	Perceptions about the (in)existence of leadership skills
	I think women impose a barrier on themselves and this has happened to me, we look at a professional opportunity and don't even think that it is for you	Professional opportunity and don't even think that is for you	Leadership	Opportunities - self-limitation	Conduct regarding professional opportunities	Beliefs and behaviors regarding career and career planning

	I really benefited from this obligation to also seek out women for leadership, from the quotas	Benefited from this obligation	Leadership	Quota	Conduct regarding professional opportunities	Beliefs and behaviors regarding career and career planning
	I was in charge of a team from an early age	In charge of a team from an early age	Leadership	Informal Leadership	Identification of leadership skills by third parties	Perceptions about the (in)existence of leadership skills
ID2	It's a mix, naturally, I applied and was also invited to take on roles as head of a division	I applied	Leadership	Position by application	Position by application	Procedures for obtaining positions
		also invited	Leadership	Position by invitation	Position by invitation	Procedures for obtaining positions
	I enjoy sharing knowledge and tips	Sharing knowledge	Aspirations	Share knowledge	Achievement oriented	Set of intrinsic aspirations
ID3	I have no aspirations, or ever had aspirations to be a manager or a leader, It is not an ambition, but contributing to organizations to be better	I have no aspirations, or ever had aspirations to be a manager or a leader	Aspirations	Deficit of leadership aspirations	Power Needs	Set of extrinsic aspirations
		contributing to organizations	Aspirations	Contribute to the organization	Achievement oriented	Set of intrinsic aspirations
ID14	A lot of determination, a lot of dedication	Determination	Coping	Determination	Characteristics of perseverance	Set of intrinsic aspirations
		Dedication	Coping	Commitment to the organization	Professional value of commitment	Set of extrinsic aspirations

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