

A man's world?

Challenges, strategies and reflections on the role of gender and the role of organisations in leadership, by female leaders working in higher education

Master's thesis

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Abstract

Purpose – Nowadays, women are still underrepresented as leaders, causing imbalance in (leadership) qualities within organisations. To better understand the lack of representation and the role of gender in leadership, this study aims to explore what challenges and strategies female leaders perceive and use in their roles, and how their gender plays a role here. Moreover, the role organisations play is reviewed, recognising that ‘fixing women’ is not a solution on its own.

Methodology – This study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews, using the critical incident technique, with female leaders working in higher education (n = 20). In addition, a differentiation was made between academic and service employees. The interviews focused on challenges, satisfactory situations, and strategies used in both kinds of situations. Interviews also focused on the perceived role of gender in leadership, working culture, and organisational support.

Findings – This study found six main challenges (relational aspects of leadership, facing gender bias, emotional aspects of leadership, intrinsic challenges, competitive culture, and positive action) and five clusters of strategies (systematic approach, building team cohesion, leadership development, persuasive communication, and conflict resolution). In addition, female leaders perceive that their gender plays a role in leadership, and they perceive a mainly masculine working culture with average organisational support. Differences between academic and service leaders are relatively small.

Conclusion – This study shows that gender plays a role in leadership. Female leaders perceive challenges and strategies both related to gender and not related to gender. However, it is organisations that create working culture and provide a certain level of support to female leaders. Thus, both parties need to contribute to reach a balance in leadership.

Keywords Female leadership, Leadership challenges & strategies, Organisational support, Working culture, Higher education

Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction	5
2. Theoretical framework.....	7
2.1 Leadership in higher education.....	7
2.1.1 Definition of leadership	7
2.1.2 Context: leading in higher education.....	8
2.2 Character traits in (female) leadership	9
2.3 Challenges for female leaders.....	9
2.3.1 Gendered norms paradoxes	10
2.3.2 Leadership-mindsets.....	10
2.3.3 Female leader identity development.....	11
2.3.4 Status levelling burden.....	11
2.3.5 Positive action	12
2.3.6 Challenges and their origins.....	12
2.4 Strategies for female leaders	13
2.4.1 Growth mindset	13
2.4.2 Developing leadership traits	13
2.4.3 Reframing behaviour	14
2.4.4 Creating a supportive environment.....	14
2.4.5 Strategies and their origins	15
3. Method	16
3.1 Research design	16
3.2 Case	16
3.3 Participants	17
3.4 Procedure & interview guide	17
3.4 Data analysis	20
3.4.1 Coding scheme	20
3.4.2 Intercoder reliability	21
4. Results.....	22
4.1 Perceptions on leadership roles.....	22
4.2 Challenges.....	22
4.2.1 Relational aspects of leadership	23
4.2.2 Facing gender bias	26
4.2.3 Emotional aspects of leadership.....	28

4.2.4 Intrinsic challenges.....	29
4.2.5 Competitive culture	30
4.2.6 Positive action	31
4.3 Strategies	32
4.3.1 Systematic approach.....	33
4.3.2 Building team cohesion.....	34
4.3.3 Leadership development	36
4.3.4 Persuasive communication	39
4.3.5 Conflict resolution.....	40
4.4 Reflections on female leadership.....	42
4.4.1 How gender plays a role in leadership.....	43
4.4.2 Is gender playing in favour or against female leaders?	44
4.4.3 A masculine culture.....	46
4.4.4 Organisational support	49
5. Discussion.....	51
5.1 Main findings	51
5.2 Theoretical contribution	53
5.3 Practical implications	54
5.4 Limitations.....	55
5.5 Suggestions for future research.....	55
5.6 Conclusion.....	56
References	58
Appendices.....	65
Appendix A: Interview guide.....	65
Appendix B: Interview guide in Dutch	71
Appendix C: Coding scheme.....	77
Appendix D: Full coding table perceptions role of gender	80
Appendix E: Full coding table perceptions strategies.....	82
Appendix F: Full coding table perceptions challenges.....	84

1. Introduction

For a long time, women in leadership positions were rare. Even though this is rapidly changing, women are still underrepresented as leaders, also in higher education (CBS, 2022; Mastracci & Bowman, 2015). In 2023, only 48 out of the top 200 higher education institutions were led by women (Times Higher Education, 2023). Even though Dutch higher education institutions, or universities, rank high on this list with institutions led by women, the number of female leaders in Dutch universities is still relatively low. For example, the percentage of female professors in the Netherlands amounts to 27% (Dutch Network of Women Professors, 2022). Therefore, the representation of women in leadership roles remains deficient.

The exact cause of this discrepancy remains unclear. Researchers have often studied phenomena as the academic pipeline leak, explaining that women perceive more barriers than men to get higher up the academic ladder (e.g. Van Anders, 2004) or the glass ceiling, studying the invisible barrier that holds women back from growing into leadership positions (e.g. Bechtoldt et al., 2019; Naff, 1994). This kind of research focuses mainly on the challenges and strategies for women when trying to become leaders (see Offermann et al., 2020; Smith, 2015; Zeler et al., 2022). This study argues that the problem might not only lie with women getting into leadership positions, but also with female leaders not being able to stay in their positions. Therefore, there should not only be a focus on female leaders staying within their positions (including challenges and strategies), but also on the organisations they work in (including working culture and organisational support). Moreover, this study aims to understand the role of gender within these constructs and within leadership in general.

Researchers have found challenges for female leaders within their position on conflicting expectations, competing demands in mindset, identity development, status levelling burden, and positive action (see Cardador et al., 2022; Ely et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2018a; Zheng et al., 2018b). In addition, strategies leaders use in general were identified before, including growth-mindset and developing leadership qualities (see Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021; Dweck, 2016). Nevertheless, these studies are combining experiences from leaders in various organisations, and the role of gender often remains unclear. Furthermore, they do not focus on perceptions of female leaders on the role of an organisation. By studying the organisational aspect as well, support systems for female leaders could be developed. This study aims to build on this existing body of literature, but also extend it. For example, challenges and strategies that originate from other constructs, or focus on the team, or working culture of female leaders, could be identified. Therefore, this study will focus on expansion of the challenges female leaders face and the strategies they use, to understand why keeping women in leadership positions can be difficult for the women themselves,

and for organisations.

There does not seem to be a gender balance in leadership in higher education institutions yet. Within higher education, specifically in universities, there are two types of leaders: leaders in scientist-roles (academic leaders) and leaders in supporting-roles (service leaders). Academic leaders have less time to deal with leadership-related matters, as their main focus is on academia (Blackmore, 2014). In contrast, service leaders are more often hired because of the combination of their expertise and leadership experience or skills, as for academics, there is also a focus on academic work and output. For academic leaders, a better understanding of challenges and strategies can result in more time for academia and improved quality of work on the individual and team-level in faculties (Blackmore, 2014; Cardador et al., 2022), whereas for service leaders, it can result in an increased productivity on the leader- and team-level in their departments (Braun et al., 2016; Cardador et al., 2022).

To reach desired outcomes, leaders need to earn the respect of their team members (see DeLellis, 2000; Wolfram et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2016). However, it is more difficult for female leaders than for male leaders to earn respect, mainly because of the prejudices team members have against female leaders (Wolfram et al., 2007). Thus, challenges leaders face are often rooted in earning respect from team members, but for female leaders, these challenges can be harder than for male leaders. In other words, despite the upcoming societal belief that people of all genders can be equally effective leaders, female leaders still perceive gender-related difficulties. If these difficulties are known, interventions that address them, can be developed. This can ultimately improve the quality of leadership, the working culture in organisations, and can contribute to an equal representation of gender in leadership positions in higher education. In conclusion, it has not been studied extensively what challenges and strategies for female leaders are, how they perceive the role of gender in leadership, and what role organisations play. Therefore, this study asks: *What are the challenges and strategies for female leaders in academic versus service roles in higher education, reflecting on the role of gender in leadership, and the role of organisations in female leadership?*

2. Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework focuses on female leadership. In addition, it portrays challenges female leaders face (gendered norms paradoxes, leadership-mindsets, identity development, status levelling burden, and positive action), and strategies they use (growth mindset, developing leadership traits, reframing behaviour, and creating a supportive environment).

2.1 Leadership in higher education

To get a clear understanding of the background of this study, the definition of leadership and the construct of leadership within a context of higher education will be described.

2.1.1 Definition of leadership

Researchers do not seem to agree on a general definition of leadership. Many definitions can be found in the literature, and parts of these definitions seem to be occurring more often than others. Thus, these parts will be combined in the definition of leadership used in this study. First, DePree (1989) explains that being a leader is about making a difference for those who are being led. In addition, Hogan and Kaiser (2005) focus on whether a leader can build a team that performs well relative to other teams, and maintain this level. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association explains leadership as follows: “the processes involved in leading others, including organising, directing, coordinating, and motivating their efforts toward achieving certain group or organisational goals” (APA, n.d.). A leader can shape the achievements of these goals on different levels (e.g. DeChurch et al., 2010). Thus, all include the leading of others (on various levels) and making a difference. Moreover, achieving group goals or team goals seems to be of importance (see APA, n.d.; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005).

Leadership consists of some kind of relationship between people. It is not a rigid construct, but can be seen as a shared property, involving relational and social processes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In this dynamic context, all leaders affect their team members in some sort of way (Bass & Bass, 2008). However, team members affect their leader as well: quality of leadership is often not measured by numbers, but appreciated intuitively by team members (Bennis, 1994). Thus, a leader needs to create a system in which team members perform work because they are dedicated, not because they fear punishment or hope for reward (Bennis, 1994). Therefore, in this study, leadership is defined as the process of leading others to perform as a team, and making a difference for and with this team on the individual, organisational, and intra-organisational level.

To lead, leaders need to understand respect and engage with it (see DeLellis, 2000; Wolfram et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2016). Respect comes in two forms: recognition respect and appraisal respect (Darwall, 1977). First, recognition respect includes the recognition of, for example, a leader

within their position as a leader. This kind of respect results from existing law or hierarchy, or subordinates' feelings. After all, without followers, there is no leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Second, appraisal respect occurs because of excellence in some sort of way. One may have appraisal respect for a leader's good qualities. This includes integrity and empathy, but also specific talents. Therefore, a high number of leaders aim to earn recognition and appraisal respect from their team members. However, female leaders often have a harder time than male leaders to earn respect from their team members (Wolfram et al., 2007). A reason for this are the prejudices team members have against female leaders. In other words, female leaders might need to work harder or in a different way than male leaders to earn respect from their team members. Therefore, earned respect lies at the heart of leadership and gender can play a role in earning respect to lead.

2.1.2 Context: leading in higher education

There are different kinds of leadership functions in higher education organisations. A university often consists of a number of faculties and service departments. A faculty is a group of departments that focus on an interrelated area of study. For example, a faculty of behavioural science can include psychological and communicational areas of study. A service department focuses on supporting the faculties with their work, such as educational support departments, or making sure the organisation stays healthy, such as human resources or finance departments. The employees, and thus, leaders, working in service departments are called service staff. In faculties, most employees, and thus, leaders, are academics. Academics range from PhD-candidates to full professors, but also include researchers and lecturers. However, faculties also contain service staff, such as local HR-managers. Therefore, we can differentiate between two types of leadership functions in higher education: academic leaders and service leaders.

Female leaders working in academic departments might encounter very different types of challenges and strategies than female leaders working in service departments, because of the differences in work activities and direct working environment. Academic leaders are responsible for, among others, the affairs of their department, overseeing academic programmes, and planning for academic growth. Service leaders are responsible for developing or improving all activities that support academic processes. For example, improving student affairs or campus facilities. In addition, academic and service leaders need to work together and align their actions to achieve the (educational) mission of the institution, and to face challenges unique to the context of higher education institutions (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). For example, adapting to (inter)national socio-political developments, or managing and bringing in funding for research. Moreover, international and intraorganisational academic competitiveness plays a main role for academic and service leaders, as this environment can be perceived as rather masculine (e.g. Fotaki, 2013; Steinþórsdóttir

et al., 2020; Salminen-Karlsson et al., 2018). Therefore, the context of higher education shows a very interesting distinction between female leaders to examine further.

2.2 Character traits in (female) leadership

Character traits play an important role in leadership (e.g. Seijts et al., 2015; Widyatmoko et al., 2020). Even though researchers agree that it is complex to assign specific character traits directly to gender, some common, sometimes stereotypical, traits can be associated with gender in leadership.

Researchers distinguish expressive or communal traits from instrumental or agentic traits. First, researchers often find that women more often identify with expressive traits, and tend to show more (affective) empathy, sensitivity and nurturing traits than men do (e.g. Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012; Hoffman, 1977; Vial & Cowgill, 2022). This means that women are generally better at sharing and detecting the emotional state of others, and they also focus more on building and maintaining relationships, and helping others (Koenig et al., 2011; Rochat, 2023). In contrast, men more often identify with instrumental traits, associated with pragmatism, assertiveness, independence and a focus on performance (e.g. Agut et al., 2022; Gartzia & Van Engen, 2012). This means that men are generally better at focussing on goals and making decisions (Koenig et al., 2011). Thus, it can be argued that female leaders associate with different traits than male leaders do.

Table 1

Character traits feminine versus masculine

Feminine focus on:	Masculine focus on:
Empathy	Pragmatism
Sensitivity	Assertiveness
Nurturing traits	Independence
Sharing/detecting emotional state others	Focus on performance
Building/maintaining relationships	Focus on goals
Helpfulness	Decisiveness

2.3 Challenges for female leaders

Researchers found five main challenges related to earning respect that women deal with in a leadership position. These challenges are often based on gendered stereotypes and bias (Hill et al., 2016). All challenges are explained below.

2.3.1 Gendered norms paradoxes

Gendered norms are social rules, created by people, related to gender. In other words, gendered norms are expectations related to gender, made by society. They play a significant role in the realisation of organisational outcomes (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Hannum et al., 2015; Mastracci & Bowman, 2015). These norms appear through interpersonal interactions within organisations, and are not isolated. Zheng et al. (2018a) found that expectations of female leaders' behaviour are paradoxical, in all types of organisations. Thus, female leaders are expected to show gendered norms for women in their leadership, but they also need to show norms related to leadership, which are often different from the gendered norms for women: the norms for leaders are more related to gendered norms for men (Zheng et al., 2018a). This resulted in four paradoxes on gendered norms, focused both on recognition and appraisal respect. First, female leaders need to demand high performance from their team (demanding), while showing that they do care about them (caring). This is difficult, as female leaders sometimes get feedback on being too intimidating (Zheng et al., 2018a). Second, female leaders constantly need to show their competence as leaders (authoritative), while showing they are also 'just a person' and show vulnerability when asking for collaboration (participative). Third, female leaders need to advocate for themselves, while serving others. This includes individual and organisational objectives: female leaders should find a balance in helping and directing others while focusing on their objectives as a leader. Fourth, female leaders seem to encounter problems with being seen as a leader (maintaining distance), while developing and maintaining relationships with their team (approachable). In other words, they want to be reachable, while earning trust and commitment from their teams. Women are not always fully aware of these paradoxes (Zheng et al., 2018a). Therefore, these paradoxes challenge female leaders during their work.

2.3.2 Leadership-mindsets

Female leaders experience two competing sets of demands in mindset, hoping to earn recognition respect. In contrast to gendered norms paradoxes, originating from gender-related expectations from society only, this challenge also originates from the tensions female leaders experience themselves. Where men are expected to behave according to agentic characteristics (dominance, independence, a high level of confidence), referring to the idea of taking power, women are expected to act communal (helpfulness, sympathy, gentleness), referring to the idea of working together (Bakan, 1966; Schock et al., 2019; Trzebiatowski et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2018b). However, leaders are expected to act agentic, instead of communal, or to keep balance. Then, female leaders are expected to act according to the expectations on their gender, but also on the expectations that go with leaders. Thus, they experience tension between an agentic and a communal mindset.

According to the role congruity theory, women then face a double bind: when they act according to gender expectations, they cannot meet expectations that go with leaders, and vice versa (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kubu, 2018). When female leaders navigate through their leadership tasks, they can take on different mindsets on leadership: a paradox mindset that embraces agency and communion, or a dilemma mindset that dichotomises agency and communion. The first refers to the idea that elements of agency and communion can co-exist and possibly complement each other in leadership, while the latter refers to the idea of two mutually exclusive opposites: one has to be prioritised over the other (Zheng et al., 2018b). Moreover, Schock et al. (2019) found that female leaders focusing on communion are more likely to develop themselves as leaders than female leaders focusing on agency. Therefore, leadership-mindsets can influence whether women are successful leaders and maintain their leadership positions.

2.3.3 Female leader identity development

Being a leader comes with fundamental questions about identity for leaders hoping to earn recognition and appraisal respect. Leadership evolves from two main, interrelated efforts, which are internalising leader identity and growing a sense of purpose (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hannum et al., 2015; Quinn, 2004). First, internalising leader identity includes processes that lead to seeing oneself as a leader, in which a leader's actions are confirmed or not by team members. These processes can cause leaders to become more self-confident, but can also leave them in a negative spiral when they do not receive the validation they are looking for as a leader (Ely et al., 2011). Especially for female leaders, feedback and relational processes with their team are of high importance (Cardador et al., 2022; Ely et al., 2011; Mastracci & Bowman, 2015). However, this process of growing self-confidence can also cause female leaders to portray queen bee behaviour, in which female leaders "distance themselves from other women and emphasise competitiveness and assertiveness" (Derks et al., 2016; Ely, 1994; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023, p. 373). Second, growing a sense of purpose is intertwined with a leader's identity development. It was found that leaders who show their personal values in their leadership to pursue purposes are most effective (Ely et al., 2011; Fu et al., 2010). Thus, it is challenging for female leaders to develop their personalised leader identity and grow their sense of purpose.

2.3.4 Status levelling burden

Female leaders sometimes experience status levelling burden. Status levelling burden refers to the idea that female leaders tend to relax the existing hierarchy between them and their team members in two ways: via tasks and/or via relations (Cardador et al., 2022). First, female leaders tend to help their team members with certain tasks more often than male leaders, and show excessive accessibility, in which they make themselves available or make more efforts than male leaders do

(Cardador et al., 2022). Second, they tend to relax relational boundaries with their teams more often. For example by building social relationships including strategic befriending (becoming friends would result in a better result) and performative niceness (being nice to earn respect). By doing this, female leaders hope to increase team cohesion (Post, 2015). However, this can lead to less time for other leadership tasks, resulting in negative performance and career implications for the female leader (Cardador et al., 2022). Thus, female leaders more often perform status levelling behaviour than their male colleagues to earn recognition respect of their team, which is a challenge called 'status levelling burden'.

2.3.5 Positive action

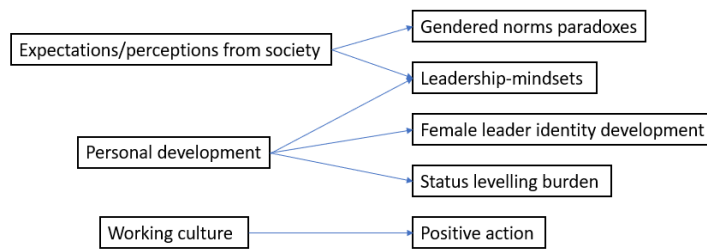
Positive action, or affirmative action, refers to creating equality and taking steps to find a balance in gender, for which organisations often have guidelines in place. However, when organisations do this, this might lead to the opposite of the wanted result (Cardador et al., 2022; Lambe & Maes, 2018). Women might feel tension: are they selected as a leader based on their gender or on their qualities? In other words, they hope to earn recognition and appraisal respect from their team. However, female positive action hires are perceived as less competent than women and men that are not associated with positive action (Heilman et al., 1997). Therefore, positive action can be a challenge for some female leaders. In addition, mainly because of positive action, female leaders have to handle what researchers call 'heightened visibility' (Ely et al., 2011). Compared to male leaders, female leaders are placed under a microscope when active in a leadership position, which can cause them working more risk-averse, overly detailed, or decide to micro-manage. Therefore, positive action and the following heightened visibility are challenging for female leaders.

2.3.6 Challenges and their origins

The five challenges that were found are related to three connected constructs: expectations or perceptions from society, female leaders' self-development, and working culture. If the origins of challenges are clear, this can not only help female leaders adapt their behaviour and shift their focus on the exact parts of their leadership that they need to develop, but also help organisations to understand where they can improve. All challenges and their origins are visible in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Challenges for female leaders and their origins



2.4 Strategies for female leaders

Research on strategies female leaders take on within their positions is limited. However, there are studies that focus on strategies people in challenging positions can take on. Four strategies are described below, of which three do not find their origin in the domain of female leadership. The strategies and their origins will be discussed below.

2.4.1 Growth mindset

Within the field of education and human resource management, the idea of a growth mindset has been studied for several decades. This theory includes the idea that one who believes they can grow their intelligence, perform better and acquire deeper knowledge, especially in difficult subjects, than people who think intelligence is a fixed characteristic (Dweck, 2016). Moreover, Dweck (2016) explains that a growth mindset of one individual can grow creativity and problem-solving skills for professionals. However, Han and Stieha (2020) argue that, for someone to take on a growth mindset, their team members' belief in them is crucial. Thus, working culture is of high importance for female leaders here. Nevertheless, if executed correctly, a growth mindset can help improve work engagement and good organisational behaviour (Han & Stieha, 2020). Therefore, a growth mindset can lead to more creativity and better leadership.

2.4.2 Developing leadership traits

Leaders are confronted with all kinds of challenges, and often their team is causing or contributing to these challenges. Researchers argue that the traits some leaders possess can prevent or solve these problems better than others. However, others state that the traits that are of importance can be taught and developed. According to Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams (2021), female leaders tend to increase their understanding of traits and necessary characteristics or skills to lead, by following training or using coaches. Developing traits can range from obtaining knowledge on leadership and personality styles, to training communication skills and emotional intelligence

(Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021; Diehl, 2014). For example, empathy can be an important trait when problems within teams or with stakeholders occur. Zivkovic (2022) presents a model that explains how empathy enhances leadership effectiveness on the leader-level. When a leader develops their trait of empathy, this can increase self-awareness, help with “enhancing relationships of a leader as an individual”, and improve skills such as mentoring and listening (Zivkovic, 2022, p. 454). Therefore, challenges can be prevented by leaders developing and working certain personal traits.

2.4.3 Reframing behaviour

Certain behaviour from female leaders can be considered a weakness. It can be argued that showing emotions, staying silent, or acting agreeable are not characteristics of a good leader. However, Zheng et al. (2018a) found that it is a good strategy to recast behaviour in such a way, that it portrays strength. For example, showing vulnerabilities can reflect inner confidence. Moreover, Jamjoom and Mills (2023) explain that staying silent is a form of acting resistant. Letting something go, for example during an argument, is important to overcome (organisational) battles. In addition, if a leader chooses carefully which battles to fight, this will ultimately lead to a joined focus on the leader’s view on the organisation’s long-term goals (Jamjoom & Mills, 2023). Therefore, a strategy female leaders can take on is reframing a situation by identifying parts that can be seen as weaknesses, framing them as strengths, and, importantly, picking battles carefully.

2.4.4 Creating a supportive environment

Everyone needs a supportive environment around them. Nevertheless, researchers found that female leaders need this more than male leaders do (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021). This environment can be in the form of a safety net at home, consisting of family members, mentorship or a network with other female leaders to share strategies, or in the form of a reduced social identity threat. This kind of environment can be created by female leaders themselves, however, it can also be provided by the organisations female leaders work for. First, a safety net at home gives female leaders the opportunity to be flexible in their job, and to feel rest and live healthy (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021). For example, if a female leader has a partner and a child, it is necessary to have a partner supporting them, taking care of the household, and watching the child in certain situations. Second, by creating a network of female leaders, female leaders can learn from best practices and exchange ideas (Norander & Zenk, 2023; Russell et al., 2023). In addition, a mentor can give them the information or inspiration to improve their leadership skills (Ely et al., 2011). Last, women who behave as ‘queen bee’ tend to feel a social identity threat (Derks et al., 2016). Researchers propose two ways to solve this issue. First, women should aim not to feel this threat at all, for example by choosing to work in an organisation where there are enough other women in

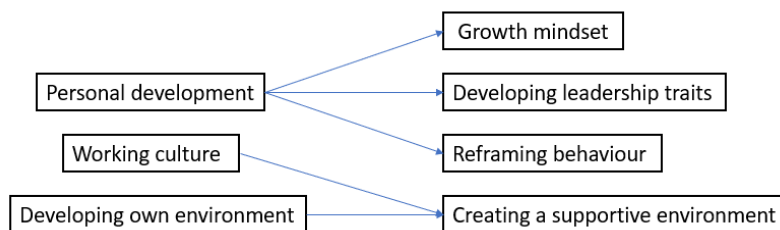
leadership positions. Second, they can reduce the threat they feel by training on focusing on their personal values and accomplishments, which results in self-affirmation (Aronson et al., 1999). Therefore, a strategy female leaders can take on, is to focus on building a supportive environment around themselves, or choose an organisation that supports them with this.

2.4.5 Strategies and their origins

All strategies focus on personal growth, development of the self and the development of one's environment, and can be useful for female leaders. Thus, all strategies focus on things female leaders can change or create themselves. This study aims to build on this existing body of literature, but also extend it. For example, strategies that originate from other constructs, focus on the team or organisational support for female leaders, could be identified. Therefore, this study will focus on expansion of the challenges female leaders face and the strategies they use, and aims to build on and identify new strategies female leaders take on to deal with these challenges. All strategies and their origins are visible in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Strategies for female leaders and their origins



3. Method

3.1 Research design

A qualitative research design is chosen to get an in-depth understanding of the experiences of female leaders within higher education. This provides the possibility for participants to freely and easily share the challenges they encounter and how they tackle them, and to explain their perceptions on female leadership. In addition, it is of importance for the researcher to be able to ask follow-up questions. Moreover, this study aims to draw conclusions based on personal, detailed explanations of reality and descriptions of incidents. In addition, this study aims to analyse the difference between challenges academic leaders and support leaders face, and the strategies they use. Therefore, a data collection method of semi-structured interviews with the use of the critical incidents technique is most suitable to not only ensure comparability of answers, but also provide possibility to ask in-depth follow-up questions. The University of Twente (UT) was chosen as a case. All interviews were conducted between October 16 and November 30, 2023. Ethical permission for executing the interviews was given by the BMS Ethics Committee on October 4, 2023 (Request nr. 231215).

3.2 Case

This study focuses on female leaders within organisations for higher education. To do this, the UT was chosen as a case. The UT is a (technical) university located in Enschede, the Netherlands. The organisation for higher education counts almost 4000 employees with different nationalities, among which two kinds of employees can be distinguished: academic employees (about 2300) and service employees (about 1800) (University of Twente, 2021). There are about 75 service leaders, of which 48% is female, and about 150 academic leaders, of which 22% is female. The UT includes five faculties (Behavioural, Management and Social sciences [BMS], Engineering Technology [ET], Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science [EEMCS], Science and Technology [TNW], and Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation [ITC]). Furthermore, there are nine UT service departments (Centre for Educational Support [CES], Campus & Facility Management [CFM], Finance [FIN], General Affairs [GA], Human Resources [HR], Library, ICT Services & Archive [LISA], Marketing & Communication [MC], Strategic Business Development [SBD], and Strategy & Policy [SP]). It should be noted that during the period of interviewing, the UT announced far-reaching financial budget-cuts.

3.3 Participants

This study includes interviews with 20 female leaders¹ working within the UT. In short, a leader is defined as someone who leads others within an organisation. In this study, only leaders working within the UT for at least half a year were selected. The participants were selected from a list of all female leaders findable on the UT website. Possible participants that were known to the researcher were cut from the list. The participants were selected randomly, but based on diversity between faculties and service departments, and chosen from different layers of leadership positions. An email was sent to twenty possible participants, asking whether they would like to participate in an interview for a master's thesis on challenges faced by female leaders at the UT, and the strategies they use. Moreover, it was checked whether the female leaders had been working at the UT for more than 0,5 years. One female leader explained she does not encounter any challenges in her work, and thus, wished not to participate. Three people did not respond to the e-mail, so three leaders suggested by other participants were contacted and interviewed.

Ten academic leaders coming from all five faculties participated. Moreover, ten service leaders from six different service departments participated in the interviews. The participants were aged between 38 and 65 years, having academic leadership roles such as department chair, and service leadership roles such as head of unit. Fifteen participants were Dutch, and five participants had other nationalities. Academic leaders all finished a PhD as their highest level of education, and service leaders more often finished a WO or HBO study as their highest level of education. The participants have worked in their current role on average for 3.9 years ($SD = 3.4$), ranging from 0.5 years to 13 years. The number of people they are supervising differs from 4 to 50 employees (on average 17.4, $SD \approx 14.8$). Out of 20 interviewees, 19 leaders stated, sometimes after thinking or doubting for a short period, that they do see themselves as leaders. One academic leader said that she does not really see herself as a leader. However, she emphasised that she does see herself as facilitator, inspirator, and coach.

3.4 Procedure & interview guide

The interviews were scheduled via email, and it was asked whether the interviews could be held in real life. If this was not possible, interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams. Fifteen interviews were held in real life, in the offices of the participants. Five interviews were held online. The longest interview took 55 minutes, while the shortest interview took 35 minutes (on average 48 minutes). Interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

¹ One participant indicated during the course of the interview that she rather identifies as non-binary (pronouns: she/her), and she explained that this was the first time she told anyone about that within the organisation.

Each interview consisted of five parts: introduction and asking consent, demographics of female leaders, experiences with difficult situations (CIT), experiences with satisfactory situations (CIT), and the role of gender in leadership. First, participants were informed about the aim of the study. Then, their rights on withdrawing from the study at any moment, anonymization of their data, and the use of their data were discussed. Permission was asked for starting the recording. The interview started with demographic questions and general questions about, for example, age and highest level of finished education. Furthermore, introducing questions about the leadership position of participants were asked. Hereafter, the participant was encouraged to talk about experiences with difficult situations (or challenges) within their role, and follow-up questions associated with the CIT technique were asked. Then, questions on satisfactory experiences within their role and follow-up questions were asked. Furthermore, the participant was asked to reflect on the role of gender in leadership in these situations, and in general, and also on working culture and the organisational support within their organisation. Last, participants got the chance to add anything they would like and to ask questions. A shortened version of the interview guide is visible in Table 2. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A (in English, see Appendix B for the Dutch version). After the recording was stopped, the researcher explained that the interview would be transcribed and anonymised fully and sent to the participant by email. Participants could check the transcription, add information, anonymise parts further, or cut certain parts. Eight participants included minor adjustments, two participants anonymised parts further, and two participants cut a short part of one of their answers. The adjusted interviews were used for the coding process.

Table 2*Interview guide*

Part of interview	Question(s)
Introductory questions about leadership	<p>What is your role at the University of Twente? How long have you worked in this role?</p> <p>Why can your function be considered as a leadership position?</p> <p>How many people do you supervise?</p> <p>Do you see yourself as a leader?</p> <p>How would you describe yourself as a leader? What kind of leader are you?</p>
Difficult situations (CIT, repeated 3 times)	<p>Can you please think of a difficult situation with other employees or colleagues you faced as a leader? Could you give a detailed account of the situation?</p> <p>What role did you play in the situation? What was the outcome of the situation? What strategy did you use to deal with the situation?</p> <p>Do you think your gender played a role in the situation? How?</p>
Satisfactory situations (CIT, repeated 3 times)	<p>Can you please think of a situation you look back on with satisfaction? Could you give a detailed account of the situation?</p> <p>What role did you play in the situation? What was the outcome of the situation? Why do you think it was a satisfactory situation? Do you think your gender played a role in this situation? How?</p>
Role of gender in leadership	<p>How do you see the role of gender in leadership? Does it play a role, and how? Could you give me an example?</p>
Gender in favour or against female leaders	<p>Have you ever felt your gender to be working against or in favour of you in your role? How?</p>
Working culture	<p>If you would place the UT on this scale (feminine – neutral – masculine), where would you place it? Why? Can you give me an example?</p> <p>What is your opinion on this? Should UT be more masculine, more feminine, or more neutral?</p>
Organisational support	<p>Do you feel the organisation is supporting you in your role as a female leader? How?</p>
Addition	<p>Is there anything you would like to add about the topics we discussed, or related to the topics we discussed?</p>

3.4 Data analysis

In this section, the process of data analysis, including the coding scheme and the intercoder reliability test, is explained.

3.4.1 Coding scheme

The transcriptions of the interviews were placed into separate Microsoft Word files and uploaded into ATLAS.ti to receive a clear overview of the answers. Open coding was used to process the information, and the codes were created while the interviews were analysed (bottom-up coding). Then, the transcribed questions were coded again using a top-down method, to ensure complete, thorough coding for all transcribed questions. Table 3 provides an overview of the codes. For the detailed coding scheme, see Appendix C.

As visible in Table 3, seven main codes were used. The first main code is 'role of gender', consisting of 16 sub codes of which 13 sub codes state that gender does play a role and shortly explain how (e.g. 'Yes, women are more structured'), visible in Appendix D. Second, the main code 'strategies' consists of 21 sub codes, which were divided into five clusters (e.g. the cluster *building team cohesion* includes the sub codes 'create clear and open communication climate', 'get to know your team' and 'show trust'), visible in Appendix E. Third, the main code 'challenges' consists of 25 sub codes, which were divided into six general challenges. Some cases can fit with more than one challenge. For example, a case in which a female leader had to compete with a male colleague on getting into a certain position, but did not get the position as she had taken time off for parental leave in the past year and he had not, fits within both 'competitive culture' and 'gender bias'. In these situations, the cases were coded to fit with multiple challenges. The clustering of all challenges is visible in Appendix F. Fourth, the main code 'desired working culture' consists of three sub codes: 'balance feminine/masculine', 'culture more feminine/less masculine', and 'culture more masculine/less feminine'. Fifth, 'desired improvements' includes sub codes as 'equal pay' and 'role models'. Sixth, the main code 'influence of gender in role' consists of: 'in favour of me', 'against me', 'both', 'I don't know', 'no role for me'. Last, 'organisational support' includes: 'yes', 'both yes and no', and 'no'.

Table 3*Main codes: frequencies and Cohen's Kappa values*

Main codes	Frequency	Cohen's Kappa
Role of gender	182	.75
Strategies	145	.80
Challenges	101	.72
Desired (working) culture	24	1
Desired improvements	31	.68
Influence of gender in role	20	1
Organisational support	20	1
Total	523	-

3.4.2 Intercoder reliability

During the process of data analysis, a second coder was involved to calculate the intercoder reliability. Using the codebook visible in Appendix C, 10% of the transcripts were coded independently by the researcher and the second coder. This aims to show the level of agreement between two researchers on the assigned codes (Boeije, 2010). To test this, the Cohen's Kappa measure of intercoder reliability was used. The first round of coding showed an insufficient Cohen's Kappa value (0.48) for the main code 'Desired improvements'. However, after discussing the codebook again, the disagreement was solved. The new Cohen's Kappa value (0.68) was assessed as sufficient. The Cohen's Kappa values for all main codes are visible in Table 3.

4. Results

This chapter offers the results of the interviews on female leadership. First, the perceptions of female leaders on their roles are discussed. Then, the challenges they encounter in their roles and the strategies they use to deal with the challenges are explained. Fourth, there is a focus on female leadership, looking into the role of gender in leadership. Last, the (working) culture of the UT and its organisational support are touched upon.

4.1 Perceptions on leadership roles

At the start of the interview, interviewees explained how they perceive their position as a leader, and how they characterise themselves as a leader. First, most interviewees indicated that their position can be seen as a leadership position, because they are leading others and/or are (hierarchically or content-wise) responsible for the work of other employees. Second, when asked if female leaders could characterise themselves as a leader, different descriptions came up. Interviewees used descriptions that can be associated with more expressive or communal traits, such as 'motivating and enthusing'. However, more neutral traits as 'open' and 'facilitating' were also used often. More feminine descriptions that were named often, are a 'human focus' and 'involved', because of the more feminine focus on the well-being of and relations with team members. What stood out, is that masculine descriptions with instrumental or agentic traits (e.g. decisive, focus on performance), were not mentioned often. Thus, female leaders do see themselves as leaders, and use various, relatively feminine, descriptions to describe themselves.

There were no clear differences in how academic leaders and service leaders see their leadership role and characterise their own leadership roles. However, it was expressed during the interviews that the main focus of academic leaders lies with their academic work and managing their team, while the main focus of service leaders lies with managing their team only.

4.2 Challenges

In total, interviewees described 101 cases that were identified as challenges. In 81 situations, female leaders perceived at least some role of gender, often in combination with something else. They explained that gender does play a role in leadership, but that it cannot always be seen separately from some other factors. These factors are culture (which is changing compared to the past), cultures (different nationalities), a mixture of experience, character, skills and ambition, and hierarchy. All challenges are visible in Table 4 and described in the sections below. The structure of the sections below is as follows: first, the challenge is explained. Then, the perceived role of gender in leadership in these challenges is outlined. Last, the possible difference(s) between answers of academic and service leaders are explained.

Table 4*Perceptions on challenges female leadership*

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Freq. code total**
Relational aspects of leadership	9	10	19	46
Facing gender bias	10	6	16	26
Emotional aspects of leadership	5	5	10	12
Intrinsic challenges	4	4	8	9
Competitive culture	5	0	5	5
Positive action	1	2	3	3
Total	10	10	20	101

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.2.1 Relational aspects of leadership

Nineteen female leaders describe at least one situation in which they struggled with managing relational aspects that come with their leadership position. Some interviewees mentioned that the difficulty of a challenge like this lies in balancing what they wanted to do and what they could actually do in reality. This cluster of ‘relational aspects of leadership’ includes challenges on relations within a leader’s team, the relation between a leader and their team, and the relation between a leader and another leader in the organisation. These three challenges are explained below.

4.2.1.1 Relations within team

Seventeen female leaders described situations in which they experienced difficulties with the relations within their team. First, ten female leaders encountered situations in which a team member did not function or functioned badly. These situations often included work that was not good enough in terms of communication with others (students, colleagues, and/or the leader herself), leading others, and listening to feedback. For example, one female leader said:

“With one colleague, all similar complaints were piling up at the student advisor. They were all about the learning situation or learning environment not being optimal, responding slowly to emails, not giving positive feedback. [...] And so talked to [this colleague], and that was difficult because [this colleague] did not agree with my standards: that one must create safe teaching situations, also in individual counselling, in the sense of learning environment”
(Interview 5, academic leader).

Second, female leaders described difficult situations in which their team was under high work pressure, leading to irritations or conflicts, or colleagues leaving. Third, some female leaders encountered situations in which team members clashed with each other, sometimes because of cultural differences. Last, one female leader described a situation in which an experienced colleague left, and she was afraid this would impact the quality of her team's work.

In these challenges, female leaders perceive that gender often plays a role in combination with something else, which aligns with theoretical expectations on the feminine focus on building and maintaining relationships. In most situations, female leaders think a combination of gender and the culture of a team member play a role. People from different cultures have different norms on how to interact with other people, and sometimes mainly with people that identify with another gender than they identify with. One female leader elaborated on a situation in which a female and a male team member clashed:

“One of them comes from a society where you are more free, more physical, hugging each other. And you also have backgrounds where people are very distant, even a kiss on the cheek is not done. And you have to make known what is acceptable behaviour for you, and what is not. And very often that doesn't happen, I think” (Interview 12, academic leader).

In addition, gender and the culture in higher education play a role. The 'Old Boys Network'-culture, as mentioned by some female leaders, is slowly disappearing. In this informal network, men help other men with the same (educational) background and characteristics to get into high positions. However, three female leaders added that the higher a female leader gets in the hierarchy, the more the culture is still in place. Last, in some situations, female leaders said that gender does definitely not play a role. In other situations, female leaders stated they did not know if gender played a role, reasoning that they cannot see gender separately from personality. One interviewee said:

“It's difficult to say. I don't know better, because I have only been a woman, so I cannot say, I would have done this differently if I would have been a man” (Interview 4, academic leader).

Nine academic leaders described difficult situations with the relations within their team, whereas eight service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders experience this challenge.

4.2.1.2 Relations leader – team

Six female leaders described situations in which they experienced difficulties with their own relation with a team member. First, three leaders experienced situations in which their team member(s) did not listen to them or undermined their decisions. Second, three female leaders indicated that the

relation between them and their team is particularly difficult when managing senior staff. One interviewee said:

“I think difficult situations are when you are leading senior staff. Senior staff, they want to follow their ambitions, they want to have decision-making power. [...] It can lead to tensions”
(Interview 12, academic leader).

Third, one academic leader experienced problems with a sick colleague that did not listen or respond to questions anymore. Last, one academic leader had difficulties in the relation with her team as she temporary took over the leadership role. She did not know what kind of leadership role she should take and whether she should start some, in her eyes necessary, long-term team building processes.

In these challenges, most female leaders experience that their gender plays a role in combination with something else, which again aligns with the theoretical support on the feminine focus on building and maintaining relationships. They explain that gender mainly plays a role in combination with personality, experience, hierarchy or culture (nationality). For example, one female leader explained that she thought a team member reacted to her in a certain way because she was a woman and because she showed certain personality traits that he did not appreciate. Furthermore, in some cultures, women are seen as less important than men. In the intercultural environment of the UT, some female leaders can struggle with male employees that grew up in these kinds of cultures. One interviewee explained a difficult situation she experienced:

“I did not feel safe enough to start the conversation alone. [...] We talk about internationalisation like it is easy, but there are a lot of cultures in the world that don’t treat women in the same way as they treat men. Or, in fact, don’t accept women as managers”
(Interview 3, service leader).

In three situations, female leaders emphasised that they thought gender did not play a role.

Four academic leaders described difficult situations with their own relation with a team member, and two service leaders did. Thus, there is a small difference between the number of times academic leaders experience this challenge, and the number of times service leaders do.

4.2.1.3 Relations leader – other leader

Eleven female leaders described situations in which they experienced difficulties with their own relation with a peer leader or their own leader. First, eight leaders experienced situations in which they encountered ‘angry’ colleagues or powerplay from colleagues. Some female leaders were accused of wrongdoings, and others are counteracted when a peer leader does not agree with something. One interviewee stated:

“[...] he sent me weekly mails with all kinds of accusations” (Interview 4, academic leader).

Second, one female leader described that she thinks it was challenging to ask if she was paid as much as her male colleagues with the same responsibility and tasks. She explained that she thinks this kind of modesty, or not having the courage to do this immediately, is a female trait. Third, one female leader experienced that a colleague was telling all kinds of lies about her to others. Last, one female leader explained that the higher up in the hierarchy she got as a leader, the higher the expectations from other leaders got.

In all of these situations, female leaders did perceive that their gender played a role, which aligns with the theoretical support on the feminine focus on building and maintaining relationships. In some situations, female leaders stated that gender played a main role, and in other situations, they said it was a combination of their gender and their personality, experience, and/or hierarchy. In terms of hierarchy, it can be harder for female leaders to convince male colleagues in higher positions than it is for male leaders. In addition, female leaders find it harder to convince or receive respect from male colleagues in roles at the same level as them. A chair of a research department explained the following about a male colleague's behaviour towards her during her previous job at another university:

“He just couldn't cope with someone who had only a doctor title, leading a group much bigger than his, and much more successful than his. That combination of a female, lower rank-person, was what drove him completely mad. When I got the job offer from here, he made a switch by 180 degrees [...]. Suddenly, he saw himself as being half a step beneath me in hierarchy” (Interview 1, academic leader).

Four academic leaders described difficult situations with their own relation with a peer leader, whereas seven service leaders described difficult situations with their own relation with another leader. Thus, there is a small difference between the number of times academic leaders experience this challenge, and the number of times service leaders do.

4.2.2 Facing gender bias

Sixteen female leaders described at least one situation in which they encountered gender bias from a colleague. Gender bias includes implicit forms of bias, such as being ignored as a woman or someone hiring more men than women. For example, a head of a department stated:

“Situations in which you get the feeling that you are ignored, in which people do listen to a man. I always thought that I just didn't explain my ideas well enough. And then I heard that a lot of women experienced that” (Interview 4, academic leader).

However, it also includes explicit bias, in which individuals are consciously aware of their prejudices. For example, one female leader experienced that she was called bitchy after sending an email in a businesslike manner:

“Later, I heard that people thought it was bitchy, my email. [...] Maybe, we are not used to working in a businesslike way at the UT [...]. However, it happens more often, when I express myself like that. As a woman, you can be labelled ‘bitchy’ then, while a man will be labelled ‘very clear’” (Interview 6, service leader).

In addition, nine female leaders explained that they experienced gender bias from a male colleague specifically. One female leader said:

“When I was appointed, I had to talk with different committees to see if I would be suitable for the position, and in one of those committees there was a man who asked: ‘how are you going to cope in this man’s world?’ I had been successful in this ‘man’s’ world for many years, together with many other women. I did not see it as a man’s world at all. What was he talking about?” (Interview 11, academic leader).

Last, some female leaders explained that they do not experience bias from their team:

“When you are in that position [as manager], then it is fully accepted that you are the leader and a female in this department” (Interview 5, academic leader).

However, female leaders do experience gender bias from their colleagues on the same level, for example, when working together in a management team (MT). Moreover, a nuance can be found here: if things at work are going well, there is less gender bias than if things are not going well. Three female leaders explained they found their own vulnerability in these kinds of situations most difficult. An interviewee expressed the following about a confrontation with a male colleague that judged her by her gender in a meeting:

“Yes, you are vulnerable at a moment like that. And if they ask those kinds of questions, not focusing on content at all... That is really something” (Interview 2, academic leader).

In all challenges, female leaders emphasised that they think gender does play a role. However, some interviewees emphasise that this happens unintentionally in some situations, and that it is hard for everyone, but especially for the older generation working at the UT, to fight stereotypes in their heads.

All 10 academic leaders experience forms of gender bias in their roles as leaders, while 6 service leaders experience some form of bias in their roles. Moreover, one service leader

experiences assumptions from colleagues based on the service department she works for. Thus, there is a relatively large difference between the number of times academic leaders experience this challenge, and the number of times service leaders do.

4.2.3 Emotional aspects of leadership

Ten female leaders described situations in which they experienced difficulties with situations in which emotions or bonds between them and a colleague were involved, or because they had to make a difficult decision affecting the colleague at hand. First, four female leaders focused on situations in which they had to tell someone bad news, for example that a colleague would be fired, or that someone would not get the promotion they worked hard for. Second, three female leaders had difficulties with being the manager of colleagues that are also their friends. One interviewee explained the following about her growth into the position of manager:

“It was quite hard to make decisions about these people, which were sometimes not that pleasant for these people. And on the other hand, being their friend and having been on the same level with them shortly before” (Interview 1, academic leader).

Moreover, two female leaders explained that they experienced a difficult situation in which they had to degrade a colleague, which was also their friend, from a function. Fourth, two leaders explained that making difficult decisions can be a challenging part of their role. Last, one female leader stated that she has difficulties with having two roles as a leader. One of these roles is more supporting and advising, while the other role includes making difficult or hard decisions on the careers of team members. Four interviewees expressed that the main difficulty lies with the human part of these challenges: their own emotions or emotions from their colleagues that emerge. One interviewee added:

“That is the unfortunate thing about leadership: it is that you sometimes have to make decisions that don’t make people happy” (Interview 1, academic leader).

In all challenges related to emotional situations in relational parts of leadership, female leaders stated they did not think gender played a role, or they thought gender played a role in combination with something else. In this regard, they explain that a combination between personality, competences, leadership style, and/or experience are seen as important factors. For example, one interviewee said:

“It’s just important to have certain skills. Specifically in my role, being able to make connections and think ahead, that’s extremely important. [...] You could say that women pay more attention to that, however, I could also recall examples in which women, including myself, did not pay that much attention” (Interview 13, service leader).

Literature showed that being a woman does play a role in emotional or more sensitive aspects of leadership, and female leaders tend to have, for example, more empathy. Nevertheless, female leaders do not (want to) perceive this. One female leader explained:

“[...] not because I am a woman and have a great deal of empathy, as I wouldn’t dare to say that about myself, but because I am a teacher as well and recognise the experience” (Interview 4, academic leader).

Another female leader added:

“[...] some men have that [empathy] too, so it is not a typical woman-thing or something. I think it depends on who you are as a person” (Interview 7, service leader).

Five academic leaders described situations in which they experienced difficulties with situations in which emotions or bonds between them and colleagues were involved, and five service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders experience this challenge.

4.2.4 Intrinsic challenges

Eight female leaders described situations that they considered intrinsically difficult because they are circumstances they cannot control, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the current financial situation of the UT. First, during the Covid-19 pandemic, female leaders found leading their team without seeing them, or only shortly seeing them online, very difficult. In addition, the combination of caring for their families during the pandemic, and working online as a leader, was seen as difficult. Second, the financial situation of the UT is putting high pressure on female leaders. They are worried about increasing work pressure for their team members, possibly losing important colleagues with a one-year contract (because all one-year contracts would be re-evaluated), and a poor leadership-example from the university board. One interviewee stated that it is difficult to find a balance between the financial side and the work pressure in her team:

“When I came here, [...] was really short-staffed, the work pressure was much, much too high. Over the last years, we improved that bit by bit. And now, there is a possibility that we need to dismantle because of these financial issues” (Interview 10, service leader).

Two female leaders that experienced a challenging situation because of Covid-19, explained that gender played a role in this challenge. They stated that gender plays a role in how leaders deal with a challenge related to or caused by Covid-19, because of the tendency of women to focus more on the well-being of their team and their traditional roles within their families. One female leader stated gender does not play a role, as she thinks showing empathy in a situation as Covid-19 is not linked to gender. The six female leaders that experience the current financial situation of the UT as a challenge explain that gender does not play a role in the challenge itself. This does not fully align with theoretical beliefs that state that more masculine traits focus on decisiveness, which could help in situations like these. Nevertheless, three of them emphasise that female character traits (e.g. empathy) are less useful than male character traits (e.g. pragmatism) in these situations, and that their male colleagues are sometimes treated differently in these situations.

Four academic leaders described intrinsically difficult situations with external factors, and four service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders experience this challenge.

4.2.5 Competitive culture

Five female leaders explain that they experience difficult situations in which the competitive culture in academia plays a role. They mention difficulty of combining the focus on output in the academic world with their tasks as female leaders. However, they do emphasise that the working environment at the UT is not as competitive as the working environment in other universities. One female leader said, when comparing her previous leadership role at another university with her role at UT now:

“I saw more and more young colleagues perceiving that workload and competition as very heavy there [...]. And I had a management position in that system, in which there was so much pressure to publish. I had to tell people that that was good, even though I didn't think it was anymore” (Interview 4, academic leader).

Four female leaders emphasise that gender does play a main role here. They think the competition in a leadership role is detrimental for female leaders that take care of their children or family in traditional households, thus, touching upon the difference in work-life balance for male and female leaders in academia. This competitive culture in academia and skewed work-life balance between leaders of different genders also shows the masculine side of academic organisations as shown in previous literature. However, one female leader explains that she cannot say that gender is the main issue here. She explains she only understood the challenge after years of working experience, and it has more to do with getting older, than with her gender.

Five academic leaders explained they deal with this challenge, whereas zero service leaders

did. Thus, there is a large difference between the number of times academic leaders experience this challenge, and the number of times service leaders do.

4.2.6 Positive action

Three female leaders described that they experienced difficulties related to positive action. This is, female leaders experience some form of judgement from colleagues because they receive(d) support in order to balance the field between men and women. They described that there is a larger spotlight on female leaders than on male leaders. There is a tension: are female leaders placed in their positions because of their skills and experience, or because of gender quota? One interviewee explained that, when she just started in her position, one of the first things a male colleague told her was:

“No offence, but you only got the job because you are a woman” (Interview 1, academic leader).

All three female leaders explained that they definitely think gender plays a role in this challenge, as positive action is based on balancing gender inequalities.

One academic leader experiences difficulties with positive action, whereas two service leaders experience this. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders experience this challenge. In Table 5, an overview of all challenges and the perceived relation to gender female leaders experience are visible.

Table 5*Overview of challenges and perceived relation to gender*

Challenges	Perceived relation to gender	Theoretical role of gender
Relational aspects of leadership	Combination of gender and culture (nationality) Combination of gender and culture (changing compared to the past) Combination of gender and personality/experience/skills Combination of gender and hierarchy Gender does not play a role	Feminine focus on building/maintaining relationships
Facing gender bias	Gender bias	Gender bias
Emotional aspects of leadership	Combination of gender and personality/experience/skills	Feminine focus on empathy
Intrinsic challenges	Gender does not play a role	Masculine decisiveness and pragmatism
Competitive culture	Family Gender does not play a role	Masculine focus on performance
Positive action	Based on balancing gender inequalities	Based on balancing gender inequalities

4.3 Strategies

In total, interviewees mentioned use of a strategy 145 times. Out all of these situations, five main clusters of strategies could be identified: using a systematic approach, building team cohesion, leadership development, persuasive communication, and conflict resolution. In seven situations, interviewees stated that they did not really use a strategy, but instead just did nothing. The strategies female leaders did use, are described below and visible in Table 6.

Table 6*Clusters perceptions on strategies female leadership*

Cluster	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Systematic approach	9	8	17	53
Building team cohesion	7	8	15	31
Leadership development	9	6	15	29
Persuasive communication	8	7	15	23
Conflict resolution	4	2	6	9
Total	10	10	20	145

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.1 Systematic approach

The cluster 'systematic approach', used by seventeen female leaders, includes two strategies: *investigation-based strategies* and *fall back on procedures*. Gender seems to play a minor role in the strategies in this cluster. There is no clear difference in the number of academic leaders and the number of service leaders that used a systematic approach. The strategies are explained below.

Table 7*Cluster systematic approach in strategies female leadership*

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Investigation-based strategies	9	8	17	47
Fall back on procedures	2	2	4	6

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.1.1 Investigation-based strategies

Seventeen female leaders used investigation-based strategies, meaning that they thoroughly prepared themselves to deal with a challenge. First, fifteen female leaders explained that they consult others when dealing with a challenge. This was really emphasised during their interviews, as the strategy was mentioned 32 times. Female leaders consult, among others, their managers, colleagues, or a coach on leadership-related matters, but also their partner or friends. A female leader explained why she uses this strategy:

“I would like to hear all opinions, and I also like to enable people to join the change process and the decision-making process” (Interview 8, academic leader).

Second, nine female leaders argue that preparation is a strategy they use to deal with certain challenges. They explain that preparing arguments, reading, and looking at the facts is most important here. Third, asking more questions or asking questions earlier in certain situations is used as a strategy. Fourth, one female leader explained she once asked legal advice to deal with a challenge.

Literature shows that feminine traits align with relationship building and maintenance. Consulting others can be a part of maintaining relationships with colleagues. However, it was not proven that being prepared is strongly connected to gender. Thus, gender does play a minor role in this strategy.

Nine academic leaders explained that they used investigation-based strategies, while eight service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.1.2 Fall back on procedures

Four female leaders explained that, if they did not know what to do anymore, they would fall back on existing procedures in certain situations. Some argued that, among others, policy documents, agreements, law or commissions can judge situations better than they can. One female leader said:

“Then I will look up the rules to show them: this is how it works” (Interview 18, service leader).

Moreover, two female leaders emphasised the importance of their Human Resources department when they faced certain challenges where colleagues were involved. Gender does not seem to play a role in this strategy.

Two academic leaders used this strategy, and two service leaders did. Thus, there is no difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.2 Building team cohesion

The cluster ‘building team cohesion’, used by fifteen female leaders, includes three strategies: *create a clear and open communication-climate*, *get to know your team*, and *show trust*. Gender mainly seems to play a role in the latter two strategies in this cluster. There are differences in the number of academic leaders and the number of service leaders using these strategies. The strategies and the differences are explained below.

Table 8*Cluster building team cohesion in strategies female leadership*

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Create a clear and open communication-climate	7	7	14	25
Get to know your team	0	4	4	4
Show trust	0	2	2	2

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.2.1 *Create a clear and open communication-climate*

Fourteen female leaders used various communication strategies to deal with certain challenges. It was argued that it is important to communicate clearly and open, and that being transparent is key. This can be in meetings, through e-mails, but also in annual conversations, or when meeting new people. Moreover, female leaders emphasised that listening and asking follow-up questions is of high importance. Interviewees also described that they first get to know their team or the person they are working with, before adapting their communication style on that. When asked how she would deal with a challenge in the future, a female leader said:

“Use as much transparency as possible towards the colleagues whom I see experience this. [...] I think I try to clarify the best I can in a diplomatic way, but trying to, as elegantly as possible, transmit that to the colleagues. So that is mainly a dialogue approach, then, and clarification” (Interview 14, service leader).

Gender does not seem to play a role in this strategy.

Seven academic leaders and seven service leaders aimed to create a clear and open communication-climate. Thus, there is no difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.2.2 *Get to know your team*

Four service leaders emphasised the importance of the strategy of getting to know one’s team. They mention having good conversations and team building sessions can help with dealing with challenges in the future. One interviewee said:

“It’s really about conversations. When I just started here, I scheduled biweekly meetings with everyone. [...] That kind of personal attention, which comes rather natural to me, is appreciated by others and it helps me to do my job” (Interview 6, service leader).

According to literature, gender seems to play a role in this strategy, as building or maintaining relationships seems to be a more feminine trait.

Zero academic leaders used this strategy, whereas four service leaders did. This large difference could be explained by the different reasons for them becoming leaders, and the priorities they set in their work.

4.3.2.3 Show trust

Two female leaders explained that as a strategy, they chose to show trust. Both leaders emphasised that they trusted their team in their work, and aimed to show this. One female leader explained about one team member:

“My role included coaching and stimulating. Showing her trust, so she could grow and develop herself” (Interview 9, service leader).

Literature shows that gender plays a role in this strategy, as showing sensitivity in relations is aligned with feminine traits more than masculine traits.

Zero academic leaders used this strategy, whereas two service leaders did. This small difference could be explained by the different reasons for them becoming leaders.

4.3.3 Leadership development

The cluster ‘leadership development’, used by fifteen female leaders, includes four strategies: *develop leadership traits, growth mindset, create a supportive environment, and differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague*. Gender seems to play a role in third strategy. There are differences in the number of academic leaders and the number of service leaders using these strategies. The strategies and the differences are explained below.

Table 9*Cluster leadership development in strategies female leadership*

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Develop leadership traits	6	3	9	10
Growth mindset	3	4	7	8
Create a supportive environment	3	3	6	8
Differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague	1	1	2	3

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.3.1 *Develop leadership traits*

Ten female leaders described that, to deal with certain situations better in the future, they participated in trainings or courses. They often do this to evaluate their own behaviour and actions, focussing on developing their skills. One interviewee argued, after encountering a challenge, she will follow a training to improve her skills on dealing with challenges like the one she encountered:

“There is this training soon, [...], and I immediately registered for it. So, next time, I will get it right from the beginning [...].” (Interview 4, academic leader).

Gender does not seem to play a role in this strategy.

Six academic leaders explained that they used this strategy, and four service leaders did. Academic leaders often stated that a course was recommended to them by a colleague (e.g. HR-advisor) after they talked with them about addressing certain issues, which may have caused this difference. Nevertheless, the difference is not large, and it is possible that service leaders do not see participating in a training as a strategy, as it is something that they are expected to do because of their function.

4.3.3.2 *Growth mindset*

Seven female leaders described that, to deal with certain situations, one needs to believe in themselves and in possibilities to grow. They explained that one needs to stand tall, be bold, and know their worth. One interviewee said:

“I think, if you naturally stand your ground... Well, if you learned that, and you don’t doubt your own role, I think that will also make it easier to accept for others” (Interview 17, service leader).

Thus, female leaders use their belief in themselves and in their possibility to grow as a strategy. Gender does not seem to play a role in this strategy.

Three academic leaders explained that they use this strategy, and four service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.3.3 Create a supportive environment

Six female leaders described that it is of high importance to create a supportive work environment. Two main sub strategies were found. First, female leaders explain that when they have a bond or relationship with (male) colleagues, they can back each other up during meetings in which gender bias plays a role. One interviewee explains:

“We can back each other up, give each other space. When someone else speaks up, or you are interrupted -that seems to happen a lot, men interrupt women more often-, then you can help each other. Like, someone is making a point here, all right? That can really help. That person does not have to be a woman, it can also be a man” (Interview 16, service leader).

Second, female leaders network or connect, mainly with colleagues but also with people outside of their organisation. One interviewee states that she networks with colleagues in other departments, so her team can benefit from all kinds of expertise within the organisation:

“We are working at a university with a lot, or maybe even only, professionals, with different expertise. I appreciate them a lot, and I think we need to use it in our favour” (Interview 8, academic leader).

Building and maintaining relationships, for example in the creation of mentorships or connecting with others, mainly aligns with feminine character traits. Thus, it can be stated that gender plays a role in this strategy.

Three academic leaders and three service leaders explained that they use these strategies. Thus, there is no difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.3.4 Differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague

Two female leaders made a distinction between their role as a leader and their role as a friend or leader. One interviewee said:

“When you are dealing with a situation like this, that you suddenly become boss and lead people that are at the same time your friends, you have to really make clear in which role you are talking to them” (Interview 1).

She also gave an example:

“I really could say like, ‘look, I would have liked to tell you this decision we were making, or discuss this decision earlier as a friend, but in this decision, I had to act as your boss. Right now, I am talking to you as a friend’” (Interview 1, academic leader).

Gender does not seem to play a role in this strategy.

One academic leader used this strategy, and one service leader did. Thus, there is no difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.4 Persuasive communication

The cluster ‘persuasive communication’, used by fifteen female leaders, includes two strategies: *framing* and *nudging*. Gender seems to play a role in the first strategy. There is no clear difference in the number of academic leaders and the number of service leaders using these strategies. The strategies are explained below.

Table 10

Cluster persuasive communication in strategies female leadership

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Framing	8	7	15	16
Nudging	2	3	5	7

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.4.1 Framing

Fifteen female leaders used the framing of issues as a strategy. They did this in three different forms: focussing on possibilities, well-being, or on a goal. First, by framing on possibilities, leaders focused on the positive sides of change, celebrating small successes, and highlighting opportunities. One female leader said:

“My first strategy: if they say they cannot do something, we can do something about that, and look into how we can proceed together” (Interview 13, service leader).

Second, by framing on well-being, female leaders focus on the impact of issues or challenges on the well-being in the organisation, and/or the (mental) health of their own team specifically. Moreover, they focus on work-life balance in their team, diversity, and human connections. Third, by framing on a goal, one female leader explained that she told her team and herself to focus on the end goal,

instead of on the issues that arose on the way.

The frames on well-being and connections include a more feminine focus, while the frame on a goal includes a more masculine focus. Thus, it can be stated that gender plays a role in this strategy.

Eight academic leaders used the strategy of framing, and seven service leaders did. Moreover, when framing issues, service leaders tend to focus on possibilities more than academic leaders, while academic leaders tend to focus on well-being more than service leaders. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders use this strategy, and the number of times service leaders do.

4.3.4.2 Nudging

Five female leaders used nudging as a strategy. Nudging is indirectly and/or unobtrusively pushing others to do something or act in a certain way. For example, when talking with a director that showed gender bias, one female leader explained:

“I think it through, when meeting with [...], how do I act? I will let my male [colleagues] do most of the talking [...]. I try to do it in a more subtle way. If I think, we need to go into this and this direction, I don't present it as a fact” (Interview 6, service leader).

Gender does not seem to play a role in using this strategy.

Two academic leaders used nudging as a strategy, and three service leaders did. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.5 Conflict resolution

The cluster ‘conflict resolution’, used by six female leaders, includes two strategies: *defence mechanisms* and *confronting: yes or no?*. Gender seems to play a role on the masculine side in these strategies. There are differences in the number of academic leaders and the number of service leaders using these strategies. The strategies and the differences are explained below.

Table 11*Cluster conflict resolution in strategies female leadership*

Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Frequency code total**
Defence mechanisms	4	0	4	6
Confronting: yes or no?	1	2	3	3

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.3.5.1 Defence mechanisms

One female leader explained that she used a strategy of defending in two situations. However, three other leaders said that they have stopped defending themselves. Instead, they consciously choose to say ‘no’ to certain things, or they ask questions (back). If she could redo a situation, one interviewee would use the latter as a strategy:

“I would first start with asking open questions, instead of giving an answer to the question that is posed. Turn it around” (Interview 12, academic leader).

Defending aligns more with feminine character traits. In contrast, not defending anymore or even choosing to say ‘no’, shows more assertiveness, aligning with masculine traits. Thus, gender plays a role here, but it seems to be on the masculine side.

All four leaders explaining a strategy of defending or not, are academic leaders. Thus, there is a large difference between the number of times academic leaders and service leaders use this strategy.

4.3.5.2 Confronting: yes or no?

Two female leaders explain that they do not always confront their team members directly as a strategy, but instead discuss matters in a general way. However, one female leaders chooses to confront others publicly. When asked how she deals with a certain situation, she stated:

“Cutting them off in public. Tell them, yes, I know. We talked about this, and we are not going to do that again” (Interview 17, service leader).

Confronting seems to be an assertive strategy. Thus, gender plays a role in this strategy, mainly on the masculine side.

One academic leader and one service leader do not confront their team directly, but discuss general matters. One academic leader did choose to confront others publicly to deal with a challenge. Thus, there is no clear difference between the number of times academic leaders and

service leaders use this strategy. In Table 12, all full clusters of strategies used by female leaders are visible.

Table 12

Strategies for female leaders

Clusters	Strategies	Theoretical role of gender
Systematic approach	Investigation-based strategies	Feminine focus on building/maintaining relationships
	Fall back on procedures	No role of gender
Building team cohesion	Create a clear and open communication-climate	No role of gender
	Get to know your team	Feminine focus on building/maintaining relationships
	Show trust	Feminine focus on sensitivity
Leadership development	Develop leadership traits	No role of gender
	Growth mindset	No role of gender
	Create a supportive environment	Feminine focus on building/maintaining relationships
	Differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague	No role of gender
Persuasive communication	Framing	Feminine focus on well-being, masculine focus on goal
	Nudging	No role of gender
Conflict resolution	Defence mechanisms	Masculine focus on assertiveness
	Confronting: yes or no?	Masculine focus on assertiveness

4.4 Reflections on female leadership

This part includes a general reflection on gender in leadership, based on the perceptions of the interviewees. First, it will be outlined how gender plays a role in leadership. Then, there will be a focus on the factors that play a role in leadership in combination with gender. Third, it will be explained whether female leaders experience their gender playing in favour or against them in their roles. Fourth, the importance of working culture will be outlined. Last, there will be a focus on

organisational support. In these topics, there does not seem to be a clear difference between academic and service leaders.

4.4.1 How gender plays a role in leadership

When asked, all interviewees explain that they perceive that gender plays a role in leadership in an overarching way. The main four arguments include the role of family, differences between the ways people act towards women versus men, a difference in the way female leaders approach situations versus how male leaders would approach situations, and the number of chances women get. Last, they emphasised that balance between men and women in leadership positions is needed

First, female leaders emphasised the role of family. They feel guilty for not being around when their kids grow up, but they also emphasise the traditional roles in the household, in which women are still seen as the first caregiver. They perceive that female leaders take family into account more when making career decisions than men do. Moreover, some interviewees stated that leaders with children are more rare than leaders without, especially when these leaders are women. One interviewee stated:

“If you don’t have children, your hands are free, and you can build a career as fast as a man can” (Interview 11, academic leader).

Furthermore, academic leaders often state that a female leader can work less hours to be with her children, but that she will notice this in her academic career.

Second, some interviewees explained that if they would have been a male leader, people might have listened to them faster and better. Also, if they would have acted more like the male leaders around them, people would have taken them more serious. In addition, their team members might not have dared to make certain (rude) comments towards them.

Third, female leaders explain that men would have approached some things differently. For example, interviewees see that male leaders tend to discuss less with their teams, are more dominant in their leadership styles, and show their feelings less than female leaders. In addition, interviewees see that female leaders often show a softer side and have more empathy than their male colleagues. Furthermore, they take feelings of their team members more seriously, and work more structured.

Last, female leaders emphasised that female leaders get less chances than male leaders do. They explain that not all female leaders fit within the relative masculine working culture at the UT. One female leader stated:

“I know some female talents left because they did not move up in the hierarchy. I do not know whether that is because of the masculinity, or just because of the lack of equal opportunities, but some good women have left. And they have excellent functions outside of the UT right now” (Interview 17, service leader).

In general, female leaders mainly focused on the necessity of finding a good balance within an organisation between genders, different viewpoints, backgrounds, and expertise. An interviewee said:

“Men can bring balance in a female world, just like women can bring balance in a male world” (Interview 3, service leader).

4.4.2 Is gender playing in favour or against female leaders?

When specifically asked, most interviewees indicated that their gender played in favour and against them in their role, as visible in Table 13. First, ten interviewees explained that their gender had played a role in both directions at multiple situations. Second, seven female leaders stated their gender plays against them in their roles. Third, two interviewees indicated that they did not know whether their gender plays in favour or against them, and last, one interviewee explained that gender does not play a role in her position. In these findings, there is no clear difference between academic and service leaders. Thus, most female leaders believe their gender to play a role in both directions within their role as a leader, closely followed by female leaders believing their gender to play against them in their role as a leader.

Female leaders often explained it was visible in one or more of the difficult situations or satisfactory situations they described before, that their gender played both in favour and against them. On the one hand, gender plays against female leaders in the form of gender biases from (male) colleagues. One academic leader referred to situations in which she and her colleagues held job interviews:

“Well, you are often not taken seriously. Especially when it comes to gender-issues, the men in my work environment often have the feeling they know best” (Interview 19, academic leader).

On the other hand, gender plays in favour of female leaders in the form of positive gender bias, and some female leaders also use their gender to work for them sometimes. One service leader stated:

"[...] and also in favour: some grants are specifically for women. Well, I did use those, I am not against that. [...] I may use that to my advantage from time to time as well" (Interview 20, academic leader).

When explaining how gender has only played against them in their role as leader, female leaders argued that as a woman 'you need to work harder' and 'carefully evaluate what you will or can say'. In addition, it is more difficult to reach or achieve something through higher management for female leaders. One service leader explained:

"I see it around me: women who want to get a higher position really do have to fight for it, and actually, I did too. Yeah, fighting, and sometimes you have to be forcing it a little" (Interview 19, academic leader).

Female leaders that indicated they did not know if their gender had ever played in favour or against them, think it is difficult to see their qualities separately from their gender. An academic leader explained:

"I perceive myself as a network with all kinds of properties and characteristics, and gender is one of them. So, I cannot see that separately. However, I have never experienced someone saying, 'you cannot do this and this, because you are a woman'" (Interview 5, academic leader).

One service leader explains she thinks her gender did never play in favour or against her in her role, but that it did play a role before she got into her leadership position:

"Not particularly as a leader, but before that, yes [...]. I also noted it when I had just started here, but when I started in my position as [head of department], I think I was taken more seriously" (Interview 9, service leader).

Table 13*Coding scheme influence of gender in leadership role*

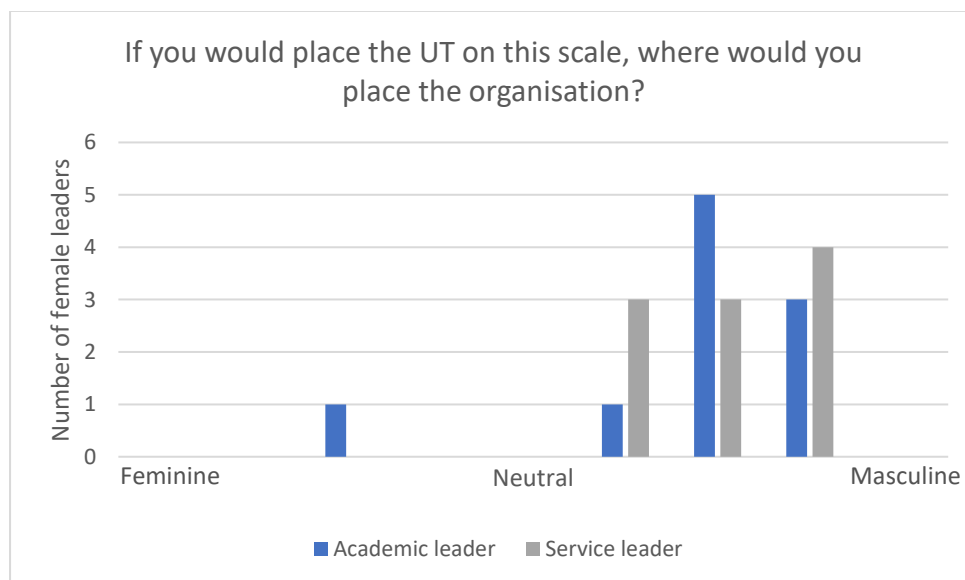
Sub codes:	Academic leaders*	Service leaders*	Total interviews*	Freq. code total**
<i>Gender plays...</i>				
In favour of me	0	0	0	0
Against me	4	3	7	7
Both in favour & against me	5	5	10	10
I don't know	1	1	2	2
No role for me	0	1	1	1

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.4.3 A masculine culture

When asked where female leaders would place the UT on a scale between feminine and masculine, 19 of them explained that the UT fitted between neutral and masculine. Only one interviewee explained that the UT could be placed between feminine and neutral, but she added that she compared the UT to another university in the Netherlands where she had worked before. Compared to that university, the UT has a more feminine (working) culture according to her. The distribution is visible in Figure 3.

Figure 3*Scale feminine versus masculine culture at UT*

Thirteen female leaders placed the UT between neutral and masculine on the scale with the relatively high number of men in leadership or high ranking positions as their main argument. Female leaders mentioned the number of men in the Executive board (2 out of 3), and the number of male directors of all faculties and services (11 out of 14). Moreover, the high number of male professors and department chairs was mentioned (152 out of 195). However, it was emphasised that the number of male deans (3 out of 5) and male vice-deans (8 out of 11) is 'finally' straightening.

Three interviewees stated that women get less chances than men at the UT. They argued that women really have to fight to get into a higher position. Multiple interviewees told that this is why a female colleague left the UT and is in a higher position somewhere else now. Moreover, they stated that the university's policy on sector plans and quota is not executed well. For example, only men got accepted for some new positions. One interviewee said:

"All the full professors that were hired, are male [...]" (Interview 2, academic leader).

In addition to this, male thinking and gender bias at the UT, portraying a masculine (working) culture in the organisation, were used as arguments. However, it was also emphasised that the culture already moved towards the feminine side, compared to the (working) culture in the past.

Interviewees that perceive that the university's (working) culture is between neutral and masculine, but closer to neutral, stated that the organisation is closer to neutral, because the UT does have a lot of attention for diversity and inclusivity. Therefore, female leaders mainly perceive the UT as masculine because of the high number of male leaders compared to female leaders, and the masculine (working) culture in the organisation. However, it was stated that the UT was even more masculine in the past, and a shift has begun.

4.4.3.1 Desired (working) culture and improvements

Twelve female leaders explained that a balance of femininity and masculinity, or neutrality, is needed in the (working) culture of the UT. The masculine focus should make place for a more balanced view. The head of a unit within a service department explained:

"I think it's about finding a good balance. [...] Both women and men make good contributions, the female qualities and male qualities, we need a good mixture. I think that is what brings the organisation the best" (Interview 9, service leader).

Another interviewee added:

"I think we should strive for such a balance, but not at the expense of quality, knowledge and skills" (Interview 3, service leader).

Moreover, awareness of the existing gender bias within the organisation is necessary. This should be the case for employees, but also for students. One interviewee emphasised at the end of her interview:

"[...] As long as we focus on awareness" (Interview 16, service leader).

Furthermore, interviewees explained that there should be an organisational focus on equal pay between men and women, and that women in leadership positions should support each other. In addition, the need for female leader role models was emphasised by eight interviewees. Women need to be represented in the organisation, and it should be shown that they get chances at this university as well. Three interviewees said that it differs per faculty or service to what extent the UT has a masculine versus a feminine culture. One interviewee said:

"For example, when I walk around at ET, I think it's strongly masculine, the same for TNW. However, at BMS or at ITC, it's much less. So in general I would say, at the masculine side, but with the comment that there are a lot of separate islands within [the organisation]"
(Interview 15, academic leader).

A service leader stated that the academic side of the organisation is rather masculine, and the service side is somewhat more neutral. She added:

"Surely, the top of the service departments is still predominantly masculine, but the service departments themselves are fairly neutral, I think. However, a woman at the top is still difficult" (Interview 7, service leader).

In other words, female leaders think a balance between female and male qualities is needed within all the parts of the UT.

There do not seem to be strong differences between the perceptions of academic and service leaders. However, as visible in Table 14, five service leaders mentioned the need for equal pay for women and men within the organisation. Academic leaders did not mention this. It is possible that this is already solved within the academic world, or that people within the academic world are not discussing the differences in their salary with each other. Thus, the perceptions of academic and service leaders do not differ strongly, however, on the topic of equal pay, they do.

Table 14*Coding scheme desired (working) culture and direction at the University of Twente*

Main code	Freq.	Sub codes	Academic leaders*	Service leaders *	Total interviews *	Freq. code total**
Desired culture	24	Balance F/M	6	7	12	13
		Culture more F/less M	4	4	8	11
		Culture more M/less F	0	0	0	0
Desired improvements	31	Role models	5	3	8	12
		Awareness of gender (bias)	3	4	7	9
		Equal pay	0	5	5	6
		Women should support each other	1	3	4	4

Note. F = feminine, M = masculine

*Number of interviewees that named this challenge.

**Total number of times this challenge was named in all interviews combined.

4.4.4 Organisational support

Interviewees have different opinions on the organisational support they get from the UT. Two interviewees do not feel organisational support. They argued that it is hard to grow in the organisation, there is (still) a gender bias, and there are no good role models. Ten interviewees do feel supported, however, not always specifically because they are women. They explained that they can grow in the organisation, that the UT is innovative, that there is good communication for opportunities at the UT, and that they feel support from their colleagues and supervisors. One interviewee stated:

“I feel support in the sense that I know there are trajectories and things, also mainly for women and female talent, to maintain and support women. I feel support through my own supervisor. If I would have a problem and go to him, I am certain that he would do something with it” (Interview 17, service leader).

Moreover, eight interviewees stated they feel organisational support, but also not, at the same time. They used arguments from both sides to explain their answers. Therefore, there are differences in how female leaders at the UT perceive organisational support.

Perceptions on organisational support do not differ strongly between academic and service leaders. Service leaders seem to focus more on the possibility of growth within the organisation, whereas academic leaders focus more on the lack of role models or supervision of their supervisors. Moreover, two academic leaders explained that they did feel organisational support when they got hired, but that the UT is not using their skills to their full potential now. One of them explained:

“I don’t have the feeling that they see someone with special skills and leadership abilities. Yes, it sounds very selfish, but I think they could deploy me better, make more use of me [...]. If I were a man... I don’t know, I don’t know that, but I don’t feel seen in this respect”
 (Interview 15, academic leader).

Thus, there are minor differences in how academic and service leaders perceive organisational support.

Table 15
Coding scheme organisational support

Main code	Sub codes	Academic leaders	Service leaders	Total interviews
Organisational support	Yes	4	6	10
	Both yes and no	4	4	8
	No	2	0	2

Note: Number of interviewees that indicated whether they received organisational support.

5. Discussion

The following sections will summarize the main findings of this study, followed by the theoretical contribution, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. Last, a conclusion based on all findings will be made.

5.1 Main findings

This study aimed to provide insight into the role of gender in female leadership, looking at the challenges and strategies for female leaders, and their reflections on working culture and organisational support. It was found that gender almost always seems to play a role in leadership. Female leaders explain that gender plays both in favour and against them in their role, or only against them, showing that being a female leader seems to be a disadvantage compared to being a male leader. This not only emphasizes the necessity of finding a good balance between viewpoints, backgrounds, expertise, and ultimately, genders of leaders, but also shows a need for focus on the working culture and (possible) organisational support. Nevertheless, this study also found that in some cases, female leaders do not or only lightly perceive characteristics or actions to be related to gender, even though theoretical constructs clearly show a relation between the construct and gender.

Female leaders need to deal with a variety of challenges, however, the challenges go beyond the gender-based challenges presented in previous literature, focussing on gender bias in the form of *gendered norms paradoxes* (see Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Hannum et al., 2015; Mastracci & Bowman, 2015, Zheng et al., 2018a) and *leadership-mindsets* (see Bakan, 1966; Schock et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2018b), or *positive action* (see Cardador et al., 2022; Lambe & Maes, 2018). This study found that female leaders in higher education also encounter *relational aspects of leadership*, *emotional aspects of leadership*, *intrinsic challenges*, and *competitive culture*. Thus, next to challenges in which gender plays a main role, female leaders need to deal with team dynamics, emotions, and unexpected changes or challenges that the outside world brings in which gender plays a relative smaller role. Based on theory, gender plays a role in these challenges in the shape of characteristics fitting better with women or with men. However, this does not always align with the perceptions of the role of gender that female leaders have. For example, in contrast with what female leaders think, women show more affective empathy than men do (e.g. Christov-Moore et al., 2014), which can be of importance in the challenge *emotional aspects of leadership*. Nevertheless, female leaders cannot quite put their finger on the exact role of gender. They often perceive that their gender plays a role in the form of a combination of gender and other factors, the latter consisting of a mixture of experience, character, skills and ambition, culture (changing compared to

the past), cultures (different nationalities), and hierarchy. The theorised challenges of *female leader identity development* (see Derks et al., 2016; Ely, 1994; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) and *status levelling burden* (Cardador et al., 2022) were not found in this study.

Most strategies female leaders use to deal with these challenges as presented in previous literature, are confirmed. A large part of these strategies can be regarded as more empathic, or including more feminine traits such as the focus on building and maintaining relationships, than other possible strategies leaders could have used. Female leaders use the strategies *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2016), *developing leadership traits* (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021), and *creating a supportive environment* (see Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2021; Derks et al., 2016; Ely et al., 2011; Norander & Zenk, 2023; Russell et al., 2023). Gender does not play a role in these strategies, except for the more feminine focus on relationships in the latter. *Reframing behaviour* as presented by Zheng et al. (2018a) and Jamjoom and Mills (2023) was not found, however, it is possible that this is a strategy that is used by female leaders unconsciously. In total, study expanded the existing body of literature by adding ten other strategies, creating a total of 13 strategies, within five different clusters: *systematic approach*, *building team cohesion*, *leadership development*, *persuasive communication*, and *conflict resolution*. In seven out of 13 strategies, gender plays a (minor) role. However, the five clusters do not show a strong role for gender, except for *conflict resolution*, which mainly includes a more masculine focus on assertiveness. Moreover, building team cohesion mainly consists of strategies in which feminine traits are more helpful (e.g. focus on building/maintaining relationships and focus on sensitivity).

The working cultures in higher education institutions can be perceived as rather masculine (e.g. Fotaki, 2013), as also found in this study. Even though the high number of male leaders within an institution can cause this feeling, it is mainly the culture that should be changed. Female leaders think a culture change like this could be started by showing more role models, awareness, equal pay, and support from other women. Just placing a balanced number of leaders or people together within an organisation, does not lead to a balanced, diverse, and inclusive environment. Organisational support can play an important role here. Among others, efforts to foster understanding, collaboration, and equity are highly needed. This study found that female leaders think they do receive organisational support, however, half of them also think they don't sometimes. This shows that even though a start has been made, there is not enough organisational support yet for female leaders to strongly believe that the organisation stands behind them.

Last, differences between academic and service leaders seem to be minimal. To a certain extent, there are differences in the challenges they face, because academic leaders mainly navigate in the academic world. Furthermore, they are not always in their position because of their expertise

in managing, which can cause them to have more difficulties with managing certain challenges. Moreover, all academic leaders experienced some form of gender bias in their role as a leader, whereas about half of the service leaders did. In addition, service leaders seem to be *using conflict resolution* strategies less than academic leaders, while they are using *building team cohesion* strategies more. It is possible that this shows an underlying problem in which academic leaders simply have less time to spend or do not want to spend time on building team cohesion and therefore need to use more conflict resolution strategies. However, it is also possible that they choose to use this strategy more because of the more masculine environment of academia they work in. Therefore, there are still gender-related challenges, but also less gender-related challenges female leaders in higher education need to deal with, often acting in a mainly masculine (working) culture with marginal organisational support.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

This study complements the existing theories on challenges and strategies for female leaders within their positions. First, previous theoretical insights focused mainly on challenges for women getting into leadership positions (instead of staying there) (see Bechtoldt et al., 2019; Offermann et al., 2020; Smith, 2015; Zeler et al., 2022), and were often based mainly on gender (e.g. *gender bias* and *positive action*). This study found four new challenges on different issues, in which gender also plays a, somewhat less obvious, role (*relational aspects of leadership*, *emotional aspects of leadership*, *intrinsic challenges*, and *competitive culture*). In *relational aspects of leadership* and *emotional aspects of leadership*, female leaders often perceive that their gender plays a role in combination with something else (nationality, culture, personality/experience/skills, or hierarchy). This aligns with theoretical insights of a more feminine focus on building and maintaining relationships and empathy (e.g. Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Koenig et al., 2011). In *intrinsic challenges* and *competitive culture*, female leaders do not really perceive a role of gender, while theoretical insights show that masculine traits on decisiveness and pragmatism and a focus on performance do play a role in these situations (e.g. Agut et al., 2022).

Existing literature did not (extensively) focus on strategies female leaders use. This study takes a broader theoretical perspective on the strategies female leaders use, borrowing existing strategies, not specifically for (female) leaders, from other research fields. Female leaders also experience three of these strategies (*growth mindset*, *developing leadership traits*, and *creating a supportive environment*), and the strategy-scala was broadened with ten new strategies, all strategies divided over five clusters.

Last, this study is one of the first, if not the first, to compare the experiences of academic and service leaders within higher education. This shows a new approach on research focusing on

leadership, by separating on categories of leaders. A comparison like this can show how different skillsets and priorities can lead to diversity in challenges, strategies, perceptions on the role of gender, and support-needs from organisations. This study found that service leaders use *building team cohesion* more, and *conflict resolution* strategies less than academic leaders.

5.3 Practical implications

Gender plays a comprehensive role in leadership, and female leaders do not always perceive this. This study offers them a framework explaining how gender is related to leadership, its challenges, and strategies that can be used. This awareness can help them advocate for the right measures to reach inclusive and supportive organisational cultures. In addition, female leaders can learn from the theoretical descriptions of the new strategies that were found. Using a *systematic approach* might help them to focus more on the factual side of issues, and it is advised to *build team cohesion* to focus on team-related issues. Moreover, female leaders should develop themselves in terms of *leadership development* strategies, developing their leadership traits, growth mindset, creating a supportive environment, and differentiate between their roles. They can use *persuasive communication* strategies to ensure effectiveness and convince colleagues. Last, it can help female leaders to read how other female leaders *resolve conflicts*. This can ultimately help them to stay in their positions as female leaders.

Organisations can play an essential role in facilitating and supporting a healthy and equal working environment for all leaders. It is important that organisations do not just focus on the specific number of female leaders within their organisation. This study showed that this can help for the perceptions on the masculinity of a working culture, however, it is not the only thing an organisation should focus on. Getting chances, following sector plans and quota, paying attention to diversity and inclusion, and reducing male thinking and gender bias are of high importance. Therefore, organisations should ensure a supportive environment for female leaders, creating a balanced working culture with attention for work-life balance, which can also increase well-being. Understanding the necessary tailored support and interventions in working culture that are needed, can ultimately also help to address the academic pipeline leak.

This study shows that academic leaders perceive more gender bias in their roles than service leaders do. Organisations in which this is also the case, could analyse why this difference arises. Moreover, they could study if there is anything organisations can do to reduce this. In addition, service leaders focus less on conflict resolution, and more on team building. Academic leaders could learn from this, as it might take less time to focus on team building than on fixing problems, possibly resulting from weak team connections. This can result in more time for academic leaders to do research and improved quality of individual work and teamwork (Blackmore, 2014; Cardador et al.,

2022). In addition, a clearer understanding of the challenges service leaders deal with and the strategies they use can result in individual and team productivity (Braun et al., 2016; Cardador et al., 2022). Thus, this study shows possible lessons for (higher education) organisations and female leaders, and aims to raise awareness in society on challenges female leaders face.

5.4 Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is that the results are based on perceptions of stories of female leaders only. In other words, this study does not compare female leaders to leaders that identify with other genders, mainly, male leaders. Thus, this study might have missed potential insights into gender dynamics within organisations and does not look into, among others, differences between female and male leaders in terms of encountered challenges and possible strategies to use. However, this study focused on the unique perspectives of female leaders. Although a comparison could offer additional context and findings, the absence of this comparison does not invalidate the relevance of the findings in this study.

Second, this study did not look into leadership in the organisation as a whole. Perspectives of third individuals, such as team members, were not included. This limits the completeness of the findings, as interactions within the broader organisational context were only studied from one side, missing a thorough nuanced perspective. Furthermore, due to the relative small scope of this study, the differences between the various hierarchical levels of leadership a university holds, were not taken into account. Both of these insights could enrich the findings further.

Third, the results are not quantifiable, meaning that it is not possible to explain the conclusions in measurable numbers. Thus, objectivity and generalisability of the findings are limited, however, the strength of this study lies in its depth and extensiveness.

Last, this study used the UT in the Netherlands as a case. The UT is a technical university, located in the east of the Netherlands. This context can include female leaders that are focused on beta outcomes, and act rather directly. At other universities, educational institutions, non-profit and governmental organisations, results should correspond. However, in the corporate sector, start-ups, or in healthcare institutions, old traditions in the form of specific hierarchies might still be in place, and they might face challenges regarding negotiation skills (as women are generally less assertive) and visibility (do they get the recognition they deserve?). In addition, these sectors might attract other types of leaders. Therefore, in these contexts, results might differ.

5.5 Suggestions for future research

For future research, it would be promising to study how the constructs studied in this study are connected. First, the role of working culture and organisational support in female leadership could

be analysed. This study emphasised that placing female leaders within an organisation does not automatically create a balanced working culture. Therefore, a study focussing on this could show, among others, new strategies for organisations that lead to an inclusive culture supporting gender diversity.

Second, work-life integration in (female) leadership and the role of organisational support in this matter could be studied. This study found that it can be difficult for female leaders to maintain a healthy work-life balance. In addition, this can also start playing a larger role for male leaders because of the more balanced gender-roles in today's households. Moreover, the normalised ways of working can be studied and re-evaluated.

Third, using a quantitative method to study challenges and strategies in female leadership can show a more objective and generalisable result. This kind of research could focus on female leaders and their leadership styles, the extent to which they encounter challenges and use certain strategies, and if their leadership style has an influence on this. In addition, this kind of research could focus on masculine and feminine character traits that can help or work against leaders in their positions, focusing on the gender aspect as well. This could ultimately help (female) leaders to grow personally and perform optimally. Thus, these three suggestions for future research include a more in-depth focus on the different constructs analysed in this study and how they are connected.

5.6 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the challenges female leaders in the context of higher education face within their position, and the strategies they use to deal with these challenges. In addition, this study focused on the perceived role of gender in leadership. The findings emphasised that, in addition to challenges in which gender plays a main role, female leaders also need to deal with challenges that are rooted elsewhere. Moreover, this study showed new strategies and shed light on the wants and needs of female leaders regarding a balanced working culture and organisational support. In other words, female leaders are still facing challenges related to their gender, however, these are not the only challenges they face. Female leaders are able to deal with these challenges using various strategies. However, it is organisations, meaning the whole institution including all of its employees and/or members, that should prioritise creating a balance in their working climate or culture. Ideally not only on the work floor, but also by conveying this message to the outside world. Nevertheless, this study showed that higher education institutions are still facing a major challenge trying to integrate gender equity and inclusiveness in the leadership sphere. As emphasised earlier, placing certain people at certain places within an organisation does not lead to a balanced, diverse, and inclusive environment without misconduct. Creating a fitting culture and atmosphere, in addition to conveying support, are key. However, the number of good examples in which all of these things are

integrated, is rather low. In other words, there is not only a long way to gender equality in higher education, but also in society at large.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Variable	Nr	Question (<i>answer option</i>)
<i>Before the interview is scheduled</i>	-	This is an interview for a study focused on female leaders, working at the University of Twente for at least 0.5 years.
<i>General information about the interview and participant & demographics</i>	-	<p>Thank you for your interest and participation in this study.</p> <p>This study focuses on the experiences of female leaders within their leadership roles in higher education. I would like to know more about your experiences with difficult situations and situations you look back on with satisfaction, within your leadership role. Therefore, it is of high importance that you feel safe to share your experiences and your vision.</p> <p>Everything you tell me, is confidential and will stay between us. Thus, all of the data will be fully anonymised: everything that could be traced back to a person, will be masked. Therefore, I would like to ask you not to share any personal identifiable data with me. My supervisors, both working at the UT, will not get to know who I spoke with. If they are helping me during my data-analysis, they will only see the fully anonymised transcripts. Of course, this also means that they will not know for which faculty or service department you work.</p> <p>Do you have any questions about this, or about the study?</p> <p>Regarding the interview, please answer as honestly and freely as possible. If there is a question you do not want to answer, do not hesitate to tell me. There are three things we need to discuss before the interview starts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) I would like to record the interview, to transcribe the information you provide. The recording will be discarded after a transcription was made. Do you agree with this?

- 2) You can withdraw from participating in this study at any time, without having to explain yourself.
- 3) Any information you share, will be fully anonymised and handled with confidentiality. The information will only be used to write a master's thesis, which will be published on the thesis repository home of the University of Twente. No identifiable information will be included in the thesis.

[Note. Do not forget to start recording and discuss these questions again.]

General & demographics	Qa	What is your age?
	Qb	What is your nationality?
	Qc	What is the highest level of education you completed? (<i>secondary education [vmbo/havo/vwo], mbo, hbo, wo bachelor, wo master</i>)
	Qd	Which study programme did you follow?
	Qe	What is your role at the University of Twente?
	Qf	How long have you worked in this role?
	Qg	Why can your function be considered as a leadership position?
	Qh	How many people do you supervise?
	Qi	Do you see yourself as a leader?
	Qj	How would you describe yourself as a leader? What kind of leader are you?

<i>Explanation of the interview structure</i>	-	The interview structure consists of three themes. The first two themes are focussed on your experiences as a leader. First, I would like to talk with you about difficult situations you experienced as a leader. Second, I would like to talk about the situations you look back on with satisfaction in your role as a leader. In addition, I am interested in the role of gender in these situations. Third, I hope we can speak about the role of gender in leadership. I would like to talk about leading others as a women in general, and within the UT.
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<p><i>Theme start 1:</i> Experiences- Challenges</p>	<p>-</p>	<p>So, let's first talk about some difficult situations you experienced as a leader.</p>
<p>Challenges and strategies</p>	<p>Q1.1</p>	<p>Can you please think of a difficult situation with other employees or colleagues you faced as a leader? Could you give a detailed account of the situation? (<i>open, critical incident</i>)</p> <p>Can you tell me what happened? What role did you play in the situation? What was the outcome of the situation? Why do you think this was a difficult situation? What strategy did you use to deal with the situation? Would you take on a different strategy to deal with the situation in the future? Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How? Can you explain? Why not?</p>
<p><i>Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's)</i></p>	<p>Q1.2</p>	<p>Can you please think of another difficult situation with other employees or colleagues you faced as a leader? Could you give a detailed account of the situation? (<i>open, critical incident</i>)</p> <p>Can you tell me what happened? What role did you play in the situation? What was the outcome of the situation? Why do you think this was a difficult situation? What strategy did you use to deal with the situation? Would you take on a different strategy to deal with the situation in the future? Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How? Can you explain? Why not?</p>
<p><i>Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's)</i></p>	<p>Q1.3</p>	<p>Can you please think of another difficult situation with other employees or colleagues you faced as a leader? Could you give a detailed account of the situation? (<i>open, critical incident</i>)</p> <p>Can you tell me what happened?</p>

What role did you play in the situation?
 What was the outcome of the situation?
 Why do you think this was a difficult situation?
 What strategy did you use to deal with the situation?
 Would you take on a different strategy to deal with the situation in the future?
 Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How?
 Can you explain? Why not?

<i>Theme start 2:</i> Experiences- Satisfactory situations	-	Now, I would like to talk about a situation on which you look back with satisfaction.
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Q2.1 Can you please think of a situation you look back on with satisfaction? Could you give a detailed account of the situation?
(open, critical incident)

Can you tell me what happened?
 What role did you play in the situation?
 What was the outcome of the situation?
 Why do you think this was a satisfactory situation?
 Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How?
 Can you explain? Why not?

<i>Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's)</i>	Q2.2	Can you please think of another a situation you look back on with satisfaction? Could you give a detailed account of the situation? <i>(open, critical incident)</i>
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Can you tell me what happened?
 What role did you play in the situation?
 What was the outcome of the situation?
 Why do you think this was a satisfactory situation?
 Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How?
 Can you explain? Why not?

Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's) Q2.3 Can you please think of another a situation you look back on with satisfaction? Could you give a detailed account of the situation? (*open, critical incident*)

Can you tell me what happened?
 What role did you play in the situation?
 What was the outcome of the situation?
 Why do you think this was a satisfactory situation?
 Do you think that your gender played a role in this situation? How?
 Can you explain? Why not?

Theme start 3: General female leadership - Third, I would like to talk about being a leader as a women, both -in general- and specifically within the UT.

Role of gender Q3 How do you see the role of gender in leadership? Does it play a role, and how? Could you give me an example?

Direction role of gender Q4 Have you ever felt your gender to be working against or in favour of you in your role?

Focus on gender within organisation Q5.1 If you would place the UT on this scale, where would you place it? Why? Could you give me an example?

Feminine-----Neutral-----Masculine

Evaluation focus on gender within organisation Q5.2 What is your opinion on this? Should UT be more masculine, more feminine, or more neutral?

Organisational support on gender Q6 Do you feel the organisation (UT) is supporting you in your role as a female leader? How?

Addition Q7 Is there anything you would like to add about the topics we discussed, or related to the topics we discussed?

Outro - Thank you for your participation. After this interview, I will transcribe our conversation, anonymize it and send it to you. Then, if there is anything you would like to change or cut, you are free to

do so. After that, I will use the anonymized data for my thesis.

Do you have any questions left?

Appendix B: Interview guide in Dutch

Variable	Nr	Question (<i>answer option</i>)
<i>Before the interview is scheduled</i>	-	Dit is een interview voor een onderzoek naar vrouwelijke leidinggevendenden, die op zijn minst 0,5 jaar voor de Universiteit Twente werken.
<i>General information about the interview and participant & demographics</i>	-	<p>Bedankt voor je interesse in en deelname aan deze studie.</p> <p>Dit onderzoek focust zich op de ervaringen van vrouwelijke leidinggevendenden binnen hun leiderschapsrol in het hoger onderwijs. Ik zou graag meer te weten komen over uw ervaringen met moeilijke situaties en situaties waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt, binnen uw rol als leidinggevende. Daarom is het erg belangrijk dat u zich veilig voelt om uw ervaringen en visie met mij te delen.</p> <p>Alles dat u mij vertelt, is vertrouwelijk en blijft tussen ons. Dus, de data wordt volledig geanonimiseerd: alles wat herleidbaar zou kunnen zijn tot een persoon, zal worden gemaskeerd. Daarom wil ik je ook vragen zo weinig mogelijk persoonlijk identificeerbare informatie met mij te delen. Mijn begeleiders, beide werkende voor de UT, krijgen niet te horen met wie ik gesproken heb. Als ze mij helpen tijdens mijn data-analyse, zien ze alleen de volledige geanonimiseerde transcripten. Natuurlijk betekent dit dus ook dat zij niet weten voor welke faculteit, dienst of afdeling u werkt.</p> <p>Heeft u hier vragen over? Of heeft u vragen over de studie?</p> <p>Aangaande het interview, antwoord alstublieft zo eerlijk en vrijuit mogelijk. Als er een vraag is die u niet wilt beantwoorden, twijfel dan niet om dat te zeggen. Er zijn drie dingen die we moeten bespreken voordat het interview begint:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Graag zou ik een audio opname maken van het interview om de informatie die u geeft te transcriberen. De opname

zal weggegooid worden nadat de transcriptie is gemaakt.

Bent u het hiermee eens?

- 2) U kunt zich te allen tijde terugtrekken uit het interview, zonder opgave van redenen.
- 3) Alle informatie die u verstrekt, wordt volledig geanonimiseerd en wordt vertrouwelijk behandeld. De informatie wordt alleen gebruikt om een masterscriptie te schrijven, die gepubliceerd zal worden op de *thesis repository home* van de Universiteit Twente. Er zal geen identificeerbare informatie opgenomen worden in de scriptie.

[Note. *Do not forget to start recording and discuss these questions again.*]

General & demographics	Qa	Wat is uw leeftijd?
	Qb	Wat is je nationaliteit?
	Qc	Wat is het hoogste niveau onderwijs dat u heeft afgemaakt? (<i>secondary education [vmbo/havo/vwo], mbo, hbo, wo bachelor, wo master</i>)
	Qd	Welke studie heeft u gevolgd?
	Qe	Wat is uw rol aan de Universiteit Twente?
	Qf	Hoe lang heeft u in deze rol gewerkt?
	Qg	Waarom is uw functie een leidinggevende functie?
	Qh	Aan hoeveel mensen geeft u leiding?
	Qi	Ziet u uzelf als leider?
	Qj	Hoe zou u uzelf omschrijven als leidinggevende? Wat voor soort leider bent u?
<i>Explanation of the interview structure</i>	-	Het interview is gestructureerd aan de hand van drie thema's. De eerste twee thema's focussen op uw ervaringen als leidinggevende. Ten eerste, zou ik het graag met u hebben over moeilijke situaties die u ervaart als leidinggevende. Ten tweede, zou ik graag met u

		<p>praten over de situaties waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt.</p> <p>Daarnaast ben ik benieuwd naar de rol van gender in deze situaties.</p> <p>Ik hoop dat we het kunnen hebben over het leidinggeven als vrouw in het algemeen, en binnen de UT.</p>
<i>Theme start 1:</i>	-	Dus, laten we het eerst hebben over uw ervaringen met moeilijke situaties in uw rol als leidinggevende.
<i>Experiences- Challenges</i>		
<i>Challenges and strategies</i>	Q1.1	<p>Kunt u alstublieft een moeilijke situatie die u hebt meegemaakt als leidinggevende met andere medewerkers of collega's in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (<i>open, critical incident</i>)</p> <p>Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?</p> <p>Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?</p> <p>Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?</p> <p>Waarom vond u dit een moeilijke situatie?</p> <p>Welke strategie heb je gebruikt om met de situatie om te gaan?</p> <p>Zou u in de toekomst een andere strategie aannemen om met de situatie om te gaan?</p> <p>Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?</p>
<i>Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's)</i>	Q1.2	<p>Kunt u alstublieft nog een moeilijke situatie die u hebt meegemaakt als leidinggevende met andere medewerkers of collega's in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (<i>open, critical incident</i>)</p> <p>Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?</p> <p>Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?</p> <p>Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?</p> <p>Waarom vond u dit een moeilijke situatie?</p> <p>Welke strategie heb je gebruikt om met de situatie om te gaan?</p> <p>Zou u in de toekomst een andere strategie aannemen om met de situatie om te gaan?</p>

Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?

Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's) Q1.3 Kunt u alstublieft nog een moeilijke situatie die u hebt meegemaakt als leidinggevende met andere medewerkers of collega's in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (*open, critical incident*)

Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?

Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?

Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?

Waarom vond u dit een moeilijke situatie?

Welke strategie heb je gebruikt om met de situatie om te gaan?

Zou u in de toekomst een andere strategie aannemen om met de situatie om te gaan?

Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?

Theme start 2: Experiences-Satisfactory situations - Nu zou ik graag meer horen over situaties waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt.

Q2.1 Kunt u alstublieft een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (*open, critical incident*)

Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?

Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?

Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?

Waarom is dit een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt?

Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?

Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's) Q2.2 Kunt u alstublieft nog een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (*open, critical incident*)

Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?
 Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?
 Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?
 Waarom is dit een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt?
 Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?

Repetition (3 situations total, using the same Q's) Q2.3 Kunt u alstublieft nog een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt in gedachten nemen? Kunt u een gedetailleerde beschrijving van de situatie geven? (*open, critical incident*)

Kunt u me vertellen wat er gebeurde?
 Welke rol heeft u daar zelf in gespeeld?
 Wat was de uitkomst van de situatie?
 Waarom is dit een situatie waar u met tevredenheid op terugkijkt?
 Denkt u dat gender een rol speelde in deze situatie? Hoe? Kunt u dat uitleggen? Waarom (niet)?

Theme start 3: General female leadership - Als laatste, zou ik het graag met u hebben over het leidinggeven als vrouw in het algemeen, én binnen de UT.

Role of gender Q3 Hoe ziet u de rol van gender in leiderschap? Speelt het een rol, en hoe? Kunt u een voorbeeld geven?

Direction role of gender Q4 Heeft u ooit het gevoel gehad dat uw gender tegen of juist voor u werkte in uw rol?

Focus on gender within organisation Q5.1 Als u de UT op deze schaal zou moeten plaatsen, waar zou u deze dan plaatsen? Waarom? Kunt u een voorbeeld geven?

Feminien-----Neutraal-----Masculien

Evaluation focus on gender within organisation Q5.2 Wat is hier uw mening over? Zou de UT meer masculien, meer feminien of neutraler moeten zijn?

Organisational support on gender Q6 Voelt u zich gesteund door de organisatie (UT) in uw rol als vrouwelijke leidinggevende? Hoe?

Addition	Q7	Is er iets dat u zou willen toevoegen over de onderwerpen die we hebben besproken, of gerelateerd is aan de onderwerpen die we hebben besproken? Zo ja, wat?
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<i>Outro</i>	-	Bedankt voor uw deelname. Na het interview, zal ik ons gesprek transcriberen, anonimiseren en naar u sturen. Dan kunt u kijken of er iets is dat veranderd of weggehaald moet worden, en dat aangeven of zelf aanpassen. Daarna zal ik de geanonimiseerde data gebruiken voor het schrijven van mijn scriptie. Heeft u nog vragen?
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Appendix C: Coding scheme

Main code	Sub code
Role of gender	Yes, through family
	Yes, through finding a balance (gender/diversity)
	Yes, through gender (only)
	Yes, men would have approached this situation differently
	Yes, men would have been approached/treated differently in this situation
	Yes, women are more structured
	Yes, women get less chances
	Yes, women show softer side/more empathic side
	Yes, women take feelings more seriously
	Combination of gender and culture (is changing compared to the past)
	Combination of gender and culture (nationality)
	Combination of gender and experience/skills/personality/ambition
	Combination of gender and hierarchy
	I don't know
	Some leaders can show softer side/have more empathy
	No, gender does not play a role (here)
Strategies	Ask more/earlier questions
	Asking for legal advice
	Bond with (male) colleagues
	Confront publicly
	Consult others
	Create clear and open communication-climate
	Defending
	Develop leadership traits
	Differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague
	Fall back on procedures
	Framing: focus on goal
	Framing: focus on possibilities
	Framing: focus on well-being
	Get to know your team
	Growth mindset
	Instead of defending, ask questions/say no

Networking/connecting
 Not confront directly, but discuss general rules/norms
 Nudging
 Preparation of arguments
 Show trust

Challenges

Acting as temporary replacement
 Angry colleague/powerplay
 Asking for equal pay
 Assumptions based on service
 Colleague telling lies about you
 Colleagues undermining/not listening
 Competitive culture in academia
 Covid-19
 Dealing with sick colleague
 Degradation friend/colleague from function
 Difficult decisions
 Experienced colleague leaving
 Financial situation UT
 Gender bias
 Gender bias, specifically from male colleague
 Gender quota
 Having two roles
 Higher expectations when higher in hierarchy
 Managing senior staff
 Managing your friends
 More spotlight on leadership positions
 Non/bad functioning team member
 People in team clash
 Team under high (work)pressure
 Telling someone bad news

Desired (working)
 culture

Balance Feminine/Masculine

 Culture more Feminine/less Masculine
 Culture more Masculine/less Feminine

Desired improvements	Awareness of gender (bias) Equal pay Role models Women should support each other
Influence of gender in role	In favour of me Against me Both in favour & against me I don't know No role for me
Organisational support	Yes Both yes and no No

Appendix D: Full coding table perceptions role of gender

Main codes	Freq.	Sub codes	A*	S**	Total	Frequency code total	Sit./120 (132)
Role of gender	182	-					
		Yes, gender plays a role through:	27	31	58	77	43
		Family	4	3	7	10	3
		Finding a balance (gender/diversity)	6	3	9	17	3
		Gender (only)	3	3	6	9	5
		Men would have approached this situation differently	3	5	8	9	7
		Men would have been approached/treated differently in this situation	4	3	7	10	9
		Women are more structured	0	2	2	2	2
		Women get less chances	1	2	3	3	3
		Women show softer side/more empathic side	4	6	10	11	6
		Women take feelings more seriously	2	4	6	6	5
		Yes, it's a combination of gender and ...	19	16	35	54	43
		Gender and culture (is changing compared to the past)	4	4	8	8	5
		Gender and culture (nationality)	4	4	8	12	9
		Gender and experience/skills/matching/ambition	8	6	14	28	23
		Gender and hierarchy	3	2	5	6	6
		I don't know/neutral	8	4	12	16	13

I don't know	5	2	7	11	10
Some leaders can show softer side/have more empathy	3	2	5	5	3
No, gender does not play a role (here)	10	17	17	35	33
Total	10	10	20	329	231

*A = Academic leaders

**S = Service leaders

Appendix E: Full coding table perceptions strategies

Main codes	Freq.	Sub codes	A*	S**	Total	Frequency code total
Strategy	145	-				
		Systemic approach	9	8	17	53
		<i>Investigation-based strategies</i>	9	8	17	47
		Consult others	8	7	15	32
		Preparation of arguments	5	4	9	11
		Ask more/earlier questions	1	1	2	3
		Asking for legal advice	0	1	1	1
		<i>Fall back on procedures</i>	2	2	4	6
		Building team cohesion	7	8	15	31
		<i>Create clear and open communication-climate</i>	7	7	14	25
		<i>Get to know your team</i>	0	4	4	4
		<i>Show trust</i>	0	2	2	2
		Leadership development	9	6	15	29
		<i>Develop leadership traits</i>	6	3	9	10
		<i>Growth mindset</i>	3	4	7	8
		<i>Create a supportive environment</i>	3	3	6	8
		Bond with (male) colleagues	2	2	4	4
		Networking/connecting	2	1	3	4
		<i>Differentiate between role as leader and role as friend/colleague</i>	1	1	2	3
		Persuasive communication	8	7	15	23
		<i>Framing</i>	8	7	15	16
		Focus on well-being	6	1	7	8
		Focus on possibilities	2	5	7	7
		Focus on goal	0	1	1	1
		<i>Nudging</i>	2	3	5	7
		Conflict resolution	4	2	6	9
		<i>Defence mechanisms</i>	4	0	4	6
		Instead of defending, ask questions/say no	3	0	3	4

Defending	1	0	1	2
<i>Confronting: yes or no?</i>	1	2	3	3
Not confront directly, but discuss general rules/norms	1	1	2	2
Confront publicly	0	1	1	1
<hr/> Total	10	10	20	145

*A = Academic leaders

**S = Service leaders

Appendix F: Full coding table perceptions challenges

Main codes	Freq.	Sub codes	A*	S**	Total	Frequency code total
Challenges	59	-				
		Relational aspects of leadership	9	10	19	46
		<i>Relations within team</i>	9	8	17	24
		Non/bad functioning team member	4	6	10	15
		Team under high (work)pressure	2	2	4	6
		People in team clash	2	0	2	2
		Experienced colleague leaving	1	0	1	1
		<i>Relations leader – team</i>	4	2	6	9
		Colleagues undermining/not listening	1	2	3	3
		Managing senior staff	1	2	3	4
		Dealing with sick colleague	1	0	1	1
		Acting as temporary replacement	1	0	1	1
		<i>Relations leader – peer / leader - own leader</i>	4	7	11	13
		Angry colleague/powerplay	3	5	8	10
		Asking for equal pay	0	1	1	1
		Colleague telling lies about you	1	0	1	1
		Higher expectations when higher in hierarchy	0	1	1	1
		Facing gender bias	10	6	16	26
		Gender bias	4	3	7	10
		Gender bias, specifically from male colleague	6	3	9	15
		Assumptions based on service	0	1	1	1
		Emotional aspects of leadership	5	5	10	12
		Telling someone bad news	1	3	4	4
		Managing your friends	1	2	3	3
		Degradation friend/colleague from function	1	1	2	2

Difficult decisions	2	0	2	2	
Having two roles	1	0	1	1	
Intrinsic challenges	4	4	8	9	
Financial situation UT	2	4	6	6	
Covid-19	2	1	3	3	
Competitive culture	5	0	5	5	
Positive action	1	2	3	3	
More spotlight on leadership positions	0	2	2	2	
Gender quota	1	0	1	1	
Total	-	10	10	20	101

*A = Academic leaders

**S = Service leaders