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Preparing to Fill the Leadership Gap: The Challenges Facing Women Leaders in Mid-Level Positions at Urban Community Colleges

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Women remain underrepresented in higher education and this disparity is high in executive-level positions. In 2016, women held 30.1% of higher education presidencies, and while that grew from 2011 (26.4%), and tripled since 1986 (9.5%) (Howard & Gagliardi, 2018). While community colleges had the highest percentage of women presidents in 2016 (36%), there is still a disproportionate rate compared to men (Gagliardi et al., 2017). By 2030, 90% of current community college presidents intend to retire (Tekle, 2012). This is exacerbated when looking at underrepresented populations like minorities and females (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Edwards (2017) posited that at the current rate of growth, it will take about 48 years for women to achieve presidential parity.

The challenges encountered by community college presidents may be similar to other college and university presidents, but many are intensified due to declining state funding and increased expectations of increased retention and graduation rates (McNaughtan, 2018). In higher education, women are underrepresented in senior-level leadership (Brower et al., 2019; Hardy, 2019) and it is important to look at mid-level women leaders to strengthen executive leadership at community colleges (Hardy, 2019).

In addition to general leadership challenges, women in leadership roles have had to navigate barriers like gender bias and stereotyping (Vial et al., 2016), work-life balance (Cavanaugh, 2020, Eddy, 2008; Gamble & Turner, 2015), lack of mentorship (Bower & Hums, 2013; Longman et al., 2019), and institutional climate and culture (Gill & Jones, 2013; Longman et al., 2019). While this literature is focused on women, most is focused on senior leaders and faculty who are women. This study is focused on mid-level women leaders who should be considered as possible executive-level leaders. This analysis assess the perception of mid-level women leaders on three levels: personal, professional, and organizational, and how these three relate to their positions. Because community colleges have varying levels of diversity, complexity, size, constituents, etc., we acknowledge that there are differences between urban, suburban, and rural community colleges and have limited our analysis to mid-level women leaders in urban community colleges. Recognizing and acknowledging the different leadership challenges faced by mid-level women leaders will help administrators

create more inclusive and supportive institutions for professional development and growth.

Significance of the Study

Leadership gaps and how to address them have been studied for over 20 years (Phillippe, 2016; Shults, 2001; Tekle, 2012). However, more research needs to be performed on women in mid-level leadership positions so that community college practitioners and leaders can have a better understanding of the challenges faced by mid-level women leaders who aspire to advance professionally. It is evident that there needs to be more professional development, mentorship opportunities, but it is also important to understand how these women leaders perceive institutional climates and cultures. Further, it is important to examine leadership pipelines (or the lack thereof) to ensure that opportunities exist with additional professional development and mentorship. It is important to for mid-level women leaders to hear each other's experiences and share their own so that they can better navigate the personal, professional, and organizational challenges that affect them. If mid-level women leaders are trained and aspire to larger leadership roles, they need training as well as encouragement and understanding.

Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of the personal, professional, and organizational challenges faced by women leaders in mid-level positions and how they navigate these sometimes unique challenges. A phenomenological approach was taken for this study because it allows us to "determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moutsakas, 1994, p. 13). This allowed the researchers to hear the stories of the participants in their own voices. The framework of this study was based on feminist theory because it allowed us to hear about how elements like patriarchies, oppression, and dominance affected the mid-level women leaders who were interviewed.

Urban locations were used as a result of their larger sizes and organizational complexities. This study focused on three urban community colleges in one state in the southeastern United States. Criterion sampling was used to form a purposive sample of diverse women leaders (Patton, 2002). To qualify, women had to be in a position with a dean or director title and working in one of the three urban community colleges under the study, and we were able to identify, recruit, and select ten participants.

Data Collection

Mid-level women leaders who met the study criteria were emailed an invitation to participate in our study. Those who agreed to participate were provided with an informed consent form which detailed the purpose of the study and information about the interview process. The email included a pre-interview survey to capture the participants' demographic information.

Based on a theoretical blueprint and the literature review, we created an interview protocol with 15 open-ended questions. After a pilot study with three mid-level women leaders, we performed one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with our ten participants. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to share personal experiences on their personal, professional, and organizational challenges and follow-up questions were asked to gather more details. The interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken. To protect our participants' anonymity, we used pseudonyms and did not use their professional roles as identifiers.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, the researchers used *epoché* and bracketing to attempt to set aside their previous experiences and beliefs to be able to understand the lived experiences of the participants more fully. For the phenomenological data analysis, we used Moutaskas' (1994) seven-step process: (a) listing and preliminary grouping, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, (d) final identification of the invariant constituents and

themes by application, (e) individual textural description, (f) individual structural description, and (g) textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience for each participant. We enhanced the trustworthiness, credibility and quality of the study through triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking, thick descriptions, and an audit trail.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Our study was focused on mid-level women leaders who were in positions of dean or director in an urban community college in one state. We increased the validity of the interview questions through peer review and a pilot test with three mid-level women leaders, but we acknowledge that because the questions were open-ended, some participants could possibly misinterpret the questions as intended and that the challenges described may have been misaligned with the researchers' expectations.

Summary of Major Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis: (a) leadership progression, (b) work-life balance, (c) mentorship and professional development, (d) communication, and (e) institutional climate and structure. Associated subthemes included mobility and relocation, family responsibilities, mentoring relationships, professional development and networking opportunities, and the absence of a clear and consistent leadership pipeline.

All participants reported challenges in work-life balance at some point in their careers. Most discussed family responsibilities, including caring for children and aging parents while maintaining busy work schedules. Most mentioned techniques they have used or are currently using to navigate this challenge, such as receiving support from family members, friends, and colleagues; managing expectations of themselves and others; or focusing on themselves.

All participants expressed the importance of mentorship and professional development. Each participant revealed she had been mentored,

but at the time of the study, only 5 participants had mentors. Nine participants believed it was also their responsibility to mentor others, mainly women with leadership aspirations. Regarding professional development, most participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities available to them due to various factors, such as budget constraints or professional development not being a priority for their institutional leadership.

Most of the participants in the study rated their current institutional climates as unfavorable. Participants cited several reasons for the negative ratings, including declining enrollment, ill-defined organizational structures, staff shortages, budget reductions, and the loss of key personnel due to downsizing. A majority described feelings of hopefulness that their institutional climates would improve in the near future. The challenges of institutional climate and organizational structure seemed to be the most difficult challenges to navigate, as most participants also expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of networking opportunities and an unclear or unpredictable *leadership pipeline* for aspiring leaders.

Findings Related to the Literature

The findings of this study share the stories of the shared experiences of women in mid-level positions in urban community colleges. Many of the findings support the findings of previous studies on women in leadership positions in higher education, although the current study is unique in discussing mid-level female leaders at community colleges. The findings are presented through the five emergent themes and the associated subthemes.

Leadership Progression

All ten participants had progressively advanced through different leadership experiences before landing in their current mid-level roles as deans or directors. Six had worked their entire careers within education, while four previously worked outside of academia. Four participants had experience working at four-year institutions, but the majority had only worked for two-year institutions.

Our study supports the notion of women being drawn to the community college sector (Cejda, 2008; Eddy, 2008; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Women support the core mission of community, open door access, and commitment to teaching (Cejda, 2008; Eddy, 2008). Townsend and Twombly (2007) described women as being essential to the base of the community college, both as students and employees. Our participants described their passion for their students, faculty, and staff as major reasons for being in their positions.

Our study confirms Eddy (2008) and Gamble and Turner (2015), affirming women are less assertive than men and tend to comply with suggestions from others to pursue progressive leadership roles. Many of those interviewed in our study were initially appointed to their positions on an interim basis; some were later hired permanently. Career advancement, for some became sporadic because of the nature of interim appointments. Eddy (2008) noted many women do not initially have goals of becoming senior leaders or presidents. Oftentimes it is by chance, and after years of upward progression in academic or student affairs roles, that a presidency becomes the logical next step in career progression (Eddy, 2008). In line with Gamble and Turner (2015), participants in the current study believed continuing to work hard in current roles would eventually lead to senior-level leadership opportunities.

Work-life Balance

Our findings were consistent with research on work-life balance challenges (Cejda, 2008; Eddy 2008; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Gill & Jones,2013). Our participants described maintaining full and busy lives, both personally and professionally, and all ten indicated work-life balance as a previous or current challenge. They also identified their biggest challenge as juggling dual roles at work and at home, in line with the difficulty in meeting society's expectations of maintaining a home while effectively leading at work (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Previous studies indicated women leaders' career decisions were influenced by the needs of their families (Cejda, 2008; Eddy, 2008; Gill & Jones, 2013). Ours supports this notion. Several participants in our study proclaimed an unwillingness to relocate for advanced job opportunities due to caring for children or aging parents, although they

understood this would limit them professionally. Eddy (2008) found women in mid-level positions to be greatly influenced by remaining at one (often smaller enrollment) college, which could mean fewer leadership experiences. Two participants in the current study expressed that they were not able to pursue doctoral degrees required for senior-level positions because of the time dedicated to their families and their current positions. Another interviewee indicated it was not possible for her to be outside of her home more than her current situation; if more time away from home was a requirement for attaining a senior-level position, she would wait a few years until her children are older.

The findings of our study support Eddy's (2008) suggestion that women presidents attributed their effectiveness as leaders to a stable home life. Likewise, the senior-level women leaders in Gill and Jones' (2013) study expressed the importance of integrating their careers with their personal lives. One participant in our study shared her family has always been a part of her career, and her children have grown up understanding her work responsibilities as being normal. Our participants also discussed attempting to navigate the challenges of work-life balance through various methods, including scheduling personal vacations, not bringing office work home in the evenings, using calendars and planners, and setting boundaries when accepting additional responsibilities at work. Moreover, we also confirm the importance of spousal support for women leaders (Eddy, 2008; Gill & Jones, 2013). Some participants described their spouses as being equal partners and assisting with family-related duties, including those typically ascribed to women.

The findings of our study are consistent with Gamble and Turner's (2015) proposal that work-life balance is a challenge for leaders who have children and those who do not. Three mid-level leaders interviewed for our study did not have any children, but these participants still expressed challenges with work-life balance. One participant described her biggest challenge as finding time to complete the requirements of the dissertation phase of her doctoral program. Another participant admitted to being so focused on her career that her marriage was impacted.

Mentorship and Professional Development

Our findings support previous studies on the importance of mentorship as well as professional development related to leadership. Our participants described people who had served as mentors to them, including senior-level administrators, peers, and non-academic leaders. Participants emphasized the significance of mentorship and professional development as leaders. They believed mentorship could be formal or informal, but relationships needed to be organic and not forced. Participants also believed as mid-level leaders, the onus was on them to pay it forward and offer mentorship to aspiring leaders in the pipeline.

Our study supports the findings of Gill and Jones (2013), who posited that women mentors tend to be models for balancing work and personal life as well as finding a way through institutional bureaucracies and hierarchies. Our participants shared that they have had several mentors who offered different benefits. Some mentors provided professional advice and guidance, while others provided personal and emotional support. This study also confirms Leatherwood and Williams (2008) who asserted leaders were able to benefit and learn from negative as well as positive experiences. Our participants expressed appreciation for mentors who were genuine and real with them and explained they were able to learn from *the good, the bad, and the ugly*.

Our study's findings supported Bower and Hums' (2013) notion that women leaders who did not have mentors felt they were losing opportunities to receive beneficial career advice, exposure, and support. Some participants in our study did not have a mentor at the time the research was conducted, but they commented on feeling as if they were on their own guide. One participant, in search of a mentor, professed feelings of envy for those who have been positively impacted by mentorship.

Our findings contradict the work of Linehan and Scullion (2008) who found that since the pool of senior-level women leaders is smaller, there are fewer women to mentor mid-level women in the pipeline. Likewise, mid-level leaders in our study described having positive experiences with both men and women as mentors, but the participants were more likely to have women as mentors.

Regarding professional development, our study confirmed Gamble and Turner's (2015) findings, which emphasized the importance of supervisors providing relevant professional development experiences for aspiring women leaders. The participants in our study believed the responsibility was on them to provide professional development opportunities for their staff, especially in recent times when the opportunities have been limited due to financial constraints. Due to the lack of professional development during the period of our study because of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants said they have created their own opportunities or settled for webinars.

Communication

Our study supports the findings of Northouse (2016) who said gender roles impact women and their ability to lead. Several participants in our study reported professional challenges involving communication. Some participants disclosed tendencies to second-guess themselves when publicly sharing opinions and being influenced by a fear of being judged when making decisions. Other participants described feelings of loneliness and isolation at work due to their middle management positions. One participant felt she was shunned because her *spots were different* from other members in her department. She explained her preference for being upfront and honest, but some of her staff interpreted her communication style as being *too blunt*.

Our study's findings are consistent with Eagly et al. (2003) who found women are expected to be friendly and unselfish, while successful leaders need to be assertive and commanding. We also confirm the findings of Vial et al. (2016), who suggested women leaders who are considered to act in masculine ways are more likely to be disliked. Some of the participants in our study described the pressure of establishing and sustaining relationships. Several expressed the difficulty in attempting to be everything to everyone, a commonly expressed frustration of women in general.

Institutional Climate and Organizational Structure

Our findings contradict earlier ones on women leaders' perceptions of institutional climate. The senior-level leaders in Gill and Jones' (2013) study did not feel their institutions' climates were welcoming to women, but they believed positive change was possible. Townsend and Twombly (2007) asserted although community colleges' climates were not perfect, they were still good places of employment for women due to higher representation.

Our findings are inconsistent with the findings of Eddy (2008) and Yearout, Williams, and Brenner (2017) on discriminatory networking. Participants in our study did not discuss the idea of good old boy networks at their colleges as noted in earlier studies. Participants did discuss the lack of formal leadership pipelines and limited networking opportunities at their community colleges. However, they believed this was a challenge for most aspiring leaders, including men and women. Some expressed feeling separated from senior-level leadership, but they believed this was because of the individuals in the leadership positions, not gender. Others suggested their colleges' leadership funnels were narrow, and their administrative leaders did not do a good job retaining promising mid-level leaders.

Our participants reflected on experiences as mid-level community college leaders. A surprising finding was participants did not directly mention experiences related to gender discrimination, glass ceiling, or good old boy networks. Several participants who reported limited professional development programs, lacking networking opportunities, and ineffective leadership funnels also commented that these experiences were lacking for both women and men in mid-level positions at their institutions. Additionally, many participants believed there was more separation between senior-level and mid-level administration, making it difficult to communicate and collaborate.

A possible reason could be the impact of current community college conditions. Currently, two-year colleges are struggling with low student enrollment, personnel layoffs, and rapid changes in organizational structure and leadership. This decline within community colleges coincides with women moving into mid-level roles at higher rates. The present

issues are overshadowing some of the challenges women already face in their leadership roles.

It is important to note that this finding is not an indication that gender bias, stereotyping, and discrimination in higher education no longer exist. Feminist theory was used as a framework for our study to highlight the impact of patriarchy, hierarchies, oppression, and submission as expressed through the participants' narratives. The framework allowed us to determine the influence of those factors on the essence of the unique challenges faced by women in mid-level positions at community colleges. Although participants did not directly discuss experiences involving discrimination or bias, they did recount specific leadership challenges related to gender differences. These feelings stem from embedded patriarchal and hierarchal norms, and they have led to additional challenges for our participants.

Discussion

We provided participants with the opportunity to tell their stories, and through their experiences, it is evident that additional support is needed from community college practitioners and leaders to promote positive leadership development in mid-level women leaders. In an interview, bell hooks stressed, "structures cannot be changed by the individual; there has to be collective resistance, because you alone cannot change the nature of structures" (Lutz, 1993, p. 420).

As administrators seek to fill the current and future leadership gap in community colleges, it is necessary to focus on the challenges faced by women in mid-level positions. These leaders are waiting for the opportunity to advance into senior-level roles.

Implications for Practice

Although research focused on women leaders has expanded, our study focused on filling a gap in the literature by investigating the personal, professional, and organizational challenges impacting women and their professional trajectories. Mid-level women leaders consistently find themselves caught in the middle – personally, as they serve in dual

roles at work and home, and professionally, as they navigate between the senior-level leaders to whom they report and their own direct reports. To compound those challenges, mid-level leaders must also deal with the constant academic, political, social, and fiscal pressures faced by today's community colleges.

As community colleges continue to look for incoming presidents and vice presidents equipped to handle the needs of the modern community college, women in mid-level positions should be considered. However, because of the unique needs of these women – particularly those in complex, urban institutions – additional leadership training and development is needed. Creating an effective leadership pipeline filled with the right professional development and networking opportunities, could make this possible.

Our findings suggest actions to reduce the personal challenges faced by women in mid-level leadership positions. Women's perceptions of personal challenges include determining their next steps in leadership progression, earning the required doctoral degree for senior-level advancement, balancing career and personal lives, and unwillingness to relocate for senior-level career opportunities. Senior-level administrators should understand the personal challenges faced by mid-level women leaders. To combat these challenges, flexibility, additional guidance, alternative work options, and tuition assistance should be considered when possible. Traditional organizational structures, policies, and practices should be examined and altered to create more inclusive environments that promote growth and development for those seeking senior-level leadership.

It is also important for aspiring and current women leaders to reflect on their ultimate career goals and create a general plan for pursuing those goals. These female leaders should consider ways to balance their personal and professional responsibilities by seeking support from other women with similar experiences. Women who have not earned a doctoral or terminal degree prior to entering the mid-level role should consider the costs – in time as well as money - and the effect on their work-life balance.

Our findings further suggest the need to limit the impact of professional challenges faced by women in mid-level positions. The interviewees' perceptions of professional challenges include finding mentorship,

lacking professional development opportunities, and ineffective communication. Community college leaders, particularly those wishing to encourage emerging female leaders, need to understand the benefits of mentorship and professional development experiences as a means of cultivating and retaining prospective senior-level leaders. Further, leaders must also communicate openly, fairly, and honestly with their mid-level leaders, as transparency maintains dynamic relationships with their faculty and staff as well as mid-level administrators.

This study also emphasizes the importance of mid-level women leaders seeking out mentors and reaching out to mentor other aspiring leaders, both formally and informally. Mid-level women leaders often face inadequate professional development, and they must be ready to take the initiative to find opportunities and funding on their own. Some feel frustrated with communication challenges, noting difficulty in maintaining honest and open relationships as well as feeling lonely and isolated at work (Cavanaugh, 2020). Women leaders should take time to reflect and consider the leadership and communication styles that will help them navigate these challenges.

Our findings indicate the need for leaders who will act to reduce the organizational barriers faced by women leaders in mid-level positions. Recent community college trends have factored into women leaders' negative perceptions of their institutional climates and organizational structures and have led to feelings of tension, low morale, and lack of transparency. Community college leaders must understand organizational challenges faced by mid-level women leaders, which result from institutional climates and organizational structures. Institutional leaders must be forthcoming, transparent, and should encourage continuous communication and collaboration among all constituents. Senior-level administrators should find opportunities to include various levels of faculty, staff, and students on decision-making and planning groups when possible. They should also find ways to build morale and promote community – possibly through college-wide events and celebrations – even when current situations seem dismal. Most importantly, institutional leaders must understand and acknowledge the physical and mental states of their mid-level leaders, as these leaders are in the trenches with their staff members – coordinating new and ongoing college, state, and national initiatives, directing faculty

and staff who feel overworked and underpaid, and managing departments with limited budgets.

Women mid-level leaders must consider ways to encourage and uplift themselves and their direct reports, despite uncertainties due to declining student enrollment, reduced budgets, personnel layoffs, and changing organizational structures that lack upward mobility. Women must find strategies to navigate other perceived organizational challenges, such as narrow leadership pipelines, by finding ways to network with senior-level administrators.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Leaders

Our study provided participants with a chance to tell their own narratives and describe their lived experiences as mid-level women leaders. Giving these women a platform allowed them to be heard and to voice their concerns and needs. There are several recommendations for community college practitioners and leaders: (a) encouraging and providing opportunities and support for mentorship, (b) creating and funding professional development opportunities, and (c) assisting women leaders with doctoral degree completion.

Encourage and Provide Opportunities and Support for Mentorship

Mentorship experiences are crucial for women and their leadership progression. Mid-level women leaders find value in role models who help navigate the personal, professional, and organizational challenges they face (Cavanaugh, 2020). Mentorship programs, whether formal or informal, are beneficial to leaders, their institutions, and the community college system because they prepare women for senior-level advancement at institutional, state, and national levels. Community college leaders should be ready to support mentorship through financial and programmatic initiatives, on small and large scales.

Innovative modes of mentorship development should be considered and developed, such as virtual mentorship programming through technology. Mid-level women leaders could have the opportunity to meet with other community college administrators in an online environment through a series of meetings, including an in-person meeting at a state

or national conference. It would benefit women to develop relationships with other leaders within and outside of their current environments. Campus leaders should also establish stronger networks for mid-level leaders to help combat the sense of exclusion and loneliness (Bustillos & Siqueiros, 2018).

Create and Fund Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development opportunities are limited for mid-level women leaders at institutional, state, and national levels. There is little to no formal training for dean and director positions. Most women progressively ascend through leadership roles as faculty or administrators into their middle management positions. Ongoing training is needed to ensure women leaders are adequately developing their leadership and managerial skills, understanding current community college trends, and remaining up-to-date with national best practices.

As college budgets have been reduced so has professional development funding. Funding for professional development is recommended to limit the personal, professional, and organizational challenges faced by women in mid-level leadership positions in innovative ways. Instead of webinars and presentations, funding could be directed to develop dynamic and interactive trainings, workshops, and seminars, where leaders could connect and interact in an online environment with other community college professionals in different regions, states, or countries.

Assist Women Leaders with Doctoral Degree Completion

Achieving a senior-level position at a community college requires a doctoral or other terminal degree. For mid-level women leaders positions, pursuing a doctorate while balancing career, family, and personal responsibilities, can be an overwhelming challenge. Current institutional leaders must offer both support and flexibility to encourage women to complete degree and dissertation requirements. Tuition assistance should be provided, including options other than traditional tuition reimbursement programs; many mid-level leaders are not able to provide upfront financing.

Recommendations for Further Research

As community colleges continue to experience turnover among presidents and other senior-level leaders, the need to address the leadership gap with qualified and experienced female leaders is urgent. These emerging leaders must be equipped to handle the evolving needs of the modern community college. Women remain underrepresented in senior-level administrative positions within community colleges, and mid-level women leaders are in a crucial position to fill the leadership gap. Additional empirical study focused on these leaders will provide additional understanding and insight regarding their challenges and developmental needs.

We suggest further research focused on the personal, professional, and organizational challenges of mid-level leaders. Research should be conducted with women in mid-level positions in other regions of the country. Although most community colleges are experiencing similar pressures, there may be unique situations based on locality. Additional research should be focused on women of color in mid-level positions. Two participants commented on the internal and external pressures they have felt in their positions, not only as women, but as women of color, echoing barriers like privilege and feelings of isolation (Gause, 2021).

Further research should be conducted with women in mid-level positions in suburban and rural community colleges. Leadership in different types of community colleges may present different challenges for women. Rural colleges provide more opportunities for mid-level leaders seeking their first senior-level positions due to fewer candidates seeking employment in less populated geographical areas. Further study should focus on the challenges faced by men in mid-level positions in various community college settings. Several participants commented that some of the professional and organizational challenges were common to both genders: one participant believed new parents faced similar personal challenges when dealing with work-life balance.

Concluding Remarks

The number of female leaders at community colleges continues to grow, but women remain underrepresented in senior-level leadership

positions. The American community college system is currently experiencing declines in enrollment, changes in educational policies, reduced funding, and shifts in constituents' needs. Moreover, presidents and other senior-level administrators are retiring and changing positions at rapid rates, creating a gap in leadership.

Community college leaders and practitioners must consider women in mid-level positions to fill the leadership gap. They must identify and understand the personal, professional, and organizational challenges faced by women, which are different than men. By better understanding the unique challenges of women, community college administrators can provide better training, professional development, and mentorship opportunities. Policies and practices should facilitate leadership progression for women through environments, which have long been organized based on patriarchal hierarchies, should be diverse, welcoming, and inclusive.

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