



# Coaching to support work-life balance of women in leadership positions

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**Orientation:** Women leaders face significant challenges because of the multifaceted nature of their lives. They need support to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

**Research purpose:** This study aimed to explore the role of leadership coaching to support women in leadership positions with work-life balance.

**Motivation for the study:** Leadership coaching is an effective and powerful individual support and development intervention; however, the link between coaching and work-life balance for woman leaders has not been studied sufficiently.

**Research approach/design and method:** Data were collected via in-depth interviews from ( $n=10$ ) women in leadership positions who experienced at least six leadership coaching sessions in the last 18 months. An interpretative phenomenological paradigm was utilised and thematic analysis was used to analyse collected data.

**Main findings:** Coaching supported women leaders on four fronts: increased self-awareness, designing work-life balance strategies, coping with gender-specific challenges and highlights the importance of organisational commitment to the coaching and support processes.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Coaches should ensure that coaching programmes integrate strategies and techniques to help women leaders manage emotional, labour and domestic responsibilities. Organisations should take steps to create an inclusive workplace that actively promotes the professional development and well-being of women leaders by recognising and addressing their challenges and providing support through coaching.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study provides empirical evidence that leadership coaching is a viable strategy to support women leaders with work-life balance.

**Keywords:** coaching; leadership coaching; women leaders; work-life balance; working women.

## Introduction

As a result of changes in the economy and society, workforce demographics are changing (Varshney, 2019) placing working women under enormous pressure to build careers like their male counterparts while maintaining busy personal lives. Women in leadership positions find themselves short on time and struggling to balance their personal and professional lives because of this increased work and social pressures (Jansen & Terblanche, 2021).

Women in leadership positions face a great deal of stress and competing demands on their time as they juggle multiple roles, family responsibilities and work responsibilities. This has negative repercussions (Bridges et al., 2020; Fan & Potočník, 2021; Jayasingam et al., 2023; Ollilainen, 2019). In addition, most women in senior leadership positions face resistance and are frequently undervalued and treated unfairly because of gender stereotypes (Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Schniter & Shields, 2020).

In the workplace, women not only have to deal with the pressures of full-time work but must also shoulder home demands (Kantamneni, 2020). Achieving both work-life balance and valuing an employee's personal life in relation to their professional life is critical for achieving organisational goals. Unfortunately, women in leadership roles are frequently stereotyped as being more emotional and less assertive than men, even though women bring a wide range of physical, mental and emotional experiences to everyday conversations (Johnson et al., 2021; Yadav et al., 2022). All these factors contribute to a challenging work-life balance. Jayasingam et al. (2023) define work-life balance as personal time management that focuses on the individual or family level for those who struggle to find time for personal life because of the all-encompassing nature of many contemporary forms of work.

Coaching has over time become an effective strategy and a common intervention for managing change and supporting leadership as an active, purposeful journey of self-discovery and self-regulation including an unanticipated outcome (Dwyer, 2019; Jansen & Terblanche, 2021; Knight et al., 2019). It has been shown that coaching is the enabler, an art and science that fosters and promotes both personal and professional growth, and provides an environment that values education with tenacity, goal achievement and lesser work-related stress pressure, allowing leaders to be more confident and have the larger ability (Bello & Tanko, 2020; De Haan, 2019). A well-designed coaching programme contributes to employee engagement, exceptional performance and an organisational culture of collaboration (Clack, 2021; Peláez et al., 2020), as well as potentially a healthier work-life balance.

Coaching for women in leadership positions has been shown as an excellent strategy to boost their confidence and impact as leaders while also tackling gender inequity in upper management (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Kulik, 2022). There is, however, still a lack of empirical evidence on the precise relationship between leadership coaching and work-life balance for women in leadership roles, even though the advantages of leadership coaching and the difficulties experienced by women in leadership posts are extensively established. Women face significant challenges at work, particularly with regard to work-life balance. If these challenges are not addressed, it could hamper the movement towards gender equality in the workplace, but importantly it could also cause emotional distress to working women and their families. It is imperative to find additional support mechanisms for working women. The question this research therefore asked was: *How can leadership coaching support the work-life balance of women in leadership positions?*

By examining the connection between leadership coaching and work-life balance for women in leadership roles, this study contributes to our understanding of the available support mechanisms that help women leaders maintain a healthy work-life balance.

## Literature review

### Women in leadership

The recent expansion of the women's labour force is a multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by elevated literacy levels, increased demand for financial security and shifts in both socioeconomic environments and mindsets (Winkler, 2022). Despite these advances, women often face the difficult decision of balancing family responsibilities with their careers – a dichotomy that has compelled many to relinquish their professional roles and try their hand at entrepreneurial ventures (Simeon & Marathe, 2023). This tension underscores persistent barriers in women's career advancement, including the need for mentorship and sponsorship, equitable leadership opportunities, work-life balance and wage fairness (Coleman, 2020). The persistent issue of gender discrimination, stemming from both

conscious and unconscious biases, demands not only recognition but also proactive efforts for rectification. Advocacy groups have been instrumental in promoting gender equity, particularly in fields such as surgery, emphasising the necessity of implementing such initiatives to make a tangible impact (Kulik, 2022; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Stephens et al., 2020).

Empirical studies, such as those by Herbst (2020), highlight a discrepancy in self-assessment between genders: men tend to overestimate their abilities, whereas women typically underestimate theirs, despite no significant differences in actual performance quality. This disparity in self-perception is paralleled by the labour market's bias. Women are disproportionately burdened by an unequal share of responsibilities, a disparity that extends into the workplace and erodes their satisfaction with work-life balance (Parry & Gordon, 2021).

The impact of women in leadership roles reveals a complex dynamic. Research indicates that women's leadership positively correlates with the upper echelons of female wage distribution but negatively at the lower end (Flabbi et al., 2019). Societal expectations often pigeonhole women into traditional roles and deviating from these can be challenging as they attempt to navigate sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as senior administration and leadership (Albadawi & Salha, 2022; Anglin et al., 2022). Yet, evidence suggests that corporations benefit from gender diversity at the top; companies with a higher proportion of women in senior leadership positions not only exhibit enhanced corporate governance but also enjoy superior profit margins (Baselga-Pascual & Vähämaa, 2021), reduced corporate tax avoidance (Hoseini et al., 2019) and an overall competitive advantage (Kirsch, 2018).

The underrepresentation of women in executive roles is evident, despite a theoretical acknowledgement of their equal rights and opportunities for work and promotion (Allen, 2021). In S&P 500 companies, for example, women represent 45% of the workforce but hold only 27% of the executive and senior manager positions. At the top, women account for 6% of the chief executive officer (CEO) positions (Catalyst, 2020). However, the trend is gradually shifting. With the increasing inclusion of women in leadership, organisations are not only complying with gender equity norms but are also reaping economic benefits. Currently, a growing percentage of global organisations have at least one woman in a senior management role, moving towards a more balanced representation (Russen et al., 2021).

From the aforementioned discussion, it is evident that women in leadership present a complex landscape with serious challenges to the individuals. While progress is noticed, the journey towards gender parity in leadership is ongoing, with significant strides needed to overcome the entrenched challenges of discrimination, equitable representation and especially work-life balance in the corporate hierarchy.

## Work-life balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is about having the correct balance and control of work and personal life. It is a stability between achieving work performance to the fullest degree as well as enjoying leisure time with self, family and friends (Wood et al., 2020) and is essentially the aim for equilibrium or maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life. Work-life balance is a phenomenon that is highly sought after because it helps people achieve a better equilibrium between their professional and personal responsibilities (Hill & Carroll, 2014; Verma & Gautam, 2022). Work-life balance considers employees' health and happiness (Kelliher et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020) and is an essential component of life. Human adaptation entails acquiring the means to support life. There is, however, more to life than work: there is personal life, family life and life within one's social network and culture. Because of this new awareness about work-life balance, employers are increasingly attempting to provide their employees with work-life balance environments (Fazal et al., 2022) as work-life balance positively impacts employee engagement within the workforce (Yadav et al., 2022).

While work-life balance is a challenge for all employees, women in particular have a difficult time managing the multiple demands put on them (Jansen & Terblanche, 2021). Women face unique challenges in balancing the opposing demands of their work and life aspects because they are expected to perform so many additional roles such as wife, mother and homemaker (Atteh et al., 2020; Sarker et al., 2021). Marriage, childcare and the weight of other responsibilities all have a negative impact on a woman's career prospects and advancement leading to the fact that women are less satisfied than men with their work-life balance (Saks et al., 2022).

Another perspective on the matter is the notion of work-life integration. Work-life integration seeks to find a way for both aspects (work and personal) to coexist peacefully, while work-life balance emphasises maintaining a healthy divide between professional and personal lives (Afif, 2019). For example, work-life balance enables employees to work for designated hours and then leave work for their remaining personal hours, whereby work-life integration promotes a more fluid, flexible approach (Afif, 2019). Although this integrated approach to work appears to be a pragmatic solution to this persistent challenge, work-life conflict has become a major obstacle to the organisational commitment of women. Organisations realise this and are keen to find ways to support women in the workplace with work-life balance. One support mechanism that could prove useful is leadership coaching.

## Leadership coaching

Leadership coaching (used interchangeably with the word 'coaching') is a strategic facilitator in managing organisational change (Megheirkouni & Mejeirkouni, 2020). It encompasses

a spectrum of development tools that support leaders in people management, establishing fruitful manager relationships, setting clear goals, and improving engagement and productivity. Coaching encourages a transformational personal journey, fostering performance enhancement, reflective self-assessment and adaptation to evolving job roles, which culminates in a shift in their professional and collective presence (Cunningham, 2022). The value of coaching, both monetary and non-monetary, benefits the individuals and organisations alike, underscoring its integral role (Vella-Brodrick, 2021; Yu et al., 2022).

For women leaders, coaching is a catalyst for increased flexibility, personal goal attainment and reduced occupational stress, while also honing their leadership skills (Peláez et al., 2020). It ensures leaders are accountable for their performance, behaviours and emotional intelligence, moving beyond self-centred approaches (Dugbartey, 2020).

As a personalised and experiential learning journey, leadership coaching enhances a leader's capacity to meet both immediate and long-term developmental objectives (Liu et al., 2021; Megheirkouni & Mejeirkouni, 2020; Van Oosten et al., 2019). It is a structured, one-on-one process that deepens leaders' understanding of their behaviours and the subsequent impact on leadership efficacy. Coaching is particularly beneficial for emerging women leaders, teaching them to reflect on their experiences to refine their leadership approach (Hurlow, 2022; Vito et al., 2023). Coaching has also been shown to support women returning from maternity leave (Le Sueur & Boulton, 2021).

Although coaching has proven benefits to organisations and individuals, recent views hold that coaching could be used as a process to exert control over individuals in organisational settings (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). In the context of this study where women are already under pressure, this warning rings true and care must be taken to apply coaching as an emancipatory process (Shoukry, 2016).

It is clear from this literature review that women face significant challenges in the workplace, especially when they are in leadership positions. Work-life balance in particular stands out as a difficult obstacle to overcome. Although coaching has been shown to provide a range of benefits to individuals, it is not clear exactly how coaching could help women leaders with work-life balance. It is this knowledge gap that this study set out to address.

## Research method and design

### Research approach and strategy

In this study, a qualitative interpretative approach was employed to delve into the intricate relationship between leadership coaching and work-life balance among women in leadership roles (Guest et al., 2020). A qualitative research approach is typically used when the subject of the study is a social process, meaning or experience that needs to be

understood and described in more depth (Holmes, 2020; Leavy, 2018). This approach is appropriate for this study as not much is known about the role of coaching in work-life balance for women and it therefore warrants an in-depth subjective enquiry.

## Research setting

Participants in this study were women in leadership positions in corporate organisations who had received leadership coaching.

## Research participants and sampling methods

The participants were purposely recruited via social media, specifically LinkedIn. A total of 10 women in leadership positions who had received leadership coaching in the past 18 months, or were currently receiving leadership coaching, were recruited to participate in this research as indicated in Table 1.

## Data collection

This study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of women in leadership positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McAleese & Kilty, 2019) focusing on their encounters with leadership coaching and work-life balance. The interview process was designed to be adaptive and flexible, facilitating an open exchange that would encourage participants to share their experience of how leadership coaching influenced their work-life balance candidly and in detail.

Interviews lasted between 45 min and 60 min with each participant via MS Teams or Zoom. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) and Robinson et al. (2021), using virtual interviewing is an accepted way in research when conditions for face-to-face or physical meetings are not conducive. Participants were questioned about their direct experiences with leadership coaching and work-life in terms of three aspects: gender-specific challenges at work, general benefits they experienced through coaching and the impact of coaching on work-life balance specifically. Probing follow-up questions, inspired by the approach of Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), allowed for a deeper exploration of specific aspects, offering participants an

opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. Member checking was performed by asking a few of the participants to read the transcribed scripts to ensure accurate transcription.

## Data analysis

Interviews were analysed using the first five steps of the thematic analysis process from Braun and Clarke (2006) to uncover, inductively patterns and themes in the data to make sense of women leaders' experience of coaching and how it assisted their work-life balance. Interviews were transcribed and read several times by the researcher, and notes were made on possible trends in the data (step 1). In step 2, initial codes were determined through a line-by-line examination of every transcript of each interview. The need to record the participants' explanations and interpretations was emphasised. For instance, from the participants' narratives about the difficulties they faced striking a work-life balance, preliminary codes such as 'collaboration', 'accountability', 'boundaries' and 'opportunity' emerged.

In step 3, code linking and familiarisation occurred. For example, the codes 'accountability' and 'flexibility' were grouped and 'awareness', and 'time out' and 'burn out' were grouped in another category. In step 4, categories were examined for patterns and relationships. For example, the prevalence of 'awareness' across narratives indicated a common challenge. Each category was rigorously reviewed and refined. The 'awareness' category, for instance, was distilled to highlight specific elements such as 'mindfulness' and 'self-confidence' that were particularly impactful.

In the final step, overarching themes were identified from the categories. The refined categories of 'self-awareness' and 'work-life balance' for example contributed to a broader theme; 'organisation' and 'gender challenges' illuminating the intricate dance between challenges and support systems for women in leadership. Through this process, four main themes were identified that captured the essence of the role leadership coaching plays in helping the participants manage work-life balance: self-awareness; work-life balance strategies; gender-specific challenges and organisational commitment to work-life attainment. The coding process

**TABLE 1:** Participants' demographics.

Ref	Marital status	Age group	Living arrangements	Dependants	Organisation	How coaching was initiated
Part 1	Married	60–65	With spouse	1	State-owned entity	Business
Part 2	Single	55–60	With cousin	1 pet	Mining	Business
Part 3	Married	30–35	Spouse and children	3 children	FMCG	Business
Part 4	Unmarried	50–55	Alone	1	Farming	Voluntary
Part 5	Married	55–60	With spouse	0	State-owned entity	Business
Part 6	Married	35–40	Spouse and child	1	FMCG	Private
Part 7	Married	45–50	Spouse and children	2	FMCG	Private
Part 8	Married	55–60	With spouse	0	FMCG	Business
Part 9	Divorced	45–50	With friend	2	Pharmaceutical	Voluntary
Part 10	Divorced	35–40	With a partner	0	FMCG	Business

Part, participant; FMCG, fast moving consumer goods.



was performed by the first author and supervised by the second author.

## Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Research quality assurance was performed through awareness of: (1) transferability, (2) dependability, (3) credibility and (4) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability and dependability were addressed by following a well-documented data analysis process (thematic analysis). Credibility was addressed through member checking by asking participants to review the transcribed interviews. Confirmability was addressed by the involvement of two researchers in the coding process.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee of the Stellenbosch Business School on 12 June 2023. The project number is 28227.

## Findings

The main themes and categories per theme are summarised in Table 2 and presented in detail in this section.

### Theme 1: Self-awareness

#### Understanding of self

The importance of self-awareness in one's leadership path and work-life balance was one of the most consistently mentioned ideas among participants. Many women leaders emphasised how coaching helped them to be aware of their own beliefs, constraints and objectives to enable them to create a more enduring balance between their personal and professional lives.

Participant 3 highlighted:

'Being self-aware has enabled me to set my boundaries clearly both at work and at home.'

Participant 7 echoed this sentiment, stating:

'Self-awareness is the first step in ensuring I don't lose myself in my leadership role and maintain a semblance of balance.'

Participant 10 added:

'I manage my time based on what I value, not what society expects from me. It helps me keep focus amidst conflicting demands.'

These findings are generally supported by the current research on self-awareness and leadership. This study claims that the participants' concentration on self-awareness is not a solitary or individualistic endeavour, but rather an adaptive approach. It gives them a sophisticated toolset for dealing with the problems and complications that come with being a woman in a position of leadership, and it has a substantial impact on their work-life balance.

**TABLE 2:** Summary of themes and categories.

Theme	Category	Explanation (from the data)
Self-awareness	Understanding self Communication skills Confidence building Assertiveness	The role of coaching in developing self-awareness emerged as a fundamental theme, encapsulating the evolution and enhancement of women's understanding of their professional dynamics. Participants expressed a journey of self-discovery, emphasising the role of refined communication skills, confidence-building and increased assertiveness in fostering effective leadership amid multifaceted challenges
Work-life balance strategies	Flexibility and adaptability Time management Delegation Collaboration Mental health and well-being	Women leaders underscored various strategies they found through coaching crucial in navigating the complex terrain of professional and personal life. Flexibility and adaptability were pivotal, complemented by adapting time management and effective delegation. Collaboration emerged as a fundamental strategy, and the role of mental health and well-being was highlighted as central in sustaining optimal performance and balance
Gender-specific challenges	Societal expectations Workplace gender biases Domestic responsibilities Emotional labour	Coaching helped leaders to understand the intricate, gendered challenges confronting women in leadership. Societal expectations and workplace gender bias were notable, underscoring a nuanced landscape of differential expectations and treatments. The role of domestic responsibilities and the emotional labour inherent in juggling professional and personal roles featured prominently
Organisational commitment	Trust Organisational support for coaching Peer and family support	The intrinsic and extrinsic dynamics of organisational commitment are delineated, spotlighting the integral role of trust. The importance of organisational backing in leadership coaching, and peer and family support aligns with the broader discourse on the ecosystem of support pivotal for leadership effectiveness

### Communication skills

The evidence indicates that women in leadership posts benefit from leadership coaching in terms of their communication abilities. Improved communication skills have helped them establish boundaries between their personal and professional lives, which has benefited their work-life balance in addition to making them more successful leaders.

Participant 4 mentioned:

'Coaching taught me the language I needed to articulate my needs without feeling guilty. It has revolutionised my work-life balance.'

Participant 6 shared:

'Being able to effectively communicate has made delegation easier and lightened my workload, freeing up time for my family.'

Participant 9 stated:

'I've learned to assert my boundaries better. I can now say no without jeopardising my leadership position.'

As a result, the study proposes that successful communication is a multifaceted instrument. In the context of this study, it not only improves leadership efficiency but also serves as a vehicle for women to navigate and balance the multifaceted roles they play, thus answering the sub-objective of understanding challenges and management strategies in work-life balance for women.

### Confidence building

Improved self-confidence is one of the most significant benefits of leadership coaching for women in senior jobs, according to the data study. This increased self-assurance affects them personally as well as professionally, improving their capacity to strike a better work-life balance.

Participant 1 stated:

'Leadership coaching has given me the confidence to stand my ground, both at work and at home. This has helped me balance my responsibilities much better.'

Participant 5 revealed:

'I used to second-guess my decisions a lot, but coaching has made me more assertive and confident. Now I don't bring work stress home, which benefits my personal life.'

Participant 7 noticed:

'The coaching experience made me realise that I can be a leader and not sacrifice my personal life. It gave me the courage to make necessary changes for balance.'

### Assertiveness

The findings of this study imply that among women in leadership positions, assertiveness is one of the critical abilities cultivated through leadership coaching. Setting limits at work with this newly found assertiveness has helped to enhance the work-life balance.

Participant 1 asserted:

'Leadership coaching has empowered me to say "no" when needed. This simple change has remarkably improved my work-life balance.'

Participant 6 observed:

'Earlier, I used to take up every assignment thrown at me. Coaching helped me realise the value of setting boundaries. Now, I can assertively manage my workload, ensuring that my personal life is not compromised.'

Participant 9 expressed:

'Coaching equipped me to be vocal about my needs, both at work and home. This has helped me gain a new level of equilibrium between my professional and personal life.'

## Theme 2: Work-life balance strategies

### Flexibility and adaptability

The research shows that, particularly in the setting of remote working contexts, participants must be flexible and adaptable

to successfully navigate the problems of work-life balance. Participants acknowledged that receiving leadership coaching had given them the knowledge and abilities to modify their schedules for greater productivity and well-being.

Participant 1 explained:

'Coaching taught me that rigidity in my schedule was my enemy. Now, I can adapt my hours to meet both my professional and personal demands.'

Participant 4 revealed:

'Flexibility is not just an option; it's a necessity. Working remotely allowed me to redefine "office hours" and make time for my family.'

Participant 7 stated:

'Being flexible doesn't mean you are aimless; it means you are resourceful. My coach helped me see that adapting to circumstances is a form of problem-solving in itself.'

### Time management

Delegation and collaboration are two ways of sharing work and responsibilities with other people. Delegation means assigning tasks to someone else who has the skills, authority or availability to complete them. Collaboration means working together with others to achieve a common goal or outcome. Those who collaborate work together as equals, usually without a leader, to produce ideas or make decisions together to complete a goal. Whereas teamwork is usually overseen by a team leader, and those within a team are delegated individual tasks to complete to contribute towards the team's end goal.

Time management has become a crucial component of women in leadership positions' attempts to combine their professional and personal lives. The participants observed consistently that leadership coaching has given them useful abilities in efficient planning and prioritisation, assisting them in maintaining a balance between professional obligations and personal obligations:

Participant 1 said:

'Before coaching, I used to confuse busyness with productivity. Now, I've learned to allocate specific time blocks for work tasks and family, and the impact on my work-life balance has been dramatic.'

Participant 5 stated:

'My coach introduced me to the Eisenhower Matrix for prioritising tasks. It's game-changing; I feel more in control of my life now.'

Participant 9 remarked:

'Effective planning is liberating. You'd think it would make you more rigid, but it's the opposite. I now have time for things that I never thought I could fit into my schedule.'

## Delegation

The results of the data indicate that the participants' capacity to assign tasks to others and work productively with their teams has been greatly impacted by leadership coaching. The majority of participants observed that by enabling them to share duties and lessen personal workload, this newly discovered capacity had favourably improved their work-life balance.

Participant 1 explained:

'I used to think that delegation was a sign of weakness. Coaching has shown me it's a strength. By trusting my team, I can focus on strategic activities.'

Participant 8 remarked:

'My leadership coach focused on improving my people skills and trust in delegation, which surprisingly reduced my stress and helped me manage work and home more effectively.'

## Collaboration

The theme of collaboration was prominently highlighted, shedding light on its pivotal role in enhancing both leadership effectiveness and work-life balance for women in leadership positions. Collaboration, in this context, is understood as a cooperative, collective action undertaken by a group working as equals, typically without a singular leader, aiming to achieve a common objective.

Participant 6 shared her transformative journey:

'I have always struggled with micromanaging, but coaching helped me develop collaboration skills. This not only boosted my team's morale but also gave me extra time for my family.'

This insight underscores the dual benefit where enhanced collaborative capacity contributes to improved team dynamics and personal work-life equilibrium.

Echoing this sentiment, Participant 8 offered her perspective:

'Embracing collaboration transformed my leadership approach. I learned to trust my team's competence and creativity, and this collective effort not only elevated our performance but alleviated the intense pressure I often felt, enabling a more balanced professional and personal life.'

Participant 9 reiterated the value of collaboration, expressing:

'My journey to fostering a collaborative culture was catalysed by leadership coaching. It unveiled the untapped potential within my team and me. As we co-created solutions and shared responsibilities, the overwhelming demands of my role became manageable, paving the way for a rejuvenated focus on my well-being and family.'

These reflections are congruent with contemporary scholarship emphasising the role of collaboration in leadership and how it has an impact on the leader's well-being.

## Mental health and well-being

Managing personal well-being emerged as a cornerstone in the narratives of women in leadership, intricately tied to the symbiosis between effective leadership and work-life balance. The insights shared illuminated a transformative journey where leadership coaching played a pivotal role in redefining and amplifying the participants' approaches to self-care.

Participant 1 revealed an epiphany:

'Leadership coaching taught me that taking a break is not a luxury but a necessity. My performance has improved since I started scheduling "me time".'

This sentiment underscored a paradigm shift where self-care transcends being a mere indulgence to becoming integral to leadership efficacy.

Participant 4 offered a reflective insight:

'It's ironic, but I found that being a better leader actually starts with taking care of myself first. Coaching made me realise this.'

Her narrative underscores the link between personal well-being and leadership acumen.

Echoing this, Participant 9 shared her experiential journey:

'My leadership coach helped me create a holistic health plan that covered exercise, nutrition, and stress management. This has significantly improved my work-life balance.'

Here, the holistic approach to well-being is highlighted, underscoring its multifaceted impact on both professional performance and personal harmony.

These narratives collectively spotlight personal well-being as an essential, non-negotiable component in the tapestry of effective leadership and balanced living, echoing the sentiments expressed in the broader discourses of leadership and well-being.

## Theme 3: Gender-specific challenges

### Societal expectations

Societal expectations emerged as a significant theme, highlighting the added complexities faced by women leaders because of prevailing cultural norms. Participants revealed the constant navigation between professional roles and societal impositions.

Participant 6 elucidated:

'The expectation to be a "perfect" mother and leader simultaneously is mentally exhausting.'

Her statement encapsulates the psychological impact of multidimensional societal expectations.

Participant 8 shared:

'People often expect me to be more nurturing and less assertive because I'm a woman. This impacts how I balance my leadership role with my personal life.'

Here, gendered expectations and their implications for leadership and work-life balance are highlighted.

### Workplace gender bias

'Workplace Gender Bias' reveals a common belief among women leaders that they must go above and beyond to distinguish themselves from their male counterparts to receive the same recognition and opportunity. This suggests that there are implicit gender prejudices in the workplace that disproportionately harm women.

Participant 1 expressed:

'In meetings, I often feel like I have to speak louder and be more assertive just to get the same level of attention as my male colleagues.'

Participant 7 observed:

'I have to consistently deliver outstanding results just to prove that I deserve to be in this position, unlike some of my male peers who are more easily accepted.'

Participant 10 pointed out:

'It's disheartening that despite having the same qualifications, I feel like I'm always one step behind my male counterparts in earning trust and respect.'

Participant 1 articulated a nuanced dynamic:

'In meetings, I often feel like I have to speak louder and be more assertive just to get the same level of attention as my male colleagues.'

This statement encapsulates the experiential reality of amplified efforts to secure parity in professional engagement.

Participant 7 expressed a similar sentiment:

'I have to consistently deliver outstanding results just to prove that I deserve to be in this position, unlike some of my male peers who are more easily accepted.'

Her narrative underscores the embedded challenges associated with implicit gender biases.

Participant 10 reflected:

'It's disheartening that despite having the same qualifications, I feel like I'm always one step behind my male counterparts in earning trust and respect.'

This revelation illuminates the emotional and psychological toll of navigating professional spaces marked by subtle yet pervasive gender biases.

### Domestic responsibilities

Compounding the challenges women faced at work was the fact that they still had domestic responsibilities. Participant 1 voiced a common struggle:

'Even though I'm in a leadership position, societal expectations dictate that I also bear the primary responsibility for my household. It's a double burden.'

This reflects the intersectionality of professional and domestic roles faced by women. Participant 1 indicated that this dual role was taxing as participants constantly had to be:

'thinking about what needs to be done at work and at home, trying to be "perfect" in both spaces.'

Women had to deal with the feelings of duty and sometimes guilt for neglecting their domestic responsibilities even though in many cases they were significant contributors to the household income.

### Emotional labour

Emotional labour involves managing one's emotions to show oneself and connect with others. It involves ensuring staff members smile and act 'peppy' to avoid negative customer treatment. If an employee reacts negatively, they may be disciplined. Emotional labour involves controlling feelings and emotions, whether personal or shared, to maintain a job or relationship. It is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment.

The information gathered under the sub-theme 'Emotional Labour' provides a potent reflection on the psychological and emotional toll taken by women in leadership roles. These interviewees often said that balancing work and family demands both physical and emotional labour.

Participant 4 mentioned:

'I am emotionally drained by the end of the week, feeling like I've used up my emotional bandwidth both professionally and personally.'

Participant 9 reflected:

'Leadership coaching has helped, but the emotional labour is constant. It's something I can't delegate like a task.'

The participants' descriptions of chronic emotional strain reveal that, while emotional labour may provide some type of connection or depth, its ongoing, often unrecognised presence is exhausting. This layer of emotional labour, together with social expectations and professional responsibilities, argues that measures for emotional resilience and management should be included in leadership coaching.

## Theme 4: Organisational commitment

### Trust

Leadership coaching also helped participants to gain a better understanding of the role that the organisation plays in their work-life balance. The theme of managerial trust was prominently underscored by participants, revealing a consensus on its critical role in augmenting leadership effectiveness and facilitating work-life balance. The narratives depict trust as a foundational pillar that empowers leaders with the autonomy and confidence essential for optimised performance.



Participant 1 illustrated this dynamic:

*'Having a manager who trusts me means I don't have to second-guess my decisions. That mental freedom is priceless.'*

This reflection underscores the psychological liberation afforded by managerial trust, enhancing decision-making efficacy.

Participant 5 conveyed the impact of trust on stress reduction, stating:

*'Trust from my manager significantly reduces my stress. I can focus on what I need to do instead of constantly proving my worth.'*

Her insight highlights the role of trust in alleviating performance pressure and enhancing focus.

Participant 10 articulated the multiplier effect of trust, expressing:

*'With trust, I've found that my effectiveness as a leader soars. It also spills over into my home life, making it more balanced.'*

This perspective unveils the symbiotic relationship between professional trust and personal work-life equilibrium.

### **Organisational support for coaching**

The pivotal role of organisational support in enhancing the impact of leadership coaching for women in management is vividly underscored in the participants' narratives. Their insights reveal a collective sentiment highlighting the amplification of coaching outcomes when bolstered by institutional backing.

Participant 1 underscored this dynamic, stating:

*'The support from the organisation makes all the difference. It's not just about having a coach; it's about knowing the institution itself is behind you.'*

This reflection accentuates the integral role of organisational endorsement in augmenting the efficacy of leadership coaching.

Participant 4 highlighted the empowering aspect of this support, expressing:

*'The company's willingness to invest in coaching sessions is a clear indicator that they believe in my potential, which is empowering.'*

Her sentiment illuminates the motivational uplift stemming from organisational investment in coaching.

Participant 7 echoed these insights, observing:

*'The organisation's support for coaching gives it credibility. It sends a message that this isn't just another fad but an essential part of our leadership development.'*

This perspective underscores the validation and legitimacy afforded to coaching initiatives by organisational endorsement.

### **Peer and family support**

Peer and family support emerged as a critical element, weaving through the narratives of women in leadership roles as an essential catalyst in achieving a balanced work-life integration. This support serves as both a foundation and a refuge, offering emotional resilience amid the multifaceted challenges of leadership and domestic responsibilities.

Participant 1 articulated:

*'My family and friends are my anchors; their support gives me the resilience to handle both leadership challenges and home commitments.'*

Her reflection illuminates the reciprocal reinforcement between personal relationships and professional efficacy.

Participant 5 underscored the professional ramifications of this dynamic, stating:

*'Having a supportive circle of colleagues has a direct impact on my job satisfaction and ability to balance work and home life.'*

This insight highlights the synergistic effect of peer support in enhancing job satisfaction and work-life harmony.

Participant 9 accentuated the holistic benefit of this support network, noting:

*'I owe my career growth and my sanity to my support network. Their emotional backing keeps me focused and grounded.'*

Here, the psychological and emotional stability engendered by peer and family support is laid bare.

## **Discussion**

The study's primary aim was to probe the intricate interplay between leadership coaching and work-life balance for women leaders. One salient revelation from this study underscores leadership coaching's potential in enhancing emotional intelligence and self-awareness among women leaders. These findings echo the sentiments of Perrigino et al. (2018) who highlighted the transformational impact of leadership coaching on enhancing self-perception and interpersonal dynamics. However, while Perrigino et al. (2018) focused on the individual transformation, this study illuminates the ripple effects of such transformations on work-life balance. The richness of these findings lies in delineating the multidimensional impacts of these enhanced competencies, not just on the individual but rippling through their professional ecosystems and into their personal spheres, catalysing a harmonised work-life balance.

On collaboration, these reflections are congruent with contemporary scholarship emphasising the role of collaboration in leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). They also align with the findings of West et al. (2014), indicating that collaborative leadership not only fosters organisational innovation and productivity but also significantly impacts the leader's well-being. Mental Health and Wellbeing, these narratives collectively spotlight personal well-being as an

essential, non-negotiable component in the tapestry of effective leadership and balanced living, echoing the sentiments expressed in the broader discourses of leadership and well-being (Grawitch et al., 2006).

The societal expectations category collectively brings to the fore the intricate dance between societal norms and the personal and professional lives of women in leadership, a theme corroborated by Eagly and Carli (2007). The category 'Domestic responsibilities' coalesce into a compelling narrative of the lived experiences of women leaders, echoing the findings of research such as that by Ely et al. (2011), which delves into the intricate dynamics of gender bias within organisational contexts. The category 'Trust' collectively illuminates managerial trust as a linchpin in the interplay between leadership efficacy and work-life balance, aligning with the sentiments of Dirks and Ferrin (2001) on the instrumental role of trust in organisational settings. Peer and Family Support, together, these reflections present a harmonised testimony of the invaluable role of peer and family support in navigating the intricate landscape of professional leadership and personal life, resonating with the findings of Allen (2021) on the interplay between social support and work-family conflict.

The gender-specific challenges faced by women leaders, especially in juggling professional and domestic responsibilities are intricately tied to the 'labyrinth' metaphor by Eaglin (2019). These findings offer a lived experience perspective, amplifying the theory's assertion of nuanced barriers women encounter. However, they extend beyond by illuminating the coping mechanisms cultivated through leadership coaching. The intersectionality of the challenges, accentuated by these findings, underscores the multiplicity of roles women leaders navigate. This research contributes nuanced narratives, breathing life and context into existing theoretical constructs, illuminating the lived experiences that often elude structured frameworks.

Organisational support emerged as a pivotal element in our study, resonating with Kelly et al.'s (2020) emphasis on institutional backing for coaching programmes. These findings, however, delve deeper into the psychological and emotional aspects, highlighting the enhanced sense of validation and self-efficacy among women leaders backed by their organisations. The theme of 'Organisational support for coaching', collectively weaves a compelling testament to the instrumental role of organisational backing in maximising the benefits of leadership coaching, resonating with the assertions of Gilley et al. (2010) regarding organisational commitment to employee development.

The role of social support networks is another aspect where this study dialogues with the existing literature. While Friberg and Lytsy (2020) cautioned about the potential drawbacks of excessive reliance on social supports, these findings illustrate the nuanced, positive impacts, especially in offering emotional resilience amid leadership challenges.

The research portrays these networks not as isolated enablers but as integral cogs in the holistic machinery that fosters work-life balance amid the intricate challenges of leadership.

In addition, this study introduces elaborate insights into the dynamic of trust. While the existing literature, such as Brown and Moshavi (2002), has focused on trust within team dynamics, these findings illuminate its pivotal role in enhancing the work-life balance of women leaders, serving as a psychological buffer against stress.

Furthermore, the persistent workplace gender biases unearthed in this study correlate with the findings of Adams (2019), yet this study underscores the amplified impact on work-life balance and the mitigating role of leadership coaching.

This discussion accentuates the multifaceted, contextually influenced relationship between leadership coaching and work-life balance among women leaders. These findings not only align with existing literature but also extend it by offering nuanced, experiential insights that cater to the evolving paradigms of work, leadership and personal well-being.

The complexity of the work-life balance narrative for women leaders, as unveiled in these findings, is not just a dialogue between the professional and personal realms. It is a multifaceted discourse that involves societal norms, organisational cultures, individual competencies and the invisible yet important threads of psychological and emotional well-being.

### Limitations and suggested future research

While this study has made progress in exploring the relationship between leadership coaching and work-life balance among women in positions of leadership, some limitations must be addressed.

Firstly, the limitation of this study was the size of the sample. The sample had 10 participants, and this impacted the generalisability of the findings to other settings. While the qualitative style of the research provides depth, the small number of participants may not be representative of wider patterns and may be prone to selection bias. As a result, when extending these ideas to bigger groups or various circumstances, care must be used.

Secondly, the study did not take into consideration differences in women's experiences in leadership roles and their connection to work-life balance across cultures and industries. Varied cultures and sectors might have very diverse gender roles and expectations, which can have an impact on how successful leadership coaching is. Researchers such as Chang and Milkman (2020) have demonstrated how organisational culture and social norms may have an impact on gender roles and leadership, while Boysen-Rotelli (2020) contends that the effectiveness of leadership coaching might vary by industry.

Given these constraints, future studies should benefit from a bigger, more varied sample size as well as comparison studies across sectors and cultures to increase the findings' generalisability. A longitudinal methodology might also provide insights into the long-term influence of leadership coaching on work-life balance. To validate self-reported data, objective indications such as staff turnover rates, promotions and performance assessments might be included.

## Conclusion

Struggles for work-life balance have become a furnace in which the mettle of women in leadership positions is frequently tested in a fast-developing professional scene.

The study's management implications serve as a roadmap for organisations wishing to implement or adapt coaching programmes targeted to the challenges encountered by their women leaders. Organisations must take a comprehensive approach to leadership development, which includes cultivating a culture of trust, establishing policies that promote work-life balance, and instituting strong monitoring and feedback channels.

This study underlines the value of leadership coaching as a strategy for improving the work-life balance of women in leadership roles. It emphasises the significance of contextual factors, organisational culture, management practices and support systems in influencing the success of such coaching programmes. As organisations and society grow, the findings of this study may act as a spark for more inclusive, effective and empathic leadership development programmes.

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N.D. conducted the fieldwork and wrote the original draft of this article. N.T. supervised the research and contributed to the writing of this article.

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### Data availability

Research data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.T., upon reasonable request but are subject to confidentiality and anonymity requirements.

## Disclaimer

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