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Exploring Transformational Leadership Practices at the Belabela Local Municipality: A Gender Comparison

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Abstract

Transformational leadership is widely recognised as a significant factor in cultivating a culture of innovation, adaptability, and high performance within organisations. This research, employing a quantitative, cross-sectional approach and drawing on secondary data, sought to explore the perceptions of professional workers regarding transformational leadership. The research identified significant variations in the perceptions of male and female

participants regarding the degree to which leaders or managers treat them as individuals, rather than simply as parts of a group. Moreover, the study highlighted considerable differences in how male and female participants feel about whether their leaders foster a sense of pride in being associated with them. Gender-based differences were also found in perspectives on how much attention leaders or managers give to mistakes, irregularities, and deviations from the norm. These observations emphasise how the attributes of practitioners, like gender, can affect the implementation of transformational leadership. The study further pointed out the importance for leaders to recognise mistakes and failures as normal aspects of the functioning within 'socio-technical' systems and the necessity for leaders to express confidence in their teams, thereby boosting team morale and effectiveness. As a result, the research suggests that organisations should focus on developing and implementing leadership training and development programmes that provide leaders, especially women leaders, with the essential tools, knowledge, and attitudes needed to promote transformational leadership throughout the organisation.

Keywords: *Gender; Leadership training and development programmes; Leadership style; Local municipality; Transformational leadership*

Introduction

Transformational leadership has become increasingly central to organisational behaviour and management, particularly for its impact on workplace dynamics, employee motivation, and organisational change (Jangsiriwattana, 2019). Recognised across sectors, this leadership style is vital for fostering innovative, adaptable, and high-performing organisational cultures. By inspiring and empowering individuals to exceed expectations, transformational leaders contribute to greater job satisfaction, team cohesion, and performance (Johnson, Smith & Jones, 2018; Smith & Jones, 2015). As organisations face growing complexity, professional perspectives provide key insights into the practical impact of transformational leadership. Given the limited research within municipalities like Bela-Bela Local Municipality (BLM), this study explores professionals' perceptions of transformational leadership and its implications in municipal settings.

Literature Review

Effective leadership involves mobilising individuals to achieve organisational goals (Jaroliya & Gyanchandani, 2022) through behaviours that positively influence others (Suherman, 2019). Unlike management, which centres on task execution and strategic vision, leadership emphasises motivation and shared purpose (Raithel, van Knippenberg & Stam, 2021). Leadership enhances organisational capability (Hurduzue, 2015) and is broadly defined as influencing groups toward common goals (Northouse, 2019).

Leadership studies often categorise behaviours such as task- or relationship-orientation, change-drivenness, participatory engagement, and transformational influence (Yukl, 2013). This paper focuses on transformational leadership due to its relevance to the studied context.

a) Women in Leadership

Gendered behavioural differences shaped by risk tolerance and decision-making styles, influence leadership dynamics. Despite advances in gender equity, women remain underrepresented in leadership, often facing systemic barriers known as the "glass ceiling" (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Gao, Wang & Liu, 2024). Traditional leadership models emphasise task achievement and hierarchical control, typically favouring masculine traits (Yoder, 2001). In contrast, transformational leadership—centred on empowerment and inclusivity—offers a more progressive model, aligning with broader definitions of success.

Women contribute unique perspectives and collaborative styles. Abbott, Parker, and Presley (2012) found that female board members improved financial governance. Though underrepresented in senior roles, initiatives such as quotas and mentoring have increased female participation. Letsoalo and Motubatse (2019) note that female directors enhance board deliberations and engagement. Globally, policies in countries like Rwanda have ensured high female political representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). In finance, women leaders contribute to sustainable and ethical decision-making (Palvia, Vähämaa & Vähämaa, 2015; Birindelli, Iannuzzi & Savioli, 2019).

Nonetheless, challenges persist, including cultural norms and dual-role burdens (Garrick, Johnson & Arendt, 2024). Addressing these requires structural reforms such as flexible policies and targeted

leadership programmes (Tessens, White & Web, 2011). Supporting women's leadership benefits individual growth and institutional outcomes.

Municipalities often reflect patriarchal structures that marginalise women (Khatriwada & Nepal, 2023). Yet, female leadership enhances inclusivity and policy responsiveness. For example, female mayors in Spain promoted financial stability when supported by gender-diverse councils (Balaguer-Coll & Ivanova-Toneva, 2021). In South Africa and Brazil, women-led local health units played crucial roles in crisis response, including reducing COVID-19 mortality (Bruce et al., 2022).

Gender quotas in municipalities, such as in India and Spain, have advanced women's representation and governance quality (Ríos, Guillamón & Cuadrado-Ballesteros, 2022; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). Yet, studies like Ntuli, Jili, and Xaba (2023) highlight resistance to women leaders in municipalities, calling for stronger institutional support and mentorship.

b) Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership centres on instilling shared purpose, fostering creativity, and motivating peak performance (Anwar, 2016; Mahdinezhad et al., 2013). Coined by Downton (1973) and popularised by Burns (1978), this approach contrasts with transactional leadership by uplifting followers through vision and moral engagement. Burns argued that its impact lies in facilitating social change.

Characterised by commitment, innovation, and performance enhancement (Mahmud, Shoalihin & Hayat, 2023; Bader, Gielnik & Bledow, 2023), this leadership style is ideal for navigating organisational change (Kariuki, 2021). It fosters ethical cultures and emotional connection, builds trust, and aligns personal and organisational goals (Zach, 2018; Putri, Mirzania & Hartanto, 2020). Intellectual stimulation promotes innovation by encouraging new perspectives (Sarwar et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership is relevant across sectors and hierarchies, where leaders act as role models and build team resilience (Lai et al., 2020; Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019). Through charisma, motivation, and individual consideration, leaders nurture inclusive, value-driven environments (Sardi, 2017; Reza, 2019).

Leadership effectiveness depends on factors like demographics, education, and context (Poturak et al., 2020). Gender also plays a role; men are often perceived as transformational leaders, though women may exhibit greater empathy and participatory styles (Kim & Shin, 2017; Lu & Herremans, 2019).

Organisational culture influences the success of transformational leadership. Cultures that support learning and openness enhance its impact, while rigid environments inhibit innovation (Schein, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2023). Leaders must align strategic goals with culture to gain competitive advantage.

Personal qualities—charisma, communication, humility—are foundational. Effective leaders are reflective, authentic, and open to feedback, fostering inclusive, adaptive teams (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Chandler et al., 2023). Their success also hinges on employee engagement (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Lancefield, 2021). In addition, external pressures like market shifts and crises often necessitate transformational leadership (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Leaders must respond proactively to such changes.

Leadership development is essential for cultivating transformational capacity. Programmes build emotional intelligence and vision while promoting a leadership culture (Nduneseokwu & Harder, 2023; Johnson & Lee, 2019). They correlate with improved retention and performance (Williams & Miller, 2018).

Communication is a key tool—not just to inform, but to align and inspire (Taylor & Hunsaker, 2017). Transparency builds trust and fuels innovation (Wilson, 2019). During change, it eases transitions (Adams & Adams, 2018). Strong systems underpin effective communication (Men, 2014). Furthermore, reward frameworks aligned with transformational goals reinforce motivation and excellence (Ihemereze et al., 2023). Leaders celebrate individual and team achievements, using recognition to drive culture and morale (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Obeng et al., 2021).

The four dimensions of transformational leadership—idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration—manifest differently across genders (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Van Engen et al., 2004), highlighting the importance of inclusive leadership.

c) Strategies to Support Gender Equality in Leadership

Women remain less likely than similarly qualified men to secure high-status or high-paying roles (Galos & Coppock, 2023). Gender stereotypes portray women as lacking leadership traits, especially in male-dominated roles (Heilman, Caleo & Manzi, 2024). Nonetheless, younger employees increasingly demand greater female leadership (Franczak & Margolis, 2022).

Though the number of women in top roles is limited, their presence symbolises progress (Schultheiss, 2021). Women's differing leadership approaches warrant strategic talent management. Organisations must set diversity targets, eliminate biases, and evaluate progress. Recruitment criteria should be inclusive, with hiring managers incentivised to meet diversity benchmarks (Tipper, 2004).

Women tend toward participative, transformational leadership styles (Eagly et al., 2003), though their evaluations often reflect bias. Interventions to reduce segregation include family-friendly policies and gender-balanced leadership pipelines (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Comprehensive diversity initiatives, mentorship, and flexible environments enhance equality and innovation (Johnson et al., 2016; Letsoalo, 2021; Kearney et al., 2022).

Governments and businesses employ strategies such as leadership training and mentoring to empower women. Initiatives like the African Women Leaders Network pair women with mentors for skill-building and guidance (UN Women, 2020). Programmes like Lean In develop negotiation and decision-making skills (Lean In, 2022). Gender-specific training and networking platforms also support leadership development (OECD, 2020; Harvard Business Review, 2021).

Early-career opportunities, diverse experiences, and women-only programmes strengthen self-confidence and leadership capacity (Woolnough, Davidson & Fielden, 2006; Clarke, 2011). Gender quotas in countries like Rwanda and India ensure women's participation in politics, while equal pay legislation (e.g., UK's Equality Act 2010) helps close the wage gap. Corporations adopting diversity policies, like Unilever, have increased women's leadership (Unilever, 2022). Parental leave in countries such as Sweden promotes shared caregiving and reduces career disruption (OECD, 2019).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study was buttressed by three theoretical frameworks: Role Congruity Theory (RCT), Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET). In essence, RCT, TLT, and SET provided the foundational concepts underpinning this research. SET helped researchers understand how employees perceive the influence of transformational leaders on performance management practices, viewing it as a mutual exchange involving effort and rewards. TLT emphasises the importance of visionary and inspiring leadership in driving significant organisational change and development. Conversely, according to Eagly and Karau (2002), RCT explains that prejudice towards female leaders arises due to the inconsistencies between the characteristics associated with the female gender stereotype and those associated with typical leadership.

a) Transformational Leadership Theory

The four dimensions of transformational leadership (idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration) set a tone for the two parties to develop a positive, conducive, and reciprocal relationship that is beneficial to the organisation. Focusing on the aspects of individual consideration and intellectual stimulation within transformational leadership, a leader is attentive to employees' needs and allows employees to excel in their work by using their own approach (Lee, Lin, Srinivasan & Carr, 2023:2). Transformational leadership managers focus particularly on developing an overall value system of the employees, which helps develop morality, skills and increase motivation levels. The transformational leadership acts as a strong bridge between the followers and leaders, to develop clear understanding associated with the motivational level, values, and interests (Al Khajeh 2018:3). Transformational leadership ideally values team members, acts as a facilitator of the organisation's vision, and plays a key role in enabling success (Mokhber, bin Wan Ismail & Vakilbashi, 2015). For example, transformational leaders show that leaders share cognitive analysis of problems among their followers and motivate them towards resolving problems more creatively (AlHusseini et al, 2021). Inspirational motivation shows that leaders understand their followers' needs, build a supportive environment, and then engage the followers in practices that

instill confidence in them (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman & Legood, 2018). Individualised consideration leaders are the best example for subordinates, encouraging staff to “do the right thing,” and being willing to take risks for the organisation's interest (Vijian & Wahab, 2020).

b) Social Exchange Theory

The core of social exchange theory lies in the reciprocal interaction between employers and employees, which may be positive or negative depending on the quality of their relationship (Lee, Lin, Srinivasan & Carr, 2023:2). Transformational leadership, which promotes mutual development between leaders and subordinates, enhances the innovative and entrepreneurial outlook of modern knowledge workers, strengthening their sense of ownership (Siangchokyoo, Klinger & Campion, 2020; Abu-Rumman, 2021). This is further supported by Al-Atwi et al. (2022), who emphasise the importance of strong exchange relationships in which leaders invest in followers' professional growth and help them achieve their goals. These leaders consider employees' diverse strengths, abilities, and aspirations, thereby meeting both emotional and professional needs. As a result, employees under such leadership are more likely to seek tailored work arrangements, which are often granted.

Aligned with social exchange theory, workplace friendships between leaders and followers positively influence employee exchange relationships (Tse, Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2008:197). These friendships reinforce social exchange not only among employees but also between leaders and subordinates. A strong leader-follower exchange fosters collaboration and contributes to organisational success (Tyagi & Puri, 2017:25).

c) Role Congruity Theory

In 2002, Eagly and Karau introduced Role Congruity Theory (RCT) to explain the roots of prejudice against female leaders. The theory posits that a group is positively evaluated when its characteristics align with traditional social roles (Eagly & Diekmann, 2005). Conversely, the stereotype fit hypothesis suggests that individuals may face discrimination in certain roles if their social group is not stereotypically linked to the traits required for success in those roles.

Leadership has long been viewed as a male domain in corporate, political, and military sectors. While women have gained access to supervisory and middle management roles, they remain underrepresented among elite leaders and executives. RCT builds on social role theory by arguing that perceived mismatch between the female gender role and leadership expectations fosters bias against female leaders. Addressing this incongruity, organisations can implement strategies such as bias awareness training and redefining leadership qualities to promote inclusivity.

The theory also underscores that transformational leadership, often associated with women, can be more effectively understood through social role theory. It supports leadership approaches that align with societal expectations of women's roles, while also challenging those norms to encourage broader acceptance of diverse leadership styles. Moreover, it explains why women may be undervalued when adopting traditionally masculine leadership traits. This insight can help develop fairer evaluation practices that recognise diverse leadership strengths, particularly in municipal governance.

Grounded in this framework, the study offers insights for gender-sensitive policies informed by societal understandings of gender roles. Such an approach can support more sustainable strategies for advancing gender equality in leadership, especially within business and governance settings.

Methodology

This cross-sectional study, aimed at exploring the perspectives of individuals within the BLM in South Africa's Limpopo Province, employed a quantitative approach using secondary data from a larger research project. The target population comprised professionals within the municipality, and data was collected through convenience sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Specifically, convenience sampling, a type of non-probability sampling where participants are chosen based on practical criteria such as geographical proximity, availability, ease of access, or willingness to participate (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), was utilised for participant selection.

Statistical analysis and data management were conducted using a combination of the software packages Stata Release 15 (StataCorp, 2017) and Epi-Info (Carstensen & Plummer, 2011). To evaluate internal

consistency, Cronbach's alpha was utilised with a predefined threshold of 0.7 (Tavakol & Dennik, 2011). The Cramer's V test was employed to assess the magnitude of the correlation between gender and each of the items used to gauge the latent concept of leadership (McHugh, 2013). Descriptive statistics, presented as counts and percentages, were used to summarise categorical variables. To assess the association between two categorical variables, Pearson's chi-square test was employed (Agresti, 2010). The interpretation of the results was carried out with a significance level of 0.05.

Study Objectives

Gender encompasses the physical, biological, mental, and behavioural traits that differentiate masculinity and femininity (Haig, 2004; Letsoalo & Mmako, 2023). Its interpretation varies by context, referring to biological sex (male, female, or intersex), sex-based social structures (such as gender roles), or gender identity (Igbuku, 2015; Letsoalo, 2018). For this study, gender is defined as the binary classification of individuals as male or female.

The study sought to investigate the perceptions of professional staff concerning factors associated with transformational leadership within the Bela-Bela Local Municipality (BLM) in Limpopo, South Africa. While gender was considered, the research did not focus exclusively on female leadership, as this issue is already well-represented in existing literature. To guide the inquiry, the study tested the null hypothesis that a significant relationship exists between participants' gender and aspects of transformational leadership, against the alternative hypothesis, which posits no significant relationship between gender and transformational leadership dimensions.

Results and Interpretations

The study sample comprised 350 participants aged between 24 and 57 years, including 164 men (46.86%) and 186 women (53.14%), reflecting a higher proportion of female respondents. Participants' length of service with the municipality ranged from three to 26 years, while their tenure in current roles spanned one to 21 years.

Data were collected using a 25-item instrument, thematically organised as C1 to C25 (see Table 1). The tool demonstrated acceptable

reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7274. Notably, the exclusion of items C1 or C2 would reduce the alpha below the 0.7 threshold, underscoring their importance. Removing any other item would retain the coefficient between 0.7066 and 0.7364.

Table 1: Test for internal consistency

Item	Description	item-test correlation	item-rest correlation	average interitem correlation	Alpha
c1	My supervisor recognizes and acknowledges a need for transformational leadership within the organisation.	0.6731	0.6059	0.0863	0.6938
c2	My supervisor sufficiently involved me during the development and implementation of change interventions.	0.6154	0.5399	0.0882	0.6989
c3	Provides me with assistance during the completion of a task.	0.5234	0.4367	0.0912	0.7066
c4	Critically questions information presented to him /her before making a decision.	0.4798	0.3885	0.0926	0.7102
c5	Does not intervene until problems become serious.	0.2983	0.1937	0.0986	0.7242
c6	Focuses too much attention on irregularities, mistakes, exceptions, and deviations from standards.	0.3068	0.2027	0.0983	0.7236
c7	Avoids getting involved when important issues arise.	0.3155	0.2118	0.0981	0.7229
c8	Talks about his / her most important values.	0.2437	0.1367	0.1004	0.7282
c9	Is absent when needed.	0.3297	0.2268	0.0976	0.7219
c10	Seeks differing perspectives when solving problems.	0.1972	0.0888	0.1020	0.7315
c11	Talks optimistically about the future.	0.4555	0.3619	0.0934	0.7121
c12	Instills pride in me for being associated with him or her.	0.1275	0.0178	0.1043	0.7364
c13	Discusses in specific terms who is responsible for achieving performance targets.	0.2026	0.0943	0.1018	0.7311
c14	Waits for things to go wrong before taking an action.	0.4688	0.3765	0.0930	0.7111
c15	Talks enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished.	0.3275	0.2245	0.0977	0.7220
c16	Specifies the importance of having a clear purpose.	0.4513	0.3573	0.0936	0.7125
c17	Makes it clear what one can expect to receive when performance goals are achieved.	0.4781	0.3867	0.0927	0.7103
c18	Shows that he/she is a firm believer in "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"	0.1339	0.0242	0.1040	0.7360
c19	Goes beyond self-interest for the benefit of the group.	0.1337	0.0240	0.1041	0.7360
c20	Treats me as an individual rather than just a member of a group.	0.3935	0.2948	0.0955	0.7170
c21	Acts in a way that builds my respect towards him / her.	0.4599	0.3667	0.0933	0.7118
c22	Concentrates his/her full attention on dealing with mistakes, complaints and failures.	0.3585	0.2574	0.0966	0.7197
c23	Consider the moral and ethical consequences of decisions.	0.2435	0.1365	0.1004	0.7282
c24	Displays a sense of power.	0.4186	0.3218	0.0947	0.7150
c25	Prevents a vision for the future in an exciting manner.	0.4678	0.3754	0.0930	0.7111
Test Scale				0.0965	0.7274

Source: Authors

Table 2 reveals that most participants preferred choosing 'Once in a while' and 'Sometimes' as their responses. It further shows a tendency among males to opt for 'frequently' and 'always', while females mainly selected 'Sometimes' and 'Once in a while'. Consequently, there is a significant statistical association between gender and C6 ($P = 0.010$), suggesting male and female respondents differ in their views on the extent to which supervisors or managers emphasise irregularities, errors, exceptions, and deviations from norms. Additionally, the table indicates that the relationship's intensity between gender and C6 is moderate, as denoted by a Cramer's V value of 0.195.

Table 2: Association between C6 and gender

C6	Gender				Total
	Male	Percent	Female	Percent	
Not at all	29	52.73	26	47.27	55
Occasionally	33	37.08	56	62.92	89
Sometimes	44	40.74	64	59.26	108
Frequently	35	64.81	19	35.19	54
Always	23	52.27	21	47.73	44
Total	164	46.86	186	53.14	350
P-value = 0.010					Cramer's V = 0.195

Source: Authors

Table 3 illustrates that a larger percentage of males selected the 'Not at all' and 'occasionally' response choices, while a higher proportion of females opted for 'Frequently' and 'Always' responses. Additionally, the table reveals a significant association between C20 (Treats me as an individual rather than just a member of a group) and gender ($p = 0.04$). This implies that the proportions of male participants to female participants in the various levels of C20 were statistically distinct. Consequently, males and females held differing viewpoints regarding whether leaders or managers treated them as individuals rather than as mere members of a group. However, the strength of this association is moderate, with a Cramer's V value of 0.1691.

Table 3: Gender vs C20

C20	Gender				Total
	Male	Percent	Female	Percent	
Not at all	43	55.84	34	44.16	77
Occasionally	33	46.48	38	53.52	71
Sometimes	45	51.14	43	48.86	88
Frequently	18	30.00	42	70.00	60
Always	25	46.30	29	53.70	54
Total	164	46.86	186	53.14	350
P-value = 0.040				Cramer's V = 0.1691	

Source: Authors

The strength of the relationship between gender and C12 (Instills pride in me for being associated with him or her) is moderate, as evidenced by a Cramer's V value of 0.1854, as depicted in Table 4. Furthermore, the table reveals that a larger percentage of male participants selected 'Always' and 'Occasionally' response options, whereas most females chose 'Frequently' and 'Sometimes' responses. The table's representation indicates that the proportion of male participants compared to female participants was significantly different at the various levels of C12 (P = 0.017). It can, consequently, be inferred that males and females hold significantly different perspectives regarding whether the leader or manager instills a sense of pride in them for being associated with him or her.

Table 4: C12 vs gender

C12	Gender				Total
	Male	Percent	Female	Percent	
Not at all	11	26.83	30	73.17	41
Occasionally	46	58.23	33	41.77	79
Sometimes	40	42.55	54	57.45	94
Frequently	35	47.95	38	52.05	73
Always	32	51.61	30	48.39	62
Total	164	46.86	185	53.14	349
P-value = 0.017				Cramer's V = 0.1854	

Source: Authors

Table 5 showcases the results of the analysis exploring the relationship between gender and various variables where no statistically significant association was detected. This implies that the nominal p-values for these associations are equal to or exceeds 0.05. In essence, male and female participants hold similar perspectives regarding the items presented in the table. The table provides both Pearson's chi-square values and Cramer's V values for these associations.

For the association between gender and variables C1 through C11, C15, C17, C21, C22, C23, and C25, the relationships are deemed weak, as evidenced by Cramer's V values, each being under 0.15. Conversely, gender shows moderate correlations with C13, C14, C16, C18, C19, and C24, where Cramer's V values were greater than 0.1 yet less than 0.25. It follows that gender does not have a strong correlation with any of the variables listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Test for association between gender and insignificant items

Item	Pearson's chi-square	P-value	Cramer's V	Item	Pearson's chi-square	P-value	Cramer's V
C1	0.4474	0.978	0.0358	C14	3.5514	0.470	0.1007
C2	1.7595	0.780	0.0709	C15	2.4666	0.651	0.0839
C3	2.7759	0.596	0.0891	C16	6.2472	0.181	0.1336
C4	1.6437	0.801	0.0685	C17	0.8376	0.933	0.0489
C5	0.5238	0.971	0.0387	C18	4.1848	0.382	0.1093
C7	0.5813	0.965	0.0408	C19	5.1988	0.267	0.1219
C8	2.5683	0.632	0.0857	C21	1.7844	0.775	0.0714
C9	2.4468	0.654	0.0836	C22	0.7156	0.949	0.0452
C10	0.7439	0.946	0.0461	C23	2.5108	0.643	0.0847
C11	3.4829	0.480	0.0998	C24	5.6073	0.230	0.1266
C13	3.5942	0.464	0.1013	C25	1.4868	0.829	0.0652

Source: Authors

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of integrating gender insights into leadership development within the Bela-Bela Local Municipality (BLM). The study involved 350 participants, with a slight female majority (53.14%). Results revealed significant gender-based differences in perceptions of leadership behaviours, particularly in domains aligned with Role Congruity Theory (RCT), Transformational Leadership Theory (ILT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET). The research explored employees' perceptions of transformational leadership within BLM, contributing to a limited body of literature and marking one of the first studies of its kind in a municipal context.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the study found that leadership constructs C1 to C25 (see Table 1) were significantly associated with binary gender categories. Notably, strong correlations emerged between gender and components C20 (being recognised as an individual), C12 (pride in association with leadership), and C6 (focus on errors and deviations). Male participants more frequently perceived leaders as concentrating on mistakes and irregularities, while female participants reported a greater sense of individual recognition from leaders. Moreover, male respondents expressed a stronger sense of pride in being associated with their leaders. These gendered perspectives reveal how leadership is interpreted differently and underscore the importance of adopting context-sensitive and gender-responsive leadership approaches.

The findings align with Gilbert et al. (2007), who advocate for the normalisation of errors within socio-technical systems, and with Fransen et al. (2015), who found that team performance improves when leaders express confidence in their teams. These outcomes affirm the centrality of leader behaviours in cultivating effective teams and enhancing organisational performance. Leaders who demonstrate trust in their teams foster psychological unity and collective efficacy. Hence, organisations should invest in leadership training and capacity-building initiatives aimed at embedding transformational leadership practices across all levels.

Equally vital is the need to create equitable pathways for women to access leadership positions. Evidence indicates that organisations benefit when they leverage women's capabilities (Eagly et al., 2003). Yet, women continue to encounter structural and societal barriers that hinder their progression. RCT posits that gender stereotypes often conflict with leadership expectations, limiting women's advancement. TLT, however, highlights women's collaborative and empathetic leadership styles, which can significantly enhance decision-making and organisational outcomes. These qualities are often undervalued in leadership selection processes dominated by masculine norms.

Addressing such disparities requires multifaceted strategies to foster gender equity. SET emphasises the value of reciprocal, supportive environments where women can thrive. Measures such as mentorship programmes, gender-sensitive leadership training, and family-friendly policies are vital. Additionally, interventions like gender quotas, transparent hiring processes, and inclusive organisational cultures can

enhance women's access to leadership roles. By promoting women's leadership, organisations benefit from diversified perspectives and contribute to more just and effective governance in both public and private sectors.

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