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# **“Oh, I’m a Damsel in Distress”: Women Higher Education Leaders’ Narratives**

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## **Abstract**

This study focused on women higher education administrators’ experiences related to intersections of gender and work lives, using a narrative analysis research methodology. Women administrators shared stories of the influence of gender on their work lives. Participants “violated” gender norms by pursuing traditionally male-dominated careers, and some shared experiences of sex discrimination and/or witnessed phenomena such as the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and various double binds related to gender stereotypes. Participants’ stories challenge the literature’s focus on barriers and gender-related challenges for women higher education administrators. Social constructions of gender, contexts, individual personalities, critical life events, among other factors inform these administrators’ perceptions and responses to workplace experiences and events. Prominent counter

narratives and themes emerged, including alternatives to formal mentors, substantial support, absence of or mitigating effects of obstacles, and equitable workplace environments, revealing the ways the participants often engage in feminist praxis.

**Keywords:** gender, leadership, women higher education administrators, counter narratives, narrative research, feminist praxis

## **Introduction and Background**

Many studies have focused on the barriers that women higher education leaders face (Diehl, 2014; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Moncayo-Orjuela & Zuluaga, 2015; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017). Literature suggests that women struggle with work-family balance and workload (Dunn et al., 2014; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Kersh, 2018; Poduval & Poduval, 2009), are marginalized within male-dominated networks (Catalyst, 2004; Diehl, 2014; Jones et al., 2015), lack mentorship and support in pursuing leadership positions (Catalyst, 2004; Hewlett et al., 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010; McDonald & Westphal, 2013), face gender discrimination, and are subject to gender-based or sexual harassment (Diehl, 2014; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ginsberg et al., 2019; Ibarra et al., 2013). Diehl and Dzubinski (2016) discussed 13 distinct types of gender-based leadership barriers. Diehl (2014) suggested, “Although women face many barriers in leadership work, existing research gives limited insight into how women leaders make meaning of barriers and other adversity they may face” (p. 54). Researchers suggested barriers’ positive and negative outcomes (Johnston, 2003; McMillen, 1999).

Research on gender and leadership in higher education underscored the differences in men’s and women’s leadership experiences and styles, discussing job satisfaction, advancement opportunities, and treatment in workplace environments (Fields, 2000; Fraser & Hodge, 2007; Hagedorn, 1998; Smooth, 2016; Talbert-Hersi, 1994). Vongalis-Macrow (2016) challenged stereotypical descriptions of male and female leadership practices, contending that gender stereotypes misleadingly and unfairly confine men and women leaders and describing women and men’s similar leadership practices.

Researchers have also argued that women higher education leaders find themselves in various double binds. “As women, they are expected to be communal, collaborative, and democratic: but as managers, they are expected to be agentic and authoritative” (Haveman & Beresford, 2012, p. 125). If women display stereotypical feminine characteristics such as a “caring, consultative style, they are called weak and indecisive; when they adopt traditional authoritarian and directive behaviors, they are criticized for being too heavy-handed” (Bornstein, 2008, p. 172). The glass-cliff phenomenon is another often-cited double bind. Women are more likely to take on leadership positions with higher levels of risk of failure than men do, and women leaders who make mistakes are more likely not to be given second chances than men who make similar mistakes (Brescoll et al., 2010; Pasquerella & Clauss-Ehlers, 2017).

This present study focused on women higher education administrators’ experiences related to intersections of gender and work lives, using a narrative analysis research methodology. Women administrators shared stories of the influence of gender on their work lives. Participants “violated” gender norms by pursuing traditionally male-dominated careers, and some shared experiences of sex discrimination and/or witnessed phenomena such as the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and various double binds related to gender stereotypes. Several participants’ stories challenge the literature’s focus on barriers and gender-related challenges for women higher education administrators. Social constructions of gender, contexts, individual personalities, critical life events, among other factors inform these administrators’ perceptions and responses to workplace experiences and events. Prominent themes and counter narratives emerged, including alternatives to formal mentors, substantial support, absence of or mitigating effects of obstacles, and equitable workplace environments, revealing the ways the participants often engage in feminist praxis.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What critical events related to work and gender do participants describe? (2) How do women higher education administrators navigate personal

and work-life responsibilities? (3) Do women act to subvert traditional workplace and home life hierarchies, inequalities, and gendered power dynamics, and if so, how and why?

## **Participants**

After securing Institutional Review Board approval, I interviewed eight women higher education administrators who serve in administrative positions at the director-level or higher in the United States. Pseudonyms and vague identifiers were used to protect confidentiality. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, a method whereby participants recommend other participants based on rich examples and narratives they could provide (Creswell, 2007). The eight participants represent regions from throughout the United States. Table 1 provides demographic data and serves as a reference for participants in this study.

## **Methodology**

This research was conducted in adherence with human research ethical standards and protocols. This research received approval from the researcher's university's Institutional Review Board. This study was determined to be exempt and present minimal risks for participants.

Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studying women higher education administrators' experiences as interview questions give participants opportunities to respond in ways meaningful to them. I asked participants questions about their backgrounds, experiences becoming leaders, and stories related to gender and their work lives. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in "narrative meanings that include psychic and social realities," and I am "dealing with a number of different narrative truths" (Squire et al., 2014, p. 8). I used a constructivist approach, as I aimed to explore how participants constructed their realities "in relation to available cultural, social and interpersonal resources" (p. 8). Carefully and systematically transcribing and then coding women administrators' narratives through first and second order

**Table 1.** Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Race/ethnicity</i>
Maria	50’s	President	Community College	Black
Rae	50’s	Vice President	Community College	White
Angela	60’s	Dean	University	White
Ashley	40’s	Dean	Community College	White
Sabrina	40’s	Dean	Community College	White
Rita	30’s	Director	University	White
Morgan	30’s	Director	College	White
Jenny	30’s	Director	Community College	White

analysis coding (Gioia et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2015), I found intertextuality among narrative texts, and themes emerged from coding. I analyzed common patterns of language use, themes, and structures among participants’ stories. I noted the selection of critical events and aspects of stories that participants emphasized, which in turn, provided insights on participants’ lived experiences related to gender and its influence on their work lives. Collaborating with participants, I sought to recognize my own agenda while privileging the participants’ analyses of their stories and experiences. Acknowledging the participants’ own agency and power over their voices, I received “responses that [were] sometimes affirming and sometimes disrupting” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 30), which was another opportunity for dialogue and participant contribution to analysis and interpretation. Further, I reflected upon my own positionality as a genderqueer, middle-class professional of multiple ethnicities. I used a systematic reflection process, including reflexive journaling, re-coding transcripts to check for consistency, member checking, and keeping transcript notes.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study claims a feminist theoretical grounding, seeking to destabilize knowledges about women higher education administrators’ work and life experiences. These narratives challenged the literature’s tendency to emphasize women’s oppression or experiences of barriers.

The themes that emerged through coding narratives reflect that these women administrators define their experiences and multiple identities through descriptions of empowerment, agency, and support in unique social and cultural contexts within patriarchal social institutions. These women's contexts as higher education directors, deans, a vice president, and a president reflected a broad spectrum of experiences and career trajectories; however, the participants share leadership styles focused on social justice, servant leadership, and collaboration. In particular, they often practiced feminist praxis, as educational researcher Weiner (1994) described. The participants' experiences were infused with ideals and practices related to equity and resistance to hierarchy. The narratives about work and gender reflected responsiveness, self-reflexivity, openness to change, adaptability based on experience, and feminist organizational practices (Weiner, 1994). Although all participants revealed feminist praxis in their leadership practices (Channing, 2020a; Channing, 2020b), not all participants reported gender as a major barrier for them as they have pursued their careers, and some reported ways that they mitigated the effects of gender as a possible obstacle. When necessary, they negotiated patriarchal power dynamics/structures to achieve goals and to serve their constituencies.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Alternatives to Formal Mentors***

Although there is a paucity of women in administrative positions to serve as role models and mentors (McDonald & Westphal, 2013; Medrano, 2017), studies have suggested that mentorship plays a significant role in women higher education administrators' careers (Dunn et al., 2014; Johnson, 2016; Moreland & Thompson, 2019; Statti & Torres, 2019). Rather than being assigned mentors or engaging in mentorship programs, participants "revised" the experience of mentorship, creating their own feminist and often times collaborative approaches to developing alternative support systems and mechanisms, including informal mentors and networks.

Morgan described formal mentorship opportunities occurring through her institution’s leadership academy where men were in the majority as participants and possibly applicants. Men were viewed as potential leaders and received “official” support and development, and women pursued informal networks of support. Morgan said, “... and so we seek each other out and seek mentors,” suggesting collaborative and collegial relationships among women at this institution.

Angela described how she self-selected mentors for particular reasons. One mentor supported her research. Another supported her teaching. Others helped her as she took on leadership roles, often the person who served in that role previously. This informal system was effective because she could select mentors based on her own developmental needs, whereas an assigned a mentor or a mentor through a leadership program, for example, may not be able to meet her specific needs at the time.

Mentoring support also came in the form of women leaders’ networks. Angela related, “But I think it helps that we meet. We help to give each other sort of energy and support, so I do see women treated differently, and I do find that there are different priorities when women are at the table.” Researchers have found that women’s networking aids them in many aspects of their work, including building organizational connections, making new professional associates or friends, socializing professionally, and even providing moral and psychological support (Coleman, 2011; Redmond et al., 2017; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). In addition to women creating a support system for each other, with more women “at the table,” different priorities and issues are brought forward and workplace issues are addressed (Stainback et al., 2016). For example, Angela discussed a transformation in organizational culture at a university where she worked, becoming more family friendly with more women in senior leadership.

Maria intentionally selected her mentors rather than engaging in formal mentoring. Her narrative suggested that well-chosen, consist mentors over time facilitate professional growth and leadership trajectories. Maria reflected on her mentor selection approach:

I think a lot of times women of color and women both have a hard time with networking and building relationships and



asking for mentors. I'm intentional about making sure my mentors don't look like me. I have some that do, but like having a white male mentor really opened my eyes to see that it's about the work that you did.

Maria shifted focus away from gender and race in her narrative. Maria emphasized that accomplishments are the essential elements for success.

Although formal mentoring has its advantages such as institutional support and goal setting with a senior administrator-mentor (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Matarazzo & Finkelstein, 2015), participants expressed advantages of informal processes such as gaining encouragement and access to their mentors. In a study of Latino women administrators' mentoring, Medrano (2017) contended:

mentoring helps students and professionals overcome various barriers. Mentors can help prepare mentees for challenging situations and build their self-confidence. While formal mentoring was experienced by 50% of the participants, informal mentoring was experienced by all mentees and was the mentoring method most valued by all participants. (p. iv)

Informal mentoring is more organic. Mentees tailor mentoring to their needs at the time through working with various mentors for specialized purposes (Baugh & Fagenson-Eland, 2007; Chao et al., 1992; Lyons & Oppler, 2004; Martin, 2019). However, informal mentors may not be consistent throughout a leader's career or even time in a particular position.

These participants' development of informal support mechanisms suggest that women often cannot rely on formal systems of leadership development or mentoring, as inequities and patriarchal social structures (i.e. leadership academies) lead to access challenges. Participants found advantages in building their own informal mentorship networks, developing strong collegial relationships and tailored mentoring experiences.

## Substantial Support

All the women in this study reported substantial support, largely in the form of spouse or partner, and they attributed their success as administrators to this support mechanism. Their relationships reflected a feminist egalitarian ethic, and several participants had “atypical domestic arrangements” (Linehan et al., 2009, p. 407); their spouses or partners provided emotional and domestic support as they pursued careers. Studies found that women administrators or managers depended on others, often hired help, to provide support for domestic duties (Campbell & Lacost, 2010; Dominici et al., 2009; Gerdes, 2006; Linehan et al., 2009).

Research has demonstrated that women tend to be the primary caregivers for children and families (Bornstein, 2008; Dominici et al., 2009; Gerdes, 2006; Haveman & Beresford, 2012; Schnackenberg, 2019). Globally, researchers have found that women consistently put in substantially more hours of work related to household duties and childcare (East-erly & Ricard, 2011; Gerdes, 2006; Hill et al., 2011; Lepkowski, 2009). These participants seem, for the most part, to be exceptions to the rule. Rae explained:

My husband is a stay-at-home dad, and so he has been so supportive. ... I have this education, and my husband does not have a college education, and when we decided to [have children], we didn’t want to go the day care route, so we decided that he would be the one that would stay home. ... It has worked out well for us. ... And he has been so supportive of me continuing in higher education, getting my degrees. Doing the Ph.D. and having children, it took me a long time to do it. At work, I don’t know that it has impacted my work in terms of being in leadership. ... But I think because I have my husband at home, it hasn’t been the same as, as some other women have been impacted.

Rae recognized that she is in what might be defined as an “alternative domestic arrangement.” Though she did not pinpoint the support’s effects on her leadership, perhaps because she had always had

this support, she acknowledged that circumstances were different for women without substantial support.

Jenny defined her home as “really egalitarian” and her spouse as supportive. She said that her husband “does 75% of the domestic and child-rearing stuff.” She attributed her achievements to her husband’s support. Jenny made connections between her experiences and the need for better policies for families.

There is a lot of policy that I think that has yet to be designed to help to make that a truly equal experience. And supporting men, too, those men who are just starting their families, making sure that they’re not treated differently. They’re given support as well.

Jenny recognized the importance of policies that support men and women in balancing their family and professional responsibilities. Similarly, Dominici et al. (2009) suggested “a more family friendly culture” at organizations (p. 27).

Angela, who is in a same-sex relationship, admitted outright, “I don’t know that I could do the job that I have right now without my partner.” Angela’s partner “does a lot,” including taking care of pets, managing household repairs, cleaning, and coordinating the smooth operation of the household. Angela explained:

I realize that I have a huge advantage being able to come here and focus on my work and then when I go home, you know, it’s we have dinner. ... She’s done most of the chores around the house during the day, and I’ve got chores that I have to do. I do try to take up the slack in other areas, but yeah, it’s a huge benefit for me. And you know, that’s a partnership that we worked out together, you know. We had some bumpy times. ‘Well, you’re not doing enough.’ ‘Well, what else can I do?’ ... But we have been able to work it out over time.

Angela, as the other participants, acknowledged the advantage of her supportive partner, as well as the challenges that come with negotiating work-life balance with a partner.

Maria emphasized that her spouse was essential to her success as a leader and narrated stories about the arrangements she and her husband made to care for their children. “My husband ... only said, ‘What do I need to do to help you?’”

[My husband said,] ‘you can take classes, more classes each semester ... because I got the kids now.’ And so we kind of made that decision. ... But I didn’t have to worry about getting my kids every day and making sure they had something eat, you know. So he has been extremely supportive and has allowed me to be able to do the early mornings, late nights, the weekends, of course my kids are older now, but I would not have been able to do it without him.

Maria’s husband became self-employed, which helped the family with childrearing and with Maria furthering her education.

Rita also discussed her husband’s role in supporting her and her work-life. She described herself as “an extremely hard worker” and as having “zero work-life balance.” Her husband’s and her views of work coincide.

So also my husband is very career-minded and careeristic. So it makes for a good situation for us. ... And we’re a good team. There are times when I do things and times when he does things. We definitely don’t have the traditional male/female roles in the relationship.

Rita’s attributed part of her success to an understanding and supportive spouse who is also focused on his career.

These narratives serve as counter narratives to many women leaders’ narratives of lack of support or the expectation of “having to do it all.” For instance, a participant in Dunn et al.’s (2014) study reported:

I sometimes felt a failure as I knew many men in similarly demanding roles who seemed to be able to make it all work. Careful observation, however, told me there was typically a supportive spouse behind the scenes who managed many

details in the personal sphere, providing the support that enabled them to focus on work. (p. 16)

Many women leaders report not having substantial support at home. In one study, nearly 70% of women reported that family obligations were the most significant obstacles in pursuing career goals (Morris, 2002). Family duties affect many women's workplace advancement opportunities (Bird, 2011; Hill et al., 2011), and duties associated with senior-level positions are "difficult to reconcile with family responsibilities" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 140). Women senior-level administrators are less likely to be married or to have children, and if they are married, they are more likely to divorce (Schnackenberg, 2019). This study's participants' relationships appear to mirror successful male administrators' relationships as these participants have partners who are often willing to take on domestic responsibilities, enabling them to pursue time- and mentally-demanding administrative work. However, their relationships may be more egalitarian than many heterosexual male administrators' relationships, as these participants describe their negotiations of work-sharing with partners.

### **Absence of or Confronting Obstacles**

Participants discussed the few obstacles that they would attribute to gender or remarked that they mitigated the effects of obstacles. For example, Morgan discussed ways that women leaders' work was infused with feminist organizational practices and subject to revision and change in response to organizational needs. "Though I think there is some perception that there may be some bias or discrimination when it comes to female leaders, I have seen some very positive change because the challenges they face. ... They put themselves out there." Morgan believed that these challenges made them better leaders because of their proactivity in dealing with challenges. Morgan related, "You have to think ahead of time. You have to plan and prepare for what people may think of and what they may say. So I think that you have to be more responsive." Not only are these leaders more responsive, but in order to stay ahead of challenges, Morgan said that "they are more forward

thinking about the people they are going to come into contact with and have a better ability to respond to people’s needs.” This responsiveness leads, in Morgan’s estimation to a greater amount of effectiveness and being “more well-rounded.” They develop “more comprehensive ... plans of action” and are “more thorough in thinking ahead.” She caveated this with, “That doesn’t mean that all male leaders aren’t that way. It just means that it is incumbent upon female leaders to be successful.” She and her colleagues think not just about their leadership styles but how others will react to them and their styles and “how can [they] put counter measures in place or sustaining measures in place so that [they] can have them [their constituents] respond better to proposed changes.” Overall, she said that the women leaders she has observed have responded to challenges in ways that resulted in “thinking about change in a more holistic environment and not change that is immediate, right in front of them there, but more of a social change aspect.” Stainback et al. (2016) argued that women administrators may be well suited to effect organizational culture change because they have encountered and overcome stereotypes to gain their positions and, in the process, developed knowledge about navigating complex, contradictory, and often oppressive social systems and institutions. Morgan described a systematic process of feminist praxis (i.e. women leaders serving their constituencies). “The challenges the women face” create the environment where women feel compelled to engage in critical reflection, adaptation, and action (feminist praxis).

Sabrina subverted patriarchal storylines to overcome obstacles. She narrated about her supervisor: “He has some male chauvinist type of behavior sometimes. But it has never been a problem between us because my personality has no problem confronting him.” Sabrina directly “confronts” her supervisor when he displays chauvinist behavior, but she found that this strategy does not work with all personality types, so she has used multiple strategies when confronted with sexist behavior in different men. She attributed her abilities to negotiate sexist behavior to her upbringing.

I came from a family where there was sort of this understanding that men and women weren’t the same and wouldn’t be treated the same, and so it doesn’t bother me when I

encounter that. And I know for other women that's not the case. It really does bother them. But I'll be honest. I just turn it against them. I just turn it around and use their personality and their women issues to my advantage.

Specifically, she performed gender in a particular way to persuade the facilities director who has displayed explicit sexist attitudes in the past to complete her maintenance work orders. She said that she acts as "oh I'm a damsel in distress" in order to "get him to do work that he wouldn't normally do." The result of this "act" benefited her division as they have superior facilities at the institution. She related, "As a result, I actually have people all over campus who are very jealous of the work I can get done in my building that they can't ever get done, and it is because I use his personality, his character flaw to my advantage." Sabrina recognized that some might interpret her behavior as manipulative; however, she narrated, "I'm really just using what they're giving me to work with." Sabrina's behavior evoked Butler's (2009) theories on performing gender. According to Butler (2009), gender is performed according to socially constructed and reproduced binary frameworks. These reproductions of gender occur within negotiations of power, suggesting possibilities for "undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines" (i). Sabrina's performance of gender (being a damsel in distress) in some ways reifies male dominance in decision making and action. After all, this story reflects that women need saving, and men are in positions of being able to save women. However, Sabrina subverted this power dynamic by using it to her and her division's advantage. Her performance negotiated power without the man in power (the facility director) ever knowing it. Gender is remade along new lines because Sabrina navigated and covertly subverted patriarchal power dynamics.

Themes of gender not being a "limiting factor" ran through Maria's narrative. She stated, "I don't think my gender has prevented me from being an administrator or has gotten in my way." Maria did not emphasize the substantial barrier phenomenon, which other researchers associated with black women administrators' experiences (Barksdale, 2007; Candia-Bailey, 2016; Logan & Dudley, 2019). Candia-Bailey

(2016) asserted, “There is a burden for African-American women described as the ‘double whammy’ of race/ethnicity and gender” (p. 3). Marie shared:

So I do want to be clear. It’s not that I don’t feel like there were things that because of my race and gender ... hindered me. I just don’t feel like that was the limiting factor. Like you’ll never be a president because you’re a black female. I never had that attitude. [It was] like I’m going to be one. It’s just a matter of when. So it could be the way I approach things that I don’t see the subtle ... little things that hinder people. Again, I will say that I think the role of mother when you have the children to consider, and it is more acceptable for the mother to stay with them when they get sick. Then some other times to take them to places. ... That hinders your ability to stay late or come in early.

Maria focused on challenges of motherhood rather than those of race.

Maria highlighted the importance of success and told her mentees that leadership success is not about being “well dressed” or having a degree but about having accomplishments. She counseled other black women not offered promotions or positions. Their responses were “Well, that’s because I’m black,” and Maria’s response was, “No, that’s because you haven’t done anything.” She said, “It isn’t always the perception of the person, and that’s different from the reality that I see.” Maria described substantial social and cultural changes in the United States in the last decade. She did not perceive her gender and her race as substantial obstacles in obtaining leadership positions.

Rita also described a lack of obstacles in her leadership trajectory. Although she related that gender may influence her leadership style, Rita said that she did not face work-related challenges or obstacles associated with gender. She said, “I do not feel that my gender has influenced my opportunities for advancement or anything like that.” Rita was in a particularly male-dominated field in higher education leadership, but from her perspective, her gender has been a non-issue. At several places of employment, she was promoted quickly. She shared:



I feel that my competency in the area has really paved the way for me and my experiences. I have never felt that my gender played a factor, honestly. I feel like my youth sometimes played a factor, but I never felt like my gender did.

Rita described herself as extremely dedicated to her work, which, she described as opening doors for her. Rita is of the Millennial Generation, characterized by Taylor and Stein (2014) as a generation that feels particular pressure to perform to prove themselves at work. “I am an extremely hard worker. I have zero work-life balance, and I am currently trying to work on that with myself, but my education and my career have been my life, and I take a lot of pride in my work and being an expert in my field.” Rita’s competency in a high-demand field, work ethic, and exceptional communication skills, which Rita reported many of her male counterparts lack, led to success and promotions at a young age. Rita admitted that this may have created a “political situation that was definitely at least acknowledged and maybe addressed in some way by my administrators.” Rita mentioned that her experience in higher education may be much different than a women from a different historical, social, or cultural context. She emphasized societal change in the last century, leading to workplace opportunities.

### **Equitable Workplace Environments**

Research on women’s experiences at work revealed issues of not being heard (Gonyea, 2019), being negatively stereotyped as less competent or able (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and facing numerous organizational culture barriers and challenges (Eddy 2010). Although some of the participants in this study expressed similar concerns or challenges, others did not report that they experienced these types of attitudes or encountered workplace environments or cultures where they perceived sexism as a major issue. Several participants described equitable workplace environments where women’s as well as others’ voices are heard, validated, and respected.

Rita viewed her workplace as fostering equity and offering opportunity. Although “there are folks at this institution that believe that

women don’t have the opportunities that men do for advancement, that has not been my experience at all.” Rita witnessed multiple women advance, and approximately half of the senior leadership at her institution were women.

And as far as being in meetings, I feel everyone should be equal regardless of gender, and everyone’s voices are heard regardless of gender. So from my experiences interacting with that level of leadership, no one is degraded by their gender. No one is taken less seriously. Everyone has value based on their expertise in their own area.

Moreover, Rita viewed having competency in one’s field as a prime factor in interactions and in respecting each other’s opinions.

Ashley described a leadership team that, through their words and actions, created an equitable workplace and learning environment. She described an environment of mutual respect even in the face of disagreements. She attributed environment to leaders who have “experienced bias and want to ensure that they’re not applying it with anybody that they’re leading or working directly with.” Although Ashley acknowledged the divisiveness in contemporary American culture, from her perspective, much has changed for the better.

In so many different ways, whether it be, gender or race or sexual orientation or, you know, all of the things that have been really so much on the forefront over the last couple of years and gotten a lot more attention, and I think in some ways that’s been very positive and has made people, you know, think about things a little bit differently.

Ashley described overall social change having positive effects because of the awareness of equity issues, as well as efforts to reduce bias and discrimination.

Sabrina described her college’s history as lending itself to an equitable environment. She narrated:

And that's the reason I can say that I don't feel a lot of microaggression here because the majority of our leadership is female, and for 17 years or so, our president was female, and our founding president was female. So we have had a long history of females in leadership. I will say to you, our last female president brought a lot of change here on campus.

Leaders, regardless of gender, often face challenges when introducing change; however, according to Sabrina, the former president encountered little "pushback." "Everyone honored whatever decision she made." After the president retired, the college continued to employ many women leaders. Although Sabrina recognized sexism as an existing workplace problem, she acknowledged a significant and long-standing tradition of valuing women's leadership at her college.

Maria facilitated the creation of a more equitable and supportive culture at her college. Maria's leadership style was a sharp contrast to the college's previous leader. "I want everybody's take. Who's missing? Go get them, you know, so it's just a different style and leadership." The culture Maria wished to create derived from her desire "to place the resources and provide more services that support not just students but faculty and staff so we could do a better job." Through her leadership, she intentionally created a culture that brought people together, focused on the college's mission, and reflected equity. "I think my personal style is very collaborative, and I worked very hard that no matter if you're staff, custodian, whoever you are, let's drop titles and let's just talk about what we need to do to improve student success." Stainback et al. (2016) found when women are given opportunities in leadership, they are more apt to be change agents, creating more equitable workplace environments and engaging in feminist praxis. The participants who described their workplaces as equitable worked at institutions where the majority of administrators were women, supporting Stainback et al.'s findings that women leaders are mindful of equity in their leadership practices.

## **Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications for Further Research**

Studies within the qualitative research traditions are often not transferable to all contexts and to all similar groups of people (Creswell, 2007); however, these participants’ insights may provide applicable insights and fodder for future studies that include more diverse participants in terms of gender identities, ethnicities, generations, institutional type, and sexual orientations and analyze the intersections among identities and work experiences. This study did not analyze intersections among all aspects of participants’ identities and their work lives. Moreover, this study was limited to the United States. Future studies could investigate intersectionality in women’s work lives outside the U.S. as well as further study women’s development of informal mentorship and networking relationships, the roles support systems and partners play in women administrators’ career advancement, and the factors influencing equity at institutions.

These narratives challenged much of the literature focused exclusively on barriers women administrators face. The participants were not unaware of or oblivious to the sexism in their environments and in society. They frequently acknowledged that sexism exists, that they have experienced it at some points in their lives or careers, or that other people perceive sexism as a substantial barrier for women leaders. They acknowledged the power of their own competence, accomplishments, and strengths in their work lives, and when they encountered sexism, they did not view this as an obstacle, but as in the case of at least one participant, something that can be used to her and her administrative unit’s advantage. These participants recognized their own agency in becoming and in constructing their own identities although they were constrained by social and personal constructions of identities such as wife or mother. For example, one participant was challenged by having to come in early and stay late due to family responsibilities. All participants described themselves as people who strategize to persevere. They intentionally sought out mentors and relied on them for specific purposes. These women reported having substantial support both at home and in their workplaces, something not often reflected in the literature about women higher education leaders. They did not wait for opportunities but recognized their own power in finding and securing

opportunities for advancement. Significantly, through their leadership, the participants engaged in feminist praxis as they thoughtfully, ethically, and responsively served others.

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