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Challenges and Successes of Women's Leadership in Higher Education in Qatar: The Case of the Community College of Qatar

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Abstract

This case study examines the cultural, institutional, and personal challenges experienced by women in academic leadership positions at the Community College of Qatar (CCQ), as well as their achievements and perceptions of leadership. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 26 women holding various leadership positions through a questionnaire, followed by a focus group discussion involving five participants. The findings reveal opportunities and barriers to attaining leadership positions, shaped by workplace culture, professional networks, cultural stereotypes, and domestic responsibilities. Women leaders also experienced burnout, stress, and anxiety after assuming leadership roles. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated strong decision-making skills, resilience, innovation, and collaborative leadership. They contributed to institutional governance by guiding their teams, supporting colleagues, making important decisions, and promoting an inclusive culture that challenges gendered assumptions about leadership. Support from coworkers, families, mentors, institutions, and communities helped participants balance professional and personal responsibilities and overcome cultural and workplace pressures. Appropriate policies, resources, mentoring, and institutional support systems were identified as essential to their success. Although limited in scope, this study contributes to the literature by documenting women's lived experiences and recommending interventions to address persistent barriers and strengthen women's leadership in higher education.

Keywords: Women in Leadership, Women in Academia, Workplace Leadership, Community College of Qatar, Qatari Women.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of women's leadership has obtained significant attention from feminist researchers seeking to mainstream gender equity and equality in institutions. When women have equal opportunities to lead, they bring viewpoints emerging from their lived experience and socialization that enhance not only their own decision-making processes but also how decisions are made in the workplace. It has become evident that where women have made headway in leadership positions globally, they enhance creativity in problem-solving, productivity, and workplace well-being [1], as Viljoen observes. Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions worldwide. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 [2], it will take another 132 years to close the gender gap globally if current trends continue. The report highlights the disparity in leadership roles:

- Political Leadership: As of 2023, only 26.5% of parliament seats and 22.6% of ministerial positions are held by women globally.
- Corporate Leadership: Women hold just 29% of senior management roles globally, and only 7.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women, according to a Catalyst 2023 report [3].
- Tech Sector: In the tech industry, women represent about 25% of the workforce, with significantly fewer in leadership roles. For example, only 11% of tech executives are women, as reported by Deloitte's 2023 Technology Industry Outlook [4].

In too many professions, glass ceilings remain in place, including higher education. Certainly, globally, women have made inroads as heads of departments, deans, provosts, vice chancellors, and university presidencies. Yet, the presence of social and cultural barriers slows down these efforts, and significant gaps remain, as Corea et al. [5] observe.,

In Qatar specifically, this glass ceiling is evident in leadership statistics. From 2018 to 2021, Qatari women's share of leadership roles across ministries, universities, and the private sector rose only marginally, from 6.7% to 7.1% [6]. At CCQ itself, while women constitute 50% of deans and 100% of non-academic heads of section, they represent only 27% of heads of department—reflecting a pattern in which women are present in leadership but concentrated at lower or more circumscribed rungs of the hierarchy. The Qatar National Vision 2030 directly addresses this gap by committing to gender equity in education and employment, expanding access to higher education, supporting flexible working arrangements, and promoting women's contribution to economic growth and national development [7]. The Vision thus provides an institutional framework within which CCQ's own gender equality efforts are situated—though as the data in this study show, formal commitments and grassroots realities do not always align. Cultural barriers in the Qatari context take specific forms: gender-segregated professional networks, social expectations about women's primary role in caregiving, and the influence of personal and family connections—referred to as “Wasta” (واسطة)¹ [8], [9]. Understanding these context-specific dynamics is one motivation for a single-institution case study approach.

¹ Wasta is an Arabic term that refers to using personal connections, social networks and intermediaries to gain access to opportunities, services or resources - roughly analogous to "who you know" in English, but more institutionalized and culturally central than that phrase implies. Those with power and influence (for example, respected family members, senior colleagues or community leaders) might use their social capital to help others get a job, promotion, education or access to public services. Wasta is a way of building social ties and increasing cooperation, but it can also affect organizational decisions together with formal qualifications and performance. In this research, wasta is relevant as it is possible that personal and family networks also influence leadership appointments, besides merit-based criteria. “Historically, these informal networks have been more open to men, so women might have less access to the informal networks where information, mentorship and career opportunities are often passed along,” she says. Women may also have less access to

In many global spaces gender parity in enrolment has been achieved in tertiary education, with Latin America & the Caribbean leading, followed by Europe and Central Asia. However, gender parity in academic roles, such as teaching positions, remains unmet, with Central Asia showing higher representation of women (55%) than Europe and Latin America & Caribbean (50%; see <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/gender-equality-and-through-teaching-profession>). Parity in these roles is projected to be achieved well beyond 2030. Variations within regions, such as internal differences in Central Asia, emphasize the need for more granular analysis. Gender parity in senior and leadership roles is even further from being realized [5].

To make real progress, governments and families must encourage and support women to pursue leadership positions while finding pathways to address the unequal burdens women face in the care economy globally—in childcare, care for the sick, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic responsibilities. Other inhibiting factors, such as globally high rates of Violence against Women (VAW), including Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), contribute to the societal conditions found worldwide that limit women’s capacity to enter equitably into leadership spaces across multiple sectors, from governance to finance, and higher education. To make real progress, governments and families must encourage and support women to pursue leadership positions while addressing the unequal burdens women face in the global care economy—childcare, elder care, care for the sick, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic responsibilities.

Understanding women’s leadership in higher education worldwide requires attention both to these broad, cross-cutting constraints (domestic/family responsibilities, gender stereotypes, violence) and to specific social, cultural, and organizational factors that influence women’s career advancement in particular contexts. Cultural norms can inhibit women’s networking capacities and discourage pursuit of high-level leadership [8]. For example, after-work events are often easier for men to attend given women’s double workday burdens. Organizational structures and informal mentoring networks in higher education can also—intentionally or not—advantage men. Women’s extensive teaching, informal advising and student support, administrative duties, and family responsibilities can crowd out the research time required for promotion. Men, freer to pursue research and more embedded in male-dominated sponsorship networks, may advance more readily [10], [11].

This hierarchical relationship between men and women is maintained through relationships between men. As suggested by Hartmann [12, p. 14], these relationships, ‘although hierarchical, establish or create interdependence among men that enable them to dominate women’. Underpinning this is the idea that men’s relationships with each other are important to men, despite these hierarchical differences. This opens up the possibility of understanding the kind of ‘pack-mentality’ that has been identified as important in perpetuating gender inequality, as well as many men’s acute sensitivity to other men’s evaluation of their behaviour and attitudes [11].

In this article, we explore whether and how these cross-cultural patterns manifest in Qatar. Through a case study of women in leadership positions at CCQ, we examine the challenges women face, their accomplishments, and the conditions that shape both. We begin

certain informal networking spaces where professional relationships are built, which can impact their visibility and movement into leadership positions. See [48].

with a selective literature review on women's leadership in higher education, with emphasis on the Arab world, especially Qatar. We then introduce CCQ and situate it within Qatar National Vision 2030. Next, we outline the theoretical framework of feminist ethnography that informed our research, describe the study methodology, present our findings, and conclude with discussion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Select Literature Review

There is a significant body of global literature on women's leadership. Here, we highlight crucial themes with a focus on the Arab Gulf states and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education. Globally, women lag behind men in workplace and governance leadership. Barriers—social, cultural, institutional, and personal—persist even where legal frameworks prohibit gender discrimination. Traditional gender roles, especially caregiving responsibilities, shape women's opportunities and choices. Addressing inequalities requires confronting the disproportionate domestic care burden experienced by women, whether or not they also engage in paid work. We see this pattern repeatedly across societies. For example, in Vietnam, barriers to women's advancement in higher education include bias against women leaders, limited networking opportunities, and work–life imbalance tied to caregiving [13]. In Pakistan, men are often prioritized for leadership and pre-leadership mentoring opportunities, reflecting broader societal bias [14].

In Arab countries, women's leadership has garnered increasing attention over the past two decades as more women pursue academic careers and as national plans influenced by Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) promote women's advancement. Research demonstrates that despite women's capacity to lead, they face significant barriers. Gender stereotypes informed by cultural beliefs and norms, as well as social expectations, limit women's progression. Organizational structures that normalize men's dominance, restrict women's access to mentorship, and limit mixed-gender networking opportunities also constrain advancement. Although many Arab countries, including Qatar, have made strides toward gender equality, women remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership.

At the same time, overgeneralization should be avoided. The “Arab world” encompasses twenty-two countries across Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa, with Arabic as the dominant language and Islam the majority religion. Yet the region is highly diverse. As Hovsepian [15, p. 2] notes, reducing the Middle East to essentialized concepts such as “Islam,” the “Arab or Muslim mind,” or treating it only through its “strategic” relevance ignores the ecological, regional, ethnic, religious, cultural, political, familial, tribal, class, and state-level diversity that exists. Said [16] famously challenged homogenizing portrayals of Arab societies through Orientalism. Accordingly, individual country studies are crucial for identifying the particular factors that limit or enable women's leadership and for designing targeted interventions.

In Saudi Arabia, Alomair [17] documents enduring social, cultural, and organizational barriers that limit women's leadership in higher education, despite the increasing share of educated women and the promise of Vision 2030. Informal networks often shape selection into leadership roles, constraining women's advancement [18]. Gender segregation and institutional

practices can result in heavier teaching and administrative loads for women, restricted engagement in research networks, and exclusion from top leadership [19]. Cultural expectations related to motherhood and caretaking further reduce opportunities. Organizational patterns, including nepotism and male-dominated leadership, restrict access.

In Jordan, a review by Al Bawab et al. [20] finds that, despite women's majority presence in higher education enrolment, women are largely absent from senior academic and managerial positions. Families invest in women's education, yet this support often does not extend to employment [21], [22], [23]. Jordanian women remain concentrated in lower ranks and face cultural norms around primary caregiving, gender stereotypes about leadership capability, unsupportive management, heavy workloads, and limited networking opportunities [24].

In Yemen, conservative norms emphasizing women's domestic roles generate skepticism about women's leadership, deterring pursuit of leadership positions and contributing to stress, limited institutional support, and even spousal disapproval due to gender-mixed workplaces [25].

In Qatar, women are represented across many academic fields (especially education and the social and health sciences), while men dominate STEM. Al-Muftah and Al-Jassim [26] argue that women's more limited research opportunities impede advancement to leadership, where research achievements are often central. Qatari women who studied abroad frequently return with strong ambitions and leadership skills, but local cultural expectations can constrain realization of these goals. Broader factors affecting women's workforce participation—especially marital status and domestic responsibilities—extend to higher education. Policies such as flexible work hours, expanded education opportunities, and family support have been identified as important for increasing women's labor market participation [27]. While Qatar has made progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership in business, universities, and government, in part due to gendered expectations affecting work–life balance and the influence of personal connections [8]. Institutional support, explicit objectives, and organizational culture are important variables [9]. Research also underscores the pivotal role of family support: when families embrace gender-equitable norms around education and leadership, Qatari women invest in their education and careers and are more likely to pursue leadership [28].

It is important to underscore that the domestic and caregiving challenges women face are distinctively gendered: they fall disproportionately on women, not because of individual choice, but because of deeply embedded patriarchal social norms and institutional structures that assign primary caregiving roles to women. It is not that men in leadership positions do not encounter pressures; they do with regard to workload and accountability stress, but they are far less likely to face the expectation of primary responsibility for childcare, elder care, and household management alongside their professional roles. Moreover, women also face workload and accountability stress. Thus, in Qatar, as elsewhere in the region and globally, women leaders navigate what was first referred to by Hochschild and Machung [29] as the “double shift”: professional obligations during the workday and disproportionate domestic responsibilities outside of it (see also, [27], [8]). This gendered dimension of leadership is not incidental to our study—it is central to understanding why women's leadership remains constrained even in contexts with formal policy commitments to gender equity. Workplace

culture change is a beginning, but gender transformation across institutions—including the family—is necessary for full gender equality and justice.

The Community College of Qatar and the Qatar National Vision: Gender Equality Initiatives

CCQ is the largest national college in Qatar, established to enhance national competencies and contribute to the Qatar National Vision 2030's educational objectives. As noted on its website, CCQ “offers specialized and flexible learning pathways, diverse academic programs, and strategic partnerships that help students reach their aspirations and strengthen the nation's workforce. Since its establishment in 2010 in partnership with Houston Community College, CCQ has grown from 308 students to over 8,900... In 2015, it transitioned to a fully independent national institution” [30].

While only two of the eight members of the Board of Trustees are women, the Chair of the Board is a woman. CCQ's public-facing materials present the college as a welcoming, co-educational space with messaging that signals support for women students. For example, under the College's values on the website—distinction, flexibility, empowerment, collaboration, and national pride—two of the images depict women. One shows two women in black hijabs reading, with the accompanying text: “We offer flexible educational pathways through hybrid learning models and adaptable scheduling to accommodate the unique circumstances of our students” [31]. Another image depicts two women wearing hardhats over hijabs and construction vests, implying that women can enter traditionally male-dominated careers. The symbolism suggests that education and career advancement for women align with religious values and norms of modesty. These public symbols reflect themes of the Qatar National Vision 2030.

Over the past three decades, Qatar has invested heavily in higher education as part of its empowerment agenda. The Qatar National Vision 2030 emphasizes human development and women's education [7]. The Vision focuses on fairness, inclusion, and the development of the Qatari people, signaling a commitment to equal opportunities in education and employment. To this end, Qatar has pursued policies to support women's contribution to economic growth and social development, including expanding access to higher education. Universities in Education City have provided opportunities across disciplines, enabling women to gain the knowledge and skills needed for leadership. Women have engaged actively in this agenda, contributing to the labor market. Between 2010 and 2015, Qatar ranked at the top among GCC countries in women's literacy [32].

Despite these advances, many highly educated Qatari women are still not equally represented in senior leadership in universities; CCQ's woman Board Chair is notable in this regard. The underrepresentation of women invites questions about cultural expectations, institutional practices, and the distribution of leadership opportunities. Despite legal changes and efforts to eliminate discrimination, barriers related to culture, institutional design, and societal support persist [33].

The Qatar National Vision 2030 also outlines support for women in the workplace—flexible work hours, maternity leave—to help balance work and family responsibilities. From 2018 to 2021, the share of Qatari women in leadership roles across ministries, universities, and the private sector increased from 6.7% to 7.1% [6]. While incremental, this aligns with Vision 2030's aspiration to expand women's leadership. In 2023, Qatar's Gender Development Index

was 1.036; and the Women's Human Development Index (0.909) slightly exceeded men's (0.877), indicating relative parity or advantage across health, education, and income indicators [34]. Yet these positive trends have not closed the leadership gap, underscoring the need for sustained, targeted interventions.

At CCQ specifically, there are concrete signs of an evolving institutional culture that is becoming more inclusive of women in leadership. Most notably, the proportion of women in higher education in Qatar has grown steadily over recent decades: women now outnumber men in enrollment at Qatari universities—a trend we see globally—and the number of women pursuing graduate degrees and academic careers has increased significantly since 2010 [32]. At CCQ, women hold 50% of dean-level positions and 100% of non-academic head-of-section roles—proportions that represent meaningful progress relative to the private sector and government ministries. The founding of CCQ in partnership with Houston Community College, and its subsequent transition to an independent national institution, created an organizational culture that drew on both international best practices and Qatari national values, opening space for women's leadership in ways not always mirrored in more traditional institutions. These changes do not erase persistent gaps, particularly at the department-head level, but they demonstrate that cultural change at CCQ is a process already underway—one that our study's findings both document and seek to accelerate.

Previous research highlights barriers to women's leadership in higher education, including gender inequality, internal policies, and implicit bias. These issues persist globally, even where anti-discrimination laws exist. Laws provide essential frameworks but require implementation, monitoring, and enforcement. Given the well-documented obstacles, this article contributes case-based evidence on women's leadership in Qatari higher education, grounded in a single institution. While not generalizable, the study adds to the richness of women's stories and illuminates how national visions intersect with institutional dynamics to shape women's leadership. Before introducing the study's methodology and findings, we outline a theoretical frame anchored in feminist ethnography to center women's narratives and perspectives.

Theoretical Underpinnings

We approach this research as feminist researchers concerned with the persistent obstacles that both limit women's access to leadership positions within higher education (and society more widely) and which challenge women once they obtain leadership positions. The multidisciplinary feminist initiative to include women's perspectives, narratives, and knowledges in examining any issue, as part of rectifying historical exclusions informs and motivates this study [35], [36], [37]. The 18th century marked the emergence of feminist writing in the US, France, and Great Britain challenging essentialist Enlightenment notions of women that sought to confine them to domesticity (Rendal [38]).

Traditional historical narratives, overwhelmingly male, Eurocentric, and heteronormative, have marginalised the experiences and epistemologies of women, non-binary individuals, and other gender-diverse subjects. This paper argues that gender historiography, especially when informed by intersectional, non-binary, and feminist post-structuralist approaches, is not a supplementary corrective but a transformative framework for rethinking historical knowledge [37, p. 1].

Rajgopal [39] effectively makes a case to include the histories of non-Western societies' feminist movements as among the first wave, challenging the idea that Western white middle class feminists pioneered feminism. She argues that women in the Indian Subcontinent sought to include women's perspectives and labors in reconstructing historical narratives and redefining patriarchal characterizations of women. In the edited collection, *Exclusions in Feminist Thought: Challenging the Boundaries of Womanhood* [40] authors make the case that women from multiple backgrounds—Latina, trans, aboriginal/First Nations, Black—continue to be marginalized in Western academic spaces despite evidence of historical activism, scholarship, and advocacy for inclusion. In various parts of the world, feminist researchers are documenting women's longstanding contributions to society, examining the conditions that gave rise to inclusivity in some aspects of society as well as ongoing advocacy for greater recognition and participation in leadership at all levels. Fox and Al-Mekaimi [41] discuss the role of Kuwaiti women in leadership, identifying Quranic roots and conditions of trade creating conditions of inclusivity.:

Through trade and exposure to global cultures, Kuwaiti society absorbed innovative ideas about gender roles fostering openness to redefining women's societal contributions. Moreover, prior to the discovery and development of the oil industry, men's prolonged absences (due to pearl diving and trade) necessitated women's leadership in managing households, finances, and community affairs. This normalized women's autonomy and decision-making, building a foundation for social transformation. In the current period of oil wealth and modernization, women have retained significant independence. The cultural legacy of self-reliance, rooted in men's historical absences, endured, easing acceptance of women's entry into education, professions, and public life [41, p. 2598].

The feminist postcolonial and decolonial work to excavate women's roles in society and the underlying conditions that created their inclusion and exclusion specific to particular geopolitical and cultural spaces is ongoing. This small study contributes to these efforts, as it demonstrates that while women do attain leadership positions in the CCQ, some women struggle more than others for reasons we highlight below, opening up opportunities for interventions both at the College and more widely across Qatari society.

METHODS

Methodology: the Collaborative Lens of Feminist Ethnography

This study employs a mixed-methods design within a feminist ethnographic framework reflecting the disciplinary background of co-author, Diana J Fox. We chose feminist ethnography because it foregrounds women's voices as primary evidence, treats research participants as collaborators with joint stakes in the research, rather than subjects, and attends to the power dynamics embedded in knowledge production itself [42], [43]. This approach is appropriate for a study whose aim is not only to describe women's leadership at CCQ but to center women's own understandings of their experiences. Data collection proceeded in two phases: (1) a Qualtrics survey distributed in both English and Arabic to all women in leadership positions at CCQ, yielding 26 usable responses; and (2) a focus group interview conducted via Zoom in Arabic by co-author Amna Abdelnur with five participants, recorded and subsequently analyzed for themes. We analyzed survey responses quantitatively using frequency

distributions; focus group data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic coding, with themes cross-referenced against survey findings for convergence and divergence. The study was approved through institutional review processes first at Bridgewater State University and subsequently by CCQ. We informed participants of their right to withdraw at any time in a consent form built into the survey and at the beginning of the focus group interview. All focus group responses are presented anonymously. Limitations include the small and single-institution sample, which precludes generalizability, and the reliance on self-report data. These limitations are discussed further in the Contributions and Limitations section.

Researcher Positionality and Collaboration

In addition, we adopt authorial first-person approach to writing, encouraged by feminist anthropology to acknowledge our own positionality and to emphasize the relationship between research topics and authorial positionality. For many feminists, research questions and concerns are located in lived experience, prompting broader questions about societal patterns. This is true for the both of us, we are each woman academic who are also mothers with domestic and care responsibilities. Moreover, authorial subjectivity and a focus on women's lived experiences as we do here through the survey with open-ended questions and the focus group, contributes to the ongoing process of including women as societal actors, rectifying long histories of exclusion [42]. Incorporating diverse herstories into human stories became central to feminist ethnographic methodology. This collaborative research emerged from an MOU between CCQ and Bridgewater State University's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) program. Diana J. Fox, who is engaged in collaborative feminist research with women across global contexts, reached out to Amna A. O. Abdelnur to explore the possibilities for this joint research. After a series of Zoom meetings, we focused on women's leadership as an area of contribution to both scholarship and practice. A decolonial feminist ethic guided the project—centering critical issues identified by collaborators in the Global South and disrupting patterns in which Global North actors set research agendas.

The collaborative nature of our research is also part of a feminist ethnographic purview. In the leading works that laid out this approach, beginning in the 1980s, women ethnographers reconceptualized the role (and terminology) of “primary informants”—those who conveyed cross-cultural knowledge to so-called authoritative researchers—as collaborators. Collaborators engage in mutually agreed-upon research strategies from the seed of an idea to the final published work. This writing itself reflects that process, as does the methodological approach which we outline in the next section. Feminist anthropologists also broadened their understanding of the “category woman” as non-universal, laying foundations for the emergence of a feminist decolonial anthropology that understood gender as complex and differentiated, while concurrently documenting similarities across differences. Many white middle-class women ethnographers who, in the 1970s, wrote about an assumed global sisterhood took seriously and absorbed into their approaches, the pushback the discipline received from women around the world emerging in the 1980s, such that by the time Lila Abu-Lughod wrote *Writing Women's Worlds* [43], women ethnographers of many backgrounds were documenting women's lives inclusively and collaboratively. Abu-Lughod [43] exemplified the idea of the feminist collaborator by centering Bedouin women's voices through personal storytelling, narrative agency, and the co-construction of knowledge. They did this while continuing to ask

questions that disturbed the male-dominated research establishment: who is included and who is left out of research? Who writes the grants? Who funds research? Whose and which questions are pursued in the first place? Who is recognized for asking the questions and doing the thinking that led to them? Who writes the reports and makes decisions about what data is included and excluded? And whose names are first or even on the page at all? These are not trivial matters but are central to the layers of knowledge construction through the research process and the stories we tell about research.

Women's Voice, Women's Stories

A methodology section need not be dry and sanitized, removing creative writing strategies such as storytelling to explicate to readers what often seems to be a mysterious process of data collection. In fact, as the above discussion indicates, such storytelling is a foundation of feminist research methodology. We explained above what brought us together in the first place—the facility of institutional arrangements and the wonders of technological communication platforms. Those e-mail exchanges took place in December 2024. Next steps are also important. To work together transnationally, we had to be flexible, as women must be: our roles as women academics are not detached from our familial and community roles as well as our other professional responsibilities. We both have adult children, husbands, and households to manage. We had a time difference of seven hours to negotiate, and thankfully, Amna Abdelnur is a night owl, permitting Diana Fox her own earlier comfort zone.

After deciding on a topic via email, we met each other on Zoom in December 2024, exploring possible methods of data collection. We decided on a mixed-methods approach. Diana Fox's university has an account with Qualtrics, so we were able to design a survey in both English and Arabic. The Planning and Effectiveness Section at CCQ distributed the survey and we collected responses from 26 women. Subsequently, Amna Abdelar engaged five participants in a focus group interview on Zoom in Arabic. Diana set up the Zoom, greeted the participants, and then left since she doesn't speak Arabic. The women chose not to have their cameras on for greater comfort. We recorded the interview to ensure we had direct quotes, which we share anonymously below in the results section. We organized survey questions into three main themes: successes, barriers, and leadership styles. Regarding leadership styles, we generated a list of approaches to leadership based on gendered research that highlighted cross-culturally salient patterns of men's and women's leadership. We asked women to identify their styles from this list and to indicate if they agreed that certain characteristics reflected men's vs. women's approaches to leadership. The focus group took place on July 9, 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings below are presented with attention to both their quantitative and qualitative dimensions. We note that, consistent with our feminist ethnographic framework, the survey and focus group data are treated as complementary rather than hierarchically ordered: quantitative frequencies reveal patterns across respondents, while qualitative narratives illuminate the lived experiences behind those patterns. Because this is a single-institution study

with 26 survey respondents, all statistical findings should be interpreted as descriptive of this cohort rather than as generalizable to Qatari higher education. The value of this data lies not in its representativeness but in three areas: 1) in the richness of women's own accounts—an epistemological commitment at the heart of feminist ethnography; and 2) the foundation it opens up for future comparative studies that build on this one, expanding the numbers of participants across the Qatari higher education landscape. Importantly, 3) many of our findings converge with the regional and global literature reviewed above, lending contextual weight. Where they diverge, that divergence itself is analytically meaningful.

The Participants

The participants in this study exhibited diverse backgrounds, encompassing variations in age, nationality, marital status, and familial obligations. The age distribution shows that most women who hold leadership positions are in their middle years. Sixty-seven percent are between the ages of 36 and 45, twenty-two percent are between the ages of 46 and 55, and eleven percent are between the ages of 26 and 35. It is noteworthy that no respondents were younger than 25 or older than 55. Fifty-two percent of respondents were Qatari, while 48% were Jordanian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Ukrainian, Tunisian, Yemeni, and Egyptian backgrounds. This diversity of nationality demonstrates that CCQ's management cares about having leaders from many cultures. Ninety-six percent of respondents stated that employment at the College is their only work.

In addition to these demographic factors, we were also interested in the marriage status of our participants and whether they have children, given the time constraints that women's caregiving roles have in their ability to devote time to research and other professional activities. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents are married; four percent are widowed; eleven percent are divorced; and twenty-six percent have never been married. This last percentage is notable in a part of the world where marriage is highly valued but also reflects global patterns of women's marriage status in higher education: “although 70 percent of male professors who achieve tenure are married with children, only 44 percent of female professors who reach the same status are married with children². Two-thirds of participants indicated they had between one and six children. We asked respondents whether “women have difficulty assuming leadership positions because of expectations about domestic responsibilities (caring for children, the sick, preparing meals, cleaning, etc.). The responses varied, with slightly less than half either agreeing or somewhat agreeing (12 total), while one slightly disagreed, 12 disagreed, and one didn't know. We did not ask about the circumstances that shaped their answers, a limitation of the study that future researchers should examine. We do not know, therefore, whether women who do not face challenges around their domestic roles have husbands and older children who share responsibilities, whether they have helpers or extended family members who offer supporting roles. Again, our sample is small, but, notably, 12 of 26 women agree that they face challenges even though we do not know the specific circumstances of their challenges—another limitation that future researchers can take up.

² See [44].

Q15 - Women have difficulty assuming leadership positions because of expectations about domestic responsibilities (caring for children, the sick, preparing meals, cleaning, etc.).

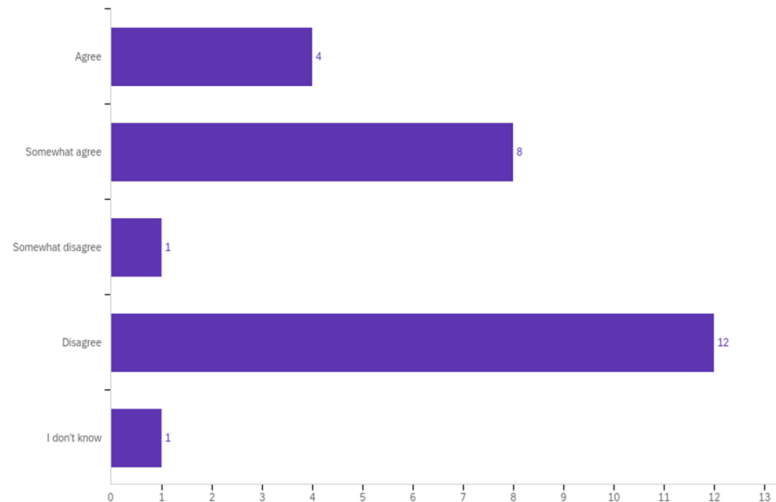


Figure 1. Women’s Reported Difficulty Assuming Leadership Positions Due to Domestic Responsibilities.

Leadership Positions and Responsibilities

The women in this study are deans, professors, coordinators, heads of units, and department chairs. The College has one Dean and three Acting Deans, eleven Heads of Department and Acting Heads of Department, three Program Coordinators, and forty-one Assistant Professors. Women represent 50% of the Deans and Acting Deans, 27% of the Heads of Department, 33% of the Program Coordinators, and 34% of the Assistant Professors. Within non-academic sections, there are eleven Heads of Sections, four Acting Heads of Sections, three managers, and one Acting Manager. One hundred percent of the Heads of Sections and Acting Heads of Sections are women. Fifty percent of the Managers and Acting Managers are women.

These statistics reveal that women at the College conduct both academic and administrative work and have responsibilities that touch many aspects of college life and operations. They do teach, plan, organize, and lead. Respondents explained that they engage in a wide variety of tasks, including hiring new staff and planning for future staffing needs. Others work in managing academic programs, establishing curriculum, and as course coordinators. They ensure that both full-time and adjunct faculty members deliver the same materials, using the same assessments, and coordinating common exams. Some of these leaders help in planning faculty members’ professional development by giving constructive feedback on their work and by providing mentoring services, while others provide students with counseling and work closely with students with special needs to provide necessary support. While the Head of the Counselling Department and team provide this service as part of their jobs, most faculty provide the necessary accommodation for students with special needs. Additionally, one of these leaders oversees the Department of Safety and Security Services, a department founded in 2010. She and her team work to ensure campus safety and handle various types of emergencies. The head also played an important role in developing an operational framework

for the department, recruiting and training eighteen staff members to support the department's functions. During her years of leadership, she has supervised multiple campus extension projects in collaboration with the Public Works Authority (Ashgal). To ensure campus safety, she has overseen the installation and maintenance of fire alarm systems, ensured continuous 24/7 surveillance, and implemented staff training for risk management.

The survey showed that many of these leaders participate in the College's long-term planning and engage in improvement activities in addition to their day-to-day tasks. They work as committee heads and actively engage in the College's major initiatives, such as accreditation and quality assurance. It is evident by looking at the positions they are holding that these women in leadership are both trusted and capable. One focus group participant shared that she was "responsible for coordinating hiring procedures at CCQ". Another participant explained how she enacted teamwork and support for her department during a restructuring period:

The College has gone through restructuring, and this resulted in many jobs being canceled. The department I am leading was affected by my staff. This was my way of preparing them for leadership positions. I believe in teamwork, and this is how I lead the department.

Professional Accomplishments/ Successes

Women in leadership at the College share a wide range of professional achievements that reflect their hard work and dedication. These women are strongly motivated to make a positive impact. They take part in planning, solve problems, and work diligently to enhance the quality of education and management in the College. Our findings showed that women in the Community College of Qatar demonstrated a commitment to academic excellence and collaborative leadership. They work closely with their teams to create an environment that empowers their students and faculty.

Our respondents participated actively in developing academic programs and academic initiatives. These contributions include the preparation of the theoretical framework for the Community College Graduate Attributes Project, Core Curriculum Program, Da'wah and the Islamic Studies Program, Associate Diploma in Digital Media, and Higher Education Certificate in Early Childhood. Certain responsibilities came with these accomplishments, including course alignment with other universities, course development and review, and establishment of an advisory council for the Da'wah and Islamic Studies Program.

Women leaders also contributed to academic quality, assessment, and governance. Some of them chair academic committees where they monitor examination quality, prepare formative assessment models, and contribute to electronic examination projects. They have participated in developing a governance system to evaluate and develop academic plans and schedules to enhance departmental operations. In addition, they participate in developing strategies and manuals for departmental operations, create a system for evaluating adjunct faculty, design an evaluation system for evaluating Qatari faculty members under the Academic Cadres Initiative (an initiative for employing Qatari faculty members), and create a system for automated academic appeals or grievances.

Another area of contribution our participants showcased was their success in student support and faculty development. Our respondents support struggling students by providing

workshops and one-on-one academic support plans. They exhibit care-work in their careers by working with students to solve problems they face in an academic environment. Faculty development is also at the top of their agendas; they organize seminars, workshops, and lectures. Training and follow-up programs are designed to ensure that new faculty members are well mentored. In their leadership roles, they also encourage faculty to collaborate and participate in professional development opportunities, and training for adjunct faculty in teaching and assessment strategies to ensure that they meet the requirements of the College. Demonstrating an ethic of care and appreciation for the responsibility of her leadership role, one focus group participant discussed the challenges of leading with care under the pressure of deadlines:

You know, we are responsible for many people. Their jobs are affected by our positions and our decisions. And this is another concern. You want to build respect. You want to build trust with them. You want to have proper teamwork. You want to take care of people's well-being, and at the same time, you have all these deadlines.

Despite these challenges, survey participants indicated that they have improved the College's work environment by strengthening communication and simplifying procedures across their departments. One participant discussed the importance of building a shared understanding of department goals and creating equal workloads:

As for me, in my leadership style, I do agree with X, and what she said about being more like a moderator. I just try to give my team enough guidance. I hold regular meetings with them, so we are all at the same level of agreement regarding anything related to the department. I try to distribute the tasks in a way that every member in the team has a valuable role and a useful input in whatever they're supposed to achieve.

Their contribution to leadership work is witnessed in their roles in building systems for developing and reviewing institutional policies and procedures. They participate in developing departmental strategic plans and work manuals. In addition, they conduct studies and feasibility analysis for new institutional initiatives.

Respondents also identified various professional achievements that have contributed to their success, including awards from professional bodies, certifications, and licensing. The above data demonstrates that their hard work and motivation are rewarded; women have been encouraged to take up important roles and generate new ideas to improve CCQ, combining planning with practical action to help improve the academic programs and administrative processes.

Perceptions of Gender Equality and Workplace Challenges

Findings in this part of the survey show that women face a mix of challenges when performing leadership roles. Some of these barriers are clear, while others are not. The survey results show varied perceptions regarding equal pay in the college. Forty-seven percent of respondents disagreed that women receive lower pay than men. While 11% agreed, 16% partially agreed and 26% partially disagreed. These responses suggest that some women in the College do not

think women are paid less than men, while a significant number of them believe that there is inequality. We do not know if this is based on perception or knowledge, however, perception is important, and administrative transparency about pay would dispel misperceptions or point to a need for pay equity.

Regarding gender bias, 72 % disagreed that gender bias acts as a barrier to reaching senior leadership positions: 28% agreed or partially agreed. The results showed that gender bias may exist in specific contexts, hindering some but not the majority of respondents in achieving their goals. The bar graph below indicates that women identified workplace cultures and professional networks as barriers. Fifty-two percent of participants agreed or somewhat agreed that workplace cultures and limited networking are barriers to pursuing leadership roles. This shows that women value networking as a pathway for career advancement and would like to see more opportunities. Some women also indicated that they have experienced discrimination at work. Approximately 46% agreed or somewhat agreed that women face discrimination compared to men. According to participants, the level of discrimination women in leadership face varies widely, as some face challenges while others do not.

Q12 - Women's opportunities for leadership positions in higher education are frequently restricted by workplace cultures and professional networks.



Figure 2. Perceived Restrictions on Women's Leadership Opportunities from Workplace Cultures and Professional Networks.

We asked three questions about women's own attitudes that indicate that these perceptions and experiences are separate from women's attitudes about their own capabilities. Question 16 demonstrates that 21/23 women have confidence in applying for a leadership position. Question 17 demonstrates that 21/23 (91%) do not fear taking chances at work. Question 18 asked women if they had difficulty advocating for themselves, and the response is a bit more ambivalent: a large majority (68%) disagreed, while an additional 14% somewhat disagreed that they struggle with advocating for themselves. In contrast, only 9% agreed, and another 9% somewhat agreed that they have difficulty advocating for themselves. Although it's a small percentage, the goal is to eradicate limitations: some women would benefit from

support in self-advocacy for leadership positions. Future studies could examine what factors inhibit these women and, conversely, what factors allow women to demonstrate self-confidence. Offering support groups for women who face challenges would be useful.

Q16 - I have not applied for leadership jobs because I lack confidence.

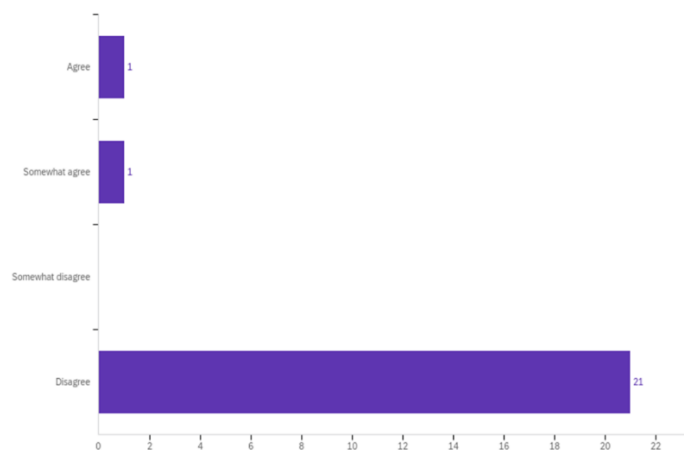


Figure 3. Confidence in Applying for Leadership Positions.

Q17 - My fear of failing has prevented me from taking chances in my career.

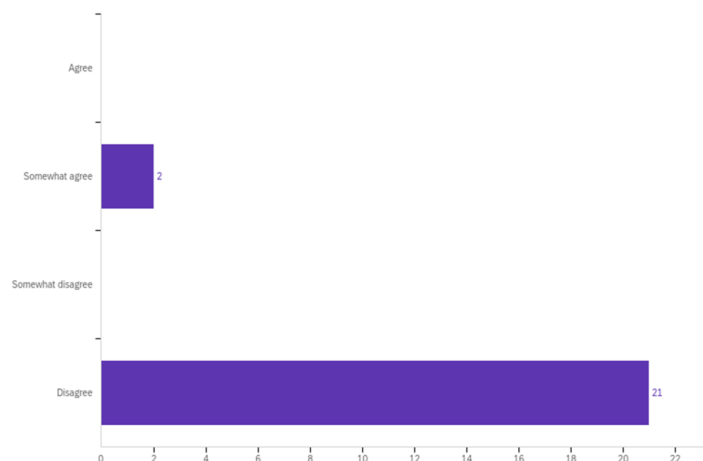


Figure 4. Fear of Failure and Willingness to Take Career Risks.

Q18 - I have trouble advocating for myself for leadership positions

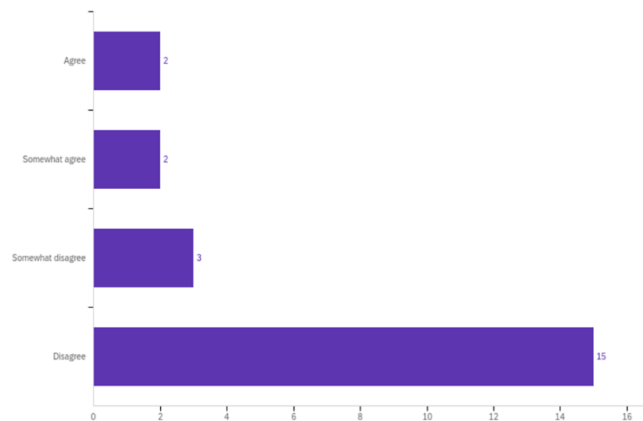


Figure 5. Difficulty Advocating for Oneself in Leadership Applications.

There were also mixed views about mentorship and career advancement. A majority (68%) disagreed or partially disagreed that a lack of mentorship had affected their career progression, while 32% agreed or somewhat agreed that it did. This is an important gap to address. In addition to the question about domestic responsibilities, we also asked about their work-life balance. Only five respondents agreed and somewhat agreed that they face difficulty juggling the two, while the remainder agreed or somewhat disagreed that they face a challenge. Balancing personal and professional responsibilities also did not appear to be a barrier for most participants. A majority—78% disagreed or partially disagreed that managing these responsibilities affected their career progression, although 22% reported some impact. This finding shows that many women in the College manage their personal and professional responsibilities while a notable minority face some challenges.

Q19 - Managing my personal and professional lives has impacted my ability to advance in my career.

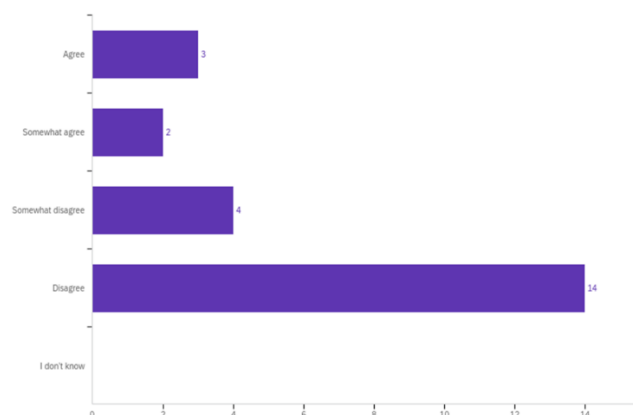


Figure 6. Impact of Managing Personal and Professional Lives on Career Advancement.

Another challenge that emerged from this survey is workplace pressures such as stress, anxiety, and burnout. About 43% of respondents reported that these factors do affect their work performance. This indicates workplace stressors affect the well-being of some women leaders. Overall, the findings of this survey showed that many of the participants are not challenged by internal personal barriers such as self-confidence, self-advocacy, and discrimination. However, those who do face these challenges mustn't fall through the cracks. The United Nations advocates for the principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB) to foster a workplace culture that expands networking opportunities for women and addresses workplace stress [45].

Leadership Styles and Qualities

Research on gendered patterns of leadership suggests that certain clusters of traits are regarded as women's leadership styles vs. men's leadership styles across multiple global spaces, even while there exist cross-cultural variations about what constitutes masculinity [46] and femininity. We asked participants about their leadership qualities and their views about these claims about gendered characteristics. They selected a range of leadership qualities. The most common qualities chosen were empathy and flexibility, with 17 % for each. This indicates that many leaders at the College believe that they need to consider and be concerned with the emotional well-being of their team. Collaboration was chosen by 13%, indicating that they value working with others when leading. Strong communication, resilience, and humanity were selected by 9%. This percentage shows that these leaders do their best in communicating clearly with their team, recognizing others as whole human beings, not just workers, and staying strong when pressured. Inclusivity and relationship building were chosen by 4 % each. These are low percentages of assigned "feminine" characteristics, which are nonetheless important in demonstrating that some of the leaders are creating a welcoming and supportive relationship with their teams. 17% chose "other", writing in their comment that they try to incorporate all these qualities; one participant mentioned resourcefulness, suggesting this as an additional quality that was not listed. These findings show that women leaders do not identify with only one trait; rather, they see their leadership as a mix of empathy, communication, teamwork, flexibility, and strength. Their responses showed that they apply a blend of leadership styles to lead their teams effectively, drawing from "feminine" and "masculine" traits, demonstrating that this binary is oversimplified. In line with this observation, 30% of the respondents indicated that they make quick and confident decisions; 17 % perceive themselves as task-oriented and think strategically; 9% selected qualities such as confidence and competition. However, only 4% of respondents chose assertiveness and visionary leadership.

The above results indicated that the women leaders see themselves as confident and capable when making decisions. They also focus on achieving results. Results on confidence and competition indicate that they are willing to demonstrate self-confidence and lead with excellence. Thus, these women leaders do not have fixed ideas about masculine or feminine qualities; rather, they draw on a range of qualities as needed, demonstrating a combination of decisiveness, strategic thinking, confidence, and other qualities that help them adapt to changing circumstances to lead their teams effectively.

In summary, the findings indicated that women leaders at the Community College of Qatar are skilled, experienced, and confident. Most of them do not feel that there are gender barriers that stop them from moving forward in their careers. However, some face challenges

related to workplace cultures, discrimination, and networking that they indicated are indeed gender-based. Our findings indicated a mix of feminine and masculine qualities used in leadership, which shows their ability to apply a range of skills to lead effectively.

Discussion

Conclusion and Recommendations: The way Forward

The recommendations below are grounded directly in the findings of this study. The finding that 52% of women identify workplace cultures and limited networking as barriers directly motivates Recommendations 3 and 4 (mentorship/sponsorship programs and networking infrastructure). The finding that 43% report burnout, stress, or anxiety affecting their work performance grounds Recommendation 7 (well-being and burnout prevention). The finding that nearly half of respondents agree or somewhat agree that women face discrimination, combined with the finding that most women do not experience domestic responsibilities as a primary barrier (though a significant minority—roughly 44%—do), motivates the layered approach of Recommendations 1 and 8 (parental leave policies and flexible scheduling). The findings on leadership style—that women employ a broad repertoire crossing stereotypically “feminine” and “masculine” traits—support Recommendation 6 (leadership development that is tailored, not gender-stereotyped). And the finding that a small but meaningful subset of women report difficulty with self-advocacy grounds Recommendation 10 (peer coaching circles). Together, the recommendations constitute a systemic response to the systemic findings: no single intervention will suffice; progress requires coordinated action at the policy, institutional, and interpersonal levels.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The following recommendations are directed toward national and sectoral policy (alignment with the Qatar National Vision 2030):

- Expand and normalize paid parental leave and flexible-work policies for women to redistribute early caregiving and prevent career penalties during pivotal progression years (see [47]).
- Develop sector-wide gender equality benchmarks for higher education (leadership representation, promotion and workload metrics), with annual public reporting.
- Formal mentorship and sponsorship: Pair emerging women leaders with senior mentors; create sponsorship pathways that include access to high-visibility assignments, committees, and external networks.
- Networking infrastructure: Establish a Women’s Leadership Council and regular cross-unit forums; support participation in mixed-gender professional networks and conferences (with funding).
- Workload equity and recognition: Systematically track and credit advising, student support, committee service, and administrative “invisible labor” in promotion criteria; offer course releases or stipends for heavy service.
- Leadership development: Provide tailored leadership training (e.g., budget and resource management, negotiations, strategic planning, conflict resolution), with targeted pipelines for underrepresented fields (e.g., STEM).

- Well-being and burnout prevention: Resource teams adequately; clarify role expectations; offer counseling and employee assistance; build team-based coverage for peak periods; provide manager training on psychological safety.
- Departmental and unit-level practices: Inclusive meeting design and schedules that accommodate caregiving; rotate meeting times when feasible for greater flexibility; provide hybrid options.
- Transparent task distribution with shared dashboards for transparency; rotate high-impact opportunities equitably.
- Peer coaching circles for women leaders focused on self-advocacy, negotiation, and strategic career planning.
- Conduct periodic campus climate surveys disaggregated by gender, role, and unit; use findings to inform targeted interventions and track progress.

CONCLUSION

Despite the many indications of positive experiences of women’s leadership, structural and cultural barriers persist. A meaningful minority of respondents reported discrimination, constrained networking opportunities, and workplace cultures that can inhibit advancement. Nearly half reported stress, anxiety, or burnout affecting performance. Domestic responsibilities were not a primary barrier for most, but they remain significant for some—consistent with wider literature across the region and globally. These mixed findings underscore the importance of institutional structures that support all women leaders—including those who may be less visible or less well-connected—and align with the UN’s “Leave No One Behind” principle. Women at CCQ are leading with impact—designing programs, strengthening governance, supporting students and faculty, and modeling adaptive leadership. Realizing the full promise of the Qatar National Vision 2030 requires scaling the structures that have enabled these successes, addressing the cultural and organizational barriers that remain, and sustaining accountability for outcomes. With deliberate policy and institutional reforms, and attention to well-being, CCQ and peer institutions can accelerate progress toward gender-equitable leadership.

LIMITATIONS

The study’s contributions lie in centering women’s voices in a Qatari higher education institution, documenting both successes and constraints, and articulating actionable strategies aligned with national goals. As a single-institution case with a modest sample, findings are not generalizable but can be analyzed in relation to secondary research. Future research should: (1) expand the sample across institutions and leadership levels; (2) deepen qualitative inquiry into the mechanisms of support (e.g., family dynamics, mentorship quality); (3) examine intersectional differences (e.g., nationality, discipline, contract type); and (4) evaluate the impact of specific interventions (mentorship/sponsorship programs, workload reforms, and well-being initiatives) on women’s advancement and retention.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

A.A.O.A. co-conceptualized the study, coordinated the CCQ-based research activities, facilitated survey distribution, conducted the Arabic-language focus group, and contributed to data interpretation and manuscript preparation. D.J.F. co-conceptualized the study, developed the feminist ethnographic framework, co-designed the bilingual Qualtrics survey, coordinated the Bridgewater State University institutional review process, and contributed to analysis, drafting, and critical revision. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT solely to support document formatting, IEEE citation-style conversion, and manuscript organization. No artificial intelligence tool was used to generate research data, conduct statistical analyses, interpret findings, or alter the scientific content. All AI-assisted output was reviewed and verified by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

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