

Part I: Rethinking Foundations

Chapter 3

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: RETHINKING GENDER AND POWER STRUCTURES

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INTRODUCTION

Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions remains a persistent global concern, cutting across regions, sectors, and political systems ([Hoyer, 2024](#)). Despite decades of progress in gender equality and the increasing participation of women in education and the workforce, leadership roles in politics, business, academia, and development organizations continue to be dominated by men ([Park, 2021](#)). This persistent gender gap is not simply a matter of individual ambition or merit but is deeply embedded in the structural and cultural fabric of institutions. These institutions often operate within patriarchal norms and hierarchies, which reinforce exclusionary practices and maintain unequal power dynamics.

The gendered nature of leadership is further complicated by intersectional factors such as class, race, ethnicity, and caste, which shape differential access to authority and voice ([Reddy, 2024](#)). Although development discourse has increasingly acknowledged the importance of gender mainstreaming and inclusive governance, institutional bias and representational asymmetries continue to challenge the transformative potential of such policies. In the context of a changing world—marked by democratic backsliding, neoliberal restructuring, and shifting norms of governance—it becomes imperative to revisit and critically interrogate the relationship between gender and leadership ([Abels, 2016](#)).

This chapter situates women's leadership within broader debates on power, representation, and institutional reform, arguing that the challenge is not merely to increase the number of women in leadership but to rethink the very structures that define and distribute power ([Verdun, 2022](#)). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusive development and politics of recognition, redistribution, and representation.

This chapter critically examines the gendered dimensions of leadership and institutional biases that limit women's effective participation and representation in decision-making spaces. Rather than treating women's leadership as an issue of numerical inclusion, this chapter engages with deeper

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questions on how power operates through institutions, norms, and discourses to produce and sustain gender hierarchies. It explores how conventional leadership paradigms are historically shaped by masculinist norms that privilege certain forms of authority, rationality, and public presence, often marginalizing alternative and feminist ways of leading and knowing.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from gender studies, political science, and development studies, this chapter seeks to uncover the systemic barriers that hinder gender-equitable leadership and identify the possibilities for more inclusive and transformative leadership models. It aims to challenge developmental and institutional assumptions that equate leadership with neutrality, objectivity, or meritocracy and instead foregrounds the need to recognize and address the embedded biases that shape leadership outcomes.

Ultimately, the chapter aims to contribute to a rethinking of development itself—one that is attentive to the politics of gender, uneven structures of power, and transformative potential of feminist interventions in leadership and governance.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The concept of “women in leadership” refers to their participation, presence, and influence in decision-making positions across political, economic, social, and cultural institutions ([Kalumba et al., 2023](#)). Leadership, traditionally conceived of in terms of authority, control, and decision-making capacity, has historically been dominated by male actors and patriarchal norms. The inclusion of women in such positions challenges not only who leads but also how leadership is conceptualized, enacted, and valued.

The roots of gendered leadership disparities can be traced to deeply embedded sociocultural, religious, and political structures that have historically excluded women from public life ([Southern & Harmer, 2019](#)). In classical political theory, from Aristotle to Rousseau, women are often cast as inherently unsuitable for leadership due to perceived emotionality, domesticity, or intellectual inferiority. These assumptions have shaped the architecture of modern states, institutions, and organizational cultures.

The modern articulation of “women in leadership” as a normative and empirical concept emerged prominently in the 20th century, particularly through the influence of feminist movements and critical social theory ([Fu et al., 2023](#)). Liberal feminists in the mid-20th century demanded equal access to leadership roles, especially in politics and the workforce, whereas radical and socialist feminists challenged the systemic and structural biases that render institutions inherently gendered.

In development studies, the discourse on women in leadership intersects with broader questions on representation, equity, and social justice ([Normore & Issa Lahera, 2020](#)). The UN’s Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 5 on Gender Equality) frame women’s leadership not merely as a matter of inclusion but as a transformative force for development and democracy. This shift marks the conceptual movement from tokenism and representation to structural change and the feminist reimagining of power. Thus, the concept is not just about women occupying existing roles of authority, but also about rethinking the nature of authority itself—challenging hierarchical, exclusionary, and masculinist paradigms of power.

The evolution of the concept of women in leadership has unfolded in tandem with shifts in feminist thought, political mobilization, and institutional reforms ([Hill Collins, 2020](#)). It moved from a focus on individual achievement to a systemic analysis of gendered power relations and institutional structures. In the early 20th century, women's leadership was often framed in terms of exceptionalism ([Spichak, 2024](#)). Women leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher were viewed as anomalies who succeeded despite their gender. Their leadership was often evaluated through masculine benchmarks that emphasized toughness, rationality, and control. This era reinforced the myth that women had to behave like men to effectively lead.

By the 1970s and the 1980s, second-wave feminism began to critique the structural and cultural barriers that limited women's leadership opportunities ([Shekhter, 2023](#)). Feminist scholars highlighted how leadership traits were socially constructed to align with masculinity and how organizational cultures privileged male norms of behavior, excluding women not only from positions of power but also from the networks and informal structures that sustain power.

The 1990s witnessed a turn toward intersectionality, especially through the works of scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw. This has expanded the understanding of women in leadership by showing how race, class, caste, sexuality, and other identities interact with gender to create differential experiences of exclusion and access ([Fenner, 2020](#)). It became increasingly clear that the category "women" was not homogenous and that leadership trajectories differed dramatically depending on one's social location.

Institutionally, affirmative action policies, gender quotas, and mainstream initiatives in countries such as Rwanda, Norway, and India have created measurable changes in women's leadership representation ([Draboo, 2021](#)). These measures, while sometimes criticized as cosmetic or symbolic, have also disrupted entrenched power relations and generated new leadership models that are often more collaborative, inclusive, and community-oriented.

In recent decades, there has also been critical rethinking of what constitutes leadership itself ([Corchia, 2018](#)). Feminist leadership theories emphasize relationality, empathy, consensus building, and ethical responsibility, rejecting traditional hierarchical and individualistic models. Moreover, the digital age and the rise of social movements such as #MeToo and global women's marches have further democratized leadership, showcasing women's leadership in decentralized, non-institutional, and grassroots contexts.

Thus, the evolution of this concept is not linear, but multidimensional, shaped by ideological struggles, policy shifts, and cultural transformations. It reflects broader changes in how we understand not only gender, but also power, legitimacy, and authority in society. Understanding women in leadership requires clarifying related concepts and drawing distinctions that are often conflated in public and academic discourse ([Pelfrey et al., 2022](#)). Gender Equality refers to equal treatment and opportunities for all genders, whereas gender equity recognizes that different genders may require different approaches to reach a level playing field. Leadership initiatives often require equity-focused strategies (e.g., mentoring programs or quotas) to correct systemic imbalances.

Representation vs. Participation: Representation implies that women are symbolically or numerically present in leadership roles, while participation suggests active engagement and influence in decision-making ([Kafumukache et al., 2023](#)). A woman in a nominal leadership position without real authority reflects representational inclusion, but not participatory empowerment.

Leadership vs. Empowerment: While leadership concerns positions of influence and authority, empowerment is a broader concept that refers to the capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes ([Ahluwalia, 2020](#)). Leadership is a pathway to empowerment; however, empowerment can also occur outside formal leadership roles, especially in grassroots or informal settings.

Power vs. Authority: Power is the ability to influence others or outcomes, whereas authority refers to the legitimate or institutionalized right to exercise power ([Roe, 2020](#)). Women may have formal authority without real power (due to patriarchal resistance) or they may exert power without holding formal authority (through activism, mobilization, or soft power strategies).

Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation: Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women in leadership roles, whereas substantive representation refers to advancing women's interests and feminist agendas ([Dockendorff et al., 2021](#)). A female leader who upholds patriarchal norms may provide descriptive but not substantive representations.

Intersectionality: This is a crucial lens for analyzing how multiple axes of identity—such as race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability—intersect to shape women's leadership experiences ([Devkota et al., 2021](#)). A Dalit woman in Indian politics or a Black queer activist in the U.S. may face compounded marginalizations that differ from those faced by elite upper-class women.

Clarifying these distinctions is essential not only for analytical precision, but also for designing effective interventions that move beyond tokenism and toward systemic transformation in gendered power structures.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding women in leadership requires engagement with foundational feminist, sociological, and political theories that critically interrogate the relationship between gender, power, and institutional structures ([Schmelzer et al., 2024](#)). The primary theoretical frameworks supporting this analysis include Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, and Critical Institutionalism.

Feminist Theory remains central to any discussion on women in leadership ([Cudd, 2022](#)). Rooted in a critique of patriarchal systems, feminist theory exposes how leadership roles have historically been gendered by males and how institutional norms privilege masculine traits such as assertiveness, rationality, and competitiveness. Liberal feminism, for instance, emphasizes equal access and representation, advocating for legal and institutional reforms to break the “glass ceiling.” Radical feminism critiques the structures of power, highlighting how leadership

hierarchies are rooted in patriarchal domination, and suggests that inclusion without structural change merely assimilates women into male-defined roles.

Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, deepens analysis by illustrating how gender intersects with race, class, caste, sexuality, and other axes of identity ([Fenner, 2020](#)). This framework reveals how not all women experience barriers to leadership in the same way. For example, while upper-class women may struggle with professional exclusion, Dalit or Black women may face compounded discrimination due to the confluence of gender and caste/racial hierarchies. Intersectionality urges scholars and policymakers to move beyond the universal category of “woman” and adopt a more nuanced approach to understanding leadership inequality.

Critical Institutionalism focuses on how formal and informal institutional rules shape who leads and how ([Pilon, 2021](#)). Institutions are not neutral; they are embedded in gendered norms and practices. Joan Acker’s theory of “gendered organizations” argues that institutions implicitly uphold masculine norms—prioritizing uninterrupted work histories, long hours, or aggressive competition—which disadvantage women who are often expected to balance caregiving roles. Leadership pipelines are therefore structured in ways that appear meritocratic, but reproduce systemic gender bias.

These theories collectively dismantle the assumption that women's underrepresentation is a matter of individual choice or capability ([Ryan-Payseur & Freitag, 2018](#)). Instead, they locate the problem within the historically embedded structures of power, cultural expectations, and institutional design. They also point to the need for transformative approaches—not just inclusion, but a redefinition of leadership itself, grounded in values such as care, collaboration, and social justice.

While feminist and critical institutional theories offer powerful tools for critiquing the status quo, alternative perspectives—some complementary and others conflicting—provide additional insights or highlight tensions in the discourse.

Meritocratic Liberalism contends that leadership positions should be based on individual merits, qualifications, and performance ([Deki & Karma, 2023](#)). While this perspective aligns with liberal feminist efforts to ensure equal opportunity, it often neglects structural inequalities and assumes a level-playing field. Critics argue that the meritocratic ideal is blind to implicit biases, unequal starting points, and cultural norms that disadvantage women and marginalized groups from the outset.

Post-Structuralist Feminism, in contrast, challenges the very notion of fixed categories like “woman” or “leader.” Scholars such as Judith Butler emphasize that gender itself is performative and constructed through discourse ([Tredway, 2017](#)). From this perspective, leadership should not be confined to predefined roles but should be understood as fluid, context-dependent, and shaped by cultural narratives. This view is useful in deconstructing rigid binaries but may appear abstract or less actionable in policy or institutional reform.

Developmental and Psychological Approaches often focus on individual traits and leadership styles such as emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, and risk-taking tendencies ([Kere & Awuor, 2023](#)). Some studies have argued that women bring distinct and often beneficial traits

to leadership roles, such as empathy, collaboration, and ethical reasoning. While such arguments aim to validate women's leadership, they risk essentializing gender and reinforcing stereotypes. They may also shift the burden back onto women to "prove" their fitness rather than question biased systems.

Cultural Relativism adds another layer, especially in the postcolonial and Global South contexts ([Mitropoulos, 2017](#)). This warns against the universal application of Western-centric models of gender equality and leadership. In some societies, informal leadership by women (in family, community, or grassroots movements) may be more relevant than formal institutional roles. Relativism can also be used to justify gender inequality under the guise of cultural specificity.

These competing and complementary frameworks highlight the complexity of theorizing women in leadership ([Morgan, 2020](#)). While some emphasize systemic transformation, others focus on individual capabilities or cultural contexts. A robust theoretical approach must navigate these tensions, valuing structural critique without dismissing agency and advocating for global gender justice while being sensitive to local realities.

This chapter adopts a critical feminist and intersectional institutionalist lens as the primary theoretical framework. This choice is grounded in the belief that gender inequality in leadership is not merely a matter of individual deficit or cultural misfit, but a deeply embedded structural and epistemic issue ([Kozuch, 2024](#)). Feminist and intersectional theories allow for a comprehensive critique of the gendered nature of power, institutions, and developmental paradigms.

The feminist lens interrogates how leadership is socially constructed to align with masculine norms and values, and questions the underlying assumptions about what makes a "good" leader ([Payne-Cardona et al., 2022](#)). This opens up possibilities for redefining leadership in ways that are more inclusive, collaborative, and ethically grounded. The intersectional approach ensures that the analysis does not universalize women's experiences but remains attentive to the differentiated impacts of power structures on women based on caste, race, class, and other social positions. This is particularly relevant in development discourse, in which leadership and participation are often framed in generic terms, sidelining the most marginalized voices.

Finally, critical institutionalism allows for an examination of how formal rules, informal norms, and organizational cultures reproduce gender bias—even in well-intentioned or "gender-sensitive" institutions ([Nentwich et al., 2021](#)). It moves beyond policy checklists to investigate how leadership pipelines, decision-making structures, and evaluative criteria systematically exclude women. By combining these frameworks, this chapter not only critiques existing power structures, but also aims to reimagine leadership and development through a more inclusive, pluralistic, and transformative lens.

DEBATES, GAPS, AND THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

One of the central controversies in the discourse on women in leadership revolves around the tension between equality of opportunity and outcomes ([Dusabe, 2023](#)). While liberal frameworks emphasize formal equality and meritocracy, critics argue that this overlooks the systemic barriers and structural inequalities that persist despite legal and policy-level reforms. Women may have

the right to participate in leadership, but the conditions under which they operate—ranging from organizational culture to societal expectations—often remain unequal.

The second major tension lies in the representation and essentialism debate ([Pande, 2017](#)). While greater female representation in leadership is seen as a measure of gender equality, some critics caution against essentialist narratives that attribute inherently “feminine” qualities such as empathy, collaboration, or moral leadership to women leaders. These assumptions, while seemingly positive, risk reinforce gender binaries and can pigeonhole women into specific leadership styles, denying them the same leadership latitude afforded to men.

Another contentious issue is the “double bind” phenomenon, in which women leaders are often penalized regardless of the leadership style they adopt ([Mehta, 2018](#)). Assertiveness, when displayed by women, is frequently perceived as aggressive, while empathetic or collaborative approaches are seen as lacking authority. This creates a paradox, in which women are judged against gendered expectations that limit their leadership potential.

The debate on intersectionality further complicates the field. Gender alone cannot account for women’s diverse leadership experiences ([Moorosi et al., 2018](#)). Race, caste, class, ethnicity, and sexuality significantly shaped the pathways and challenges of leadership. However, mainstream leadership discourse often privileges the experiences of upper-class, urban, and cisgender women, thereby marginalizing other voices. The result is a homogenized narrative that fails to account for the multi-layered nature of oppression and power.

Finally, **the institutionalization of gender equality** has sparked debate. Critics argue that gender mainstreaming and diversity policies within institutions often become technocratic checkbox exercises ([Eweje & Nagano, 2021](#)). While they symbolically affirm commitment to gender justice, they may fail to transform deeper patriarchal structures that sustain gender hierarchies. Thus, the effectiveness of institutional reforms in generating real power redistribution remains an open question.

Feminist theorists have long challenged the dominant paradigms of leadership that valorize traits associated with masculine norms such as individualism, competitiveness, and hierarchical control ([Van Doorn & Dye, 2021](#)). Scholars such as Gilligan and Acker have critiqued how organizational structures and leadership models are gendered, privileging male experiences as the norm. Acker’s theory of gendered organizations demonstrates how seemingly neutral bureaucracies reproduce gender inequalities through embedded norms and practices.

Poststructuralist feminists, notably Judith Butler, contribute a critical lens by questioning the very categories of “woman” and “leader” as stable identities ([Rohmah, 2020](#)). Butler’s notion of gender performativity opens new ways to understand how leadership is enacted and recognized. It invites a move away from static identities towards an understanding of leadership as performative, contextual, and fluid.

Critical-race feminists and decolonial scholars have further expanded this analysis by showing how leadership cannot be understood, apart from the history of colonialism, racism, and capitalism ([Mcmaster, 2019](#)). For instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the universalization of

Western feminist frameworks that erased the lived experiences of women in the Global South. In this view, leadership is not just about inclusion in existing power structures but about challenging and reimagining those structures altogether.

As advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality remains a foundational concept in contemporary critiques of gender and leadership ([Fenner, 2020](#)). It highlights how women's experiences of power, exclusion, and resistance are shaped by the interplay between multiple identities and structures of domination. Intersectionality moves the discussion beyond token representation toward substantive justice and inclusion.

Another significant contribution comes from indigenous feminist perspectives that question the Eurocentric foundations of leadership and development ([Lewis et al., 2020](#)). These frameworks emphasize relationality, community accountability, and ecological stewardship as central to leadership and challenge neoliberal and individualistic models.

Moreover, this critical tradition also interrogates the commodification of gender diversity in neoliberal regimes. The rise of “corporate feminism” and “lean-in” lean-in’ narratives—epitomized by figures like Sheryl Sandberg—has been critiqued for promoting individual success stories while ignoring structural inequalities. These approaches often align with the capitalist logic of productivity and efficiency, thereby depoliticising the feminist struggle for justice and transformation. Collectively, these critical perspectives urge a reconceptualization of leadership not merely as positional authority, but as relational, context-specific, and rooted in resistance to intersecting forms of domination.

Despite a growing body of research, several significant gaps remain in the literature on women and leadership ([Lituchy et al., 2021](#)). First, there is limited empirical engagement with non-Western, indigenous, and sub-altern leadership models. Much of the existing research is concentrated in Euro-American contexts, which frame leadership through liberal, democratic, capitalist, and often corporate paradigms. This creates a bias in understanding leadership, often neglecting grassroots, community-based, or collective forms of women's leadership in the Global South.

Second, longitudinal studies on the impact of women's leadership are relatively scarce. While many studies have analyzed barriers to entry and representation, there is less focus on what happens after women attain leadership positions—how they navigate power, resist institutional constraints, and reshape the systems they are part of ([Da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2022](#)). There is also inadequate attention paid to how institutions evolve (or fail to evolve) in response to women's sustained presence in leadership roles.

The third gap concerns the interplay between informal and formal leadership spaces ([Ji & Yin, 2019](#)). In many contexts, women have a significant influence on informal spheres, such as family, community, or social movements, which are not captured in the formal metrics of leadership. The binary relationship between formal and informal power overlooks the complexity and significance of alternative spaces.

Another underexplored area is the role of men in transforming gendered leadership structures ([White & Jenkins, 2017](#)). Much of the discourse remains focused on women's empowerment without equally interrogating how masculinity is constructed and maintained within leadership cultures. The absence of critical studies on allyship, resistance to change among male elites, and the politics of male engagement weakens the potential for structural transformation.

Finally, the literature often undertheorizes the emotional and affective dimensions of leadership, particularly how care, vulnerability, and resilience are navigated by women in power ([Duchek et al., 2020](#)). This is crucial not only for understanding leadership styles, but also for addressing the costs of leadership—burnout, isolation, and backlash—that disproportionately affect women.

APPLICATION OR ILLUSTRATION

Jacinda Ardern's tenure as Prime Minister of New Zealand (2017–2023) provides a vivid case for examining the interplay between gender, leadership, and institutional bias ([Mcguire et al., 2020](#)). Heralded globally for her empathetic leadership during crises—the Christchurch mosque shootings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a volcanic eruption—Ardern's leadership style was often framed through the lens of “compassionate governance.” However, her case also reveals the gendered expectations, media framing, and structural challenges confronting women in positions of power.

Ardern broke multiple stereotypes: she became the youngest female head of government in the world and one of the few to give birth while in office ([Sauls, 2022](#)). Her leadership was lauded for its emotional intelligence, inclusive communication, and care-oriented rhetoric. Yet, this feminized leadership model also reinforced essentialist expectations that women should lead with empathy, vulnerability, and maternal qualities. Media representations often emphasized her motherhood, dress, and emotional responses to policy acumen. In doing so, they highlight how the optics of female leadership are shaped by patriarchal scripts.

Despite the popular acclaim, Ardern faced persistent gendered scrutiny. She was subjected to sexist commentary, which included questions about her partner's role, parental choices, and physical appearance ([Attamimy et al., 2020](#)). The backlash was not merely cultural; it also had institutional dimensions. Her resignation in 2023, citing burnout and the toll of leadership, reflects how, even in relatively progressive democracies, the weight of performative expectation and emotional labor can disproportionately affect women leaders. Her exit, while framed as personal, also signaled exhaustion that comes with constant public scrutiny and the burden of having to perform both leadership and femininity.

New Zealand has a more complex context. While the country ranks high on global gender equality indices and has a history of women in leadership (e.g., Helen Clark), its institutions remain shaped by settler colonial logic, neoliberal governance, and white-majority interests ([Vinyeta & Bacon, 2024](#)). Ardern's own leadership had limits, particularly in addressing indigenous (Māori) rights, economic inequality, and systemic racism—issues that intersected with gender justice.

Thus, Ardern's case illustrates both the symbolic power of female leadership and structural barriers that persist. This shows that, while individual women may rise to power, the scaffolding around

them—the media, bureaucracy, party systems, and public discourse—still bears the imprint of male-centric norms. In this sense, leadership remains a gendered and racialized terrain where representational breakthroughs do not always translate into institutional transformation.

Jacinda Ardern's case challenges simplistic celebrations of representational inclusion. This illustrates the critical distinction between *presence* and *power*, between occupying a position, and transforming the structure ([Jeon & Kwon, 2020](#)). Feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young have argued that representation alone is insufficient; what is needed is the transformation of the institutional logic that governs recognition, redistribution, and participation.

Ardern's leadership style, rooted in empathy and care, can be read through the lens of the *ethics of care* (Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto), which proposes a relational and context-based approach to leadership as opposed to abstract, hierarchical models ([Spinelli, 2020](#)). While this style was positively received during moments of crisis, it was also subjected to gendered scrutiny, suggesting that the public sphere still normalizes masculinized forms of authority. Her tenure thus surfaces a paradox: the traits that distinguish women leaders are often weaponized against them.

Furthermore, the institutional biases that limit transformative leadership are not merely external to women; they are embedded within the design of the leadership roles themselves ([Phiri & Chitando, 2023](#)). Political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe emphasize that democratic institutions are not neutral arenas—they are sites of contestation shaped by hegemonic power. This insight helps explain why women like Ardern, even in power, must often navigate rather than reshape the structures they inherit. Postcolonial feminist frameworks draw attention to how race, class, and colonial history intersect with gender. Ardern's struggle to meaningfully address indigenous concerns demonstrates how leadership is gendered, racialized, and classed. This highlights the limitations of liberal feminist approaches that focus solely on increasing women's representation, without addressing deeper institutional and epistemic inequalities.

CONTRIBUTION AND INNOVATION

This chapter introduces a novel analytical lens to understand the intersection of gender, leadership, and institutional power by reconceptualizing leadership not simply as a position of authority, but as a site of negotiation within embedded structures of representation, recognition, and resistance ([Holmes et al., 2024](#)). Moving beyond binary comparisons between male and female leadership styles or success rates, this study foregrounds the epistemic dimension of leadership – how leadership is imagined, legitimized, and reproduced through gendered norms, symbolic exclusions, and institutional logics.

The key insight offered here is the reframing of *leadership as an epistemic and political terrain* where gender operates not only as a variable of inclusion or exclusion, but also as a structuring axis of what counts as credible, authoritative, or rational within institutions ([Vrooman & Coenders, 2020](#)). Instead of treating women's leadership as an exception or a corrective to male-dominated norms, this chapter proposes that we interrogate the norms and institutions that produce the “exceptionality” of women leaders. This includes critically examining how meritocracy, neutrality, and professional competence are often coded in masculinist terms, rendering women's ways of leading as either “deficient” or “deviant.”

Additionally, this chapter challenges liberal feminist emphasis on representational parity as the ultimate goal. While representation is crucial, it is insufficient without the accompanying transformation of institutional cultures and epistemic values ([Zanetti et al., 2023](#)). By drawing on intersectional and decolonial feminist frameworks, this chapter shows how leadership must be de-linked from the hegemonic ideals of individualism, hierarchy, and competitiveness, and reimagined through values of care, collectivity, and relational accountability.

This reconceptualization is especially relevant in development contexts where gender inclusion is often instrumentalized as a policy target rather than a transformative goal ([Linda Jones, 2020](#)). The insight, then, is not merely that more women should lead, but that *leadership itself must be redefined* in ways that dismantle structural hierarchies and valorize multiple modes of knowing, organizing, and decision-making.

This chapter proposes a threefold framework for rethinking women in leadership within development discourses and institutional practices.

1. Epistemic Reorientation

Institutions must critically assess how their knowledge systems and leadership ideals are shaped by gendered and racialized assumptions. Leadership development programs, policy frameworks, and evaluation metrics should incorporate feminist epistemologies that center on lived experience, reflexivity, and collective agency.

2. Institutional Redesign

Representation must move beyond numerical parity to address the deeper, often invisible, workings of institutional bias. This includes reconfiguring work cultures, decision-making processes, and performance indicators that currently reward masculinist behaviors (e.g., assertiveness without empathy and competition without collaboration). Policies must be rooted in equity and not just equality.

3. Transformative Leadership Ethics

This chapter advances the idea of the feminist ethics of leadership based on care, reciprocity, and interdependence. This challenges the dominant developmentalist narrative, which equates leadership with control, growth, and efficiency. Instead, it advocates leadership models grounded in sustainability, justice, and social repair, especially critical in postcolonial and global South contexts.

Together, these propositions offer a comprehensive strategy to not only increase women's access to leadership but also transform what leadership means and how it functions ([Corbett et al., 2021](#)). This framework repositions leadership as a relational, ethical, and transformative practice, and situates gender not as a variable to be managed but as a central analytic for rethinking institutional power itself ([Shore et al., 2004](#)). By advancing this synthesis, this chapter makes a significant contribution to both feminist theory and development studies, offering scholars and practitioners an alternative vocabulary and toolkit for understanding and enabling meaningful leadership in a changing world.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The analysis of women in leadership, when situated within the broader terrain of development studies and critical feminist theory, challenges dominant frameworks that historically conceptualize power and leadership through masculinist and hierarchical lenses ([Denker, 2021](#)). One of the core theoretical implications emerging from this inquiry is the need to reconceptualize power not merely as a possession or instrument of control, but as a relational and distributive force. Feminist political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young have argued for a move beyond the traditional liberal emphasis on representation alone toward a multidimensional understanding of justice, encompassing recognition, redistribution, and participatory parity.

Incorporating intersectionality as a foundational analytic, following scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, further compels a shift from monolithic gender analyses toward a more nuanced, situated understanding of how race, class, caste, sexuality, and colonial legacies shape women's experiences in leadership ([Fenner, 2020](#)). This allows us to investigate the structures of privilege and exclusion that reproduce institutional bias even in seemingly inclusive contexts.

Theoretically, this chapter contributes to deconstructing the myth of meritocracy and neutral institutional design. It focuses on how institutional cultures, policies, and success metrics are often encoded with gendered and racialized assumptions. Leadership, then, is not a neutral space into which "qualified" individuals enter but a contested terrain where norms, practices, and identities are continuously negotiated ([Khan et al., 2025](#)). The idea of "transformative leadership" becomes key—not simply increasing the number of women in power, but altering the very conditions of what counts as power and leadership. This rethinking of gender and power structures offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary dialogue across political theory, organizational studies, feminist epistemology, and development policy.

Future research could expand on several under-explored dimensions. First, more comparative and longitudinal studies are needed to trace the trajectories of women leaders across diverse political, cultural, and institutional contexts, particularly in the Global South, where localized factors profoundly shape gendered experiences. Second, empirical work on the role of informal networks, mentorship, and solidarity economies in supporting women's leadership could provide critical insights into how alternative forms of empowerment operate outside of formal institutional channels ([Shore et al., 2004](#)).

Furthermore, the interaction between digital technology and gendered leadership is a promising area. Digital platforms challenge and reinforce traditional power dynamics and offer new avenues for visibility and voice but also expose women leaders to harassment and surveillance ([Fadlallah & Phillips, 2020](#)). Finally, there is scope for transdisciplinary research linking feminist leadership frameworks with environmental sustainability, indigenous governance models, and post-growth development paradigms, thereby broadening the horizon of what leadership can and should look like in an uncertain future.

Practically, this chapter has implications for how political, educational, corporate, and developmental institutions design their leadership pipelines and accountability mechanisms. It calls for gender audits not only in terms of numerical representation but also in the deeper

organizational cultures that shape inclusion. Leadership training programs must critically interrogate the norms they propagate and prioritize feminist pedagogies that value empathy, care, and collaboration.

Moreover, policy frameworks at both the national and international levels should embed gender-sensitive metrics in development indicators, moving beyond tokenism toward genuine structural change. Organizations must invest in institutional mechanisms, such as anti-harassment bodies, flexible work policies, and leadership mentoring that explicitly address intersectional barriers. Only through such integrative reforms can leadership be reimagined not as assimilation into existing hierarchies but as the transformation of those hierarchies themselves.

CONCLUSION

This chapter critically examines the systemic, structural, and cultural barriers that continue to shape and constrain women's leadership across various sectors. The hegemonic model of leadership, shaped by patriarchal and often colonial institutions, has rendered women's participation either symbolic or contingent upon their assimilation into dominant norms ([Eswaran et al., 2024](#)). As such, even when women occupy leadership positions, they often face a paradox of visibility, subject to heightened scrutiny, yet denied full legitimacy.

We also underscored the importance of rethinking representations. A descriptive representation—simply increasing the number of women in leadership—is a necessary but insufficient condition for genuine transformation ([Jørgensen, 2023](#)). Substantive and transformative representation demands that women leaders are empowered to challenge dominant norms, reshape institutional cultures, and advocate inclusive and equitable practices. This entails moving beyond tokenism and embracing leadership models that are collaborative, intersectional, and context sensitive.

Furthermore, the chapter has emphasized the role of institutional bias—both formal and informal—in shaping access to and experiences of leadership. Institutions often reproduce gendered hierarchies through implicit norms and coded exclusions from recruitment practices to organizational cultures and decision-making norms ([Al Naqbi & G, 2023](#)). Addressing these biases requires not only gender-sensitive reforms, but also a broader cultural shift toward equity and inclusion. This includes recognizing and valuing care ethics, emotional labor, and community accountability as integral to leadership.

In rethinking gender and power structures, we have also drawn from postcolonial, feminist, and decolonial perspectives that emphasize the multiplicity of experiences and knowledge ([Goldstein & Hawthorne, 2021](#)). This pluralistic approach is essential to unsettling Western neoliberal models of leadership, which are often exported globally under the banner of development.

Ultimately, this chapter contributes to the broader project of *rethinking development* by asserting that the inclusion and empowerment of women in leadership is not only a matter of justice, but also a precondition for building more resilient, democratic, and equitable institutions. To truly transform leadership, we must center on gender not as a category to be added but as a lens that reconfigures how we understand power, representation, and the possibility of structural change.

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