

Beyond the Glass Ceiling: The Looking-Glass Self and Women's Leadership Aspirations—A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background

Women's continued underrepresentation in leadership is commonly explained through organizational barriers, including bias, stereotypes, exclusion from networks, and unequal family responsibilities. Less attention has been given to the developmental processes through which gendered expectations become incorporated into self-concept before and during working life.

Methods

Guided by Cooley's looking-glass self, this qualitative descriptive study examined how 12 college-educated women in the greater Seattle area described socialization experiences that shaped their self-concept and perceptions of women's workplace roles. Data came from 12 semistructured interviews and two focus groups involving six interview participants. Data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

Five integrative themes were developed: family as the first looking glass; schools and peers as reinforcers of gender expectations; religion and cultural expectations; media and societal messages; and reconstructing the looking-glass self. Participants linked early reflected appraisals to later confidence, career decisions, and leadership expectations, while identifying education, supportive relationships, mentoring, and professional achievement as resources for revising earlier beliefs.

Conclusions

Internalized gender expectations and organizational barriers operate as mutually reinforcing processes. Self-concept is dynamic rather than fixed, and workplaces and other social institutions can either reproduce earlier gendered appraisals or provide corrective experiences that expand women's leadership aspirations.

Background

Women have made substantial gains in educational attainment, yet those gains have not produced proportional representation in the highest levels of organizational and political leadership. Women complete postsecondary education at high rates across national contexts [1, 2], but they remain unevenly represented throughout managerial hierarchies and occupational roles [3, 4]. This disparity cannot be reduced to a lack of qualifications. It reflects a collection of organizational, cultural, and

developmental processes that shape both the opportunities available to women and the ways in which leadership becomes imaginable, desirable, or attainable.

Research on workplace gender inequality has appropriately concentrated on external barriers. Gender stereotypes influence how competence and leadership behavior are evaluated [5, 6]. Organizational norms and informal networks can preserve masculine definitions of leadership, while managers may resist responsibility for correcting inequitable systems [7, 8]. Mentoring can increase confidence and access to networks without necessarily transforming the organizational cultures that created the inequality [9]. Women's advancement is also influenced by national context and organizational leadership commitment [10], as well as by an unequal distribution of household and caregiving labor outside the workplace [11].

Together, these studies explain much about the conditions women encounter after entering organizations. They do not, however, fully explain how women come to interpret their capabilities, ambitions, and suitability for leadership. Gendered messages begin long before employment. Families, schools, peers, religious institutions, and media teach children which behaviors are rewarded, which ambitions appear realistic, and which social roles are treated as appropriate. Preschool educators, for example, may reproduce gendered expectations through discipline and classroom practices [12]. Felt pressure to conform to cultural gender roles can affect self-evaluation and behavior across development [13], while internalized sexist beliefs are associated with psychological and relational consequences in adulthood [14]. Gender essentialism can also legitimize inequality and backlash by presenting socially produced differences as natural or inevitable [15]. Recent cross-national evidence further links gendered self-stereotyping and future goals with career interests while showing that these pathways vary across cultural contexts [16].

This developmental perspective must be framed carefully. Examining internalized beliefs does not relocate responsibility for inequality from institutions to individual women. Internalization is itself a social process produced through unequal relationships, repeated cultural messages, and sanctions for gender nonconformity. Nor does it imply that women respond uniformly or passively. Women may reject, reinterpret, or strategically navigate gendered expectations. The more useful question is how external structures and internalized expectations operate together over time.

The Looking-Glass Self as a Theoretical Lens

Cooley's [17, 18] looking-glass self offers a mechanism for examining how social expectations become incorporated into self-concept. Cooley proposed that people imagine how they appear to others, imagine how others judge that appearance, and experience self-feelings in response to those perceived judgments. The important influence is not only what others objectively think but also how a person interprets their reactions. Through repeated interaction, reflected appraisals become part of the person's understanding of who they are and what they can become.

Applied to gender socialization, the theory suggests that a girl's or woman's self-concept develops partly through perceived approval and disapproval from significant others and institutions. A child who receives praise for being agreeable but criticism for being assertive learns more than a rule for a single interaction. Repetition may connect femininity with accommodation and leadership with social risk. Conversely, messages that communicate competence, autonomy, and belonging may become reflected appraisals that support agency and leadership identity.

The theory is especially useful for connecting developmental and organizational explanations of inequality. Women do not enter workplaces as blank slates. They arrive with self-concepts formed through years of interaction, and workplaces then provide new mirrors. Supervisors, coworkers, mentoring relationships, performance evaluations, and promotion decisions may reinforce earlier gendered expectations or offer corrective reflected appraisals. In this way, organizational barriers and self-concept are not competing explanations located on opposite sides of the individual. They are interdependent levels of the same social process.

The present study used this lens to examine the descriptions of college-educated women, a population for whom advanced education might be expected to expand occupational opportunity and confidence. The study addressed one broad, nonleading research question: **How do college-educated women describe the socialization experiences that shaped their self-concept and perceptions of women's roles in the workplace?**

Methods

Research Design and Epistemological Position

The study used a qualitative descriptive design to obtain a detailed, accessible account of participants' experiences in their own words. Qualitative description is appropriate when the aim is to summarize how participants understand an experience without claiming to generate a formal theory, identify the essence of a phenomenon, or produce an ethnographic account [19–22]. The study was informed by a constructivist epistemology: participants' accounts were treated as situated interpretations developed through social interaction rather than as context-free reports of an objective past.

The analysis combined inductive, semantic coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Initial coding remained close to participants' expressed meanings. The looking-glass-self framework was applied after the descriptive patterns had been developed, allowing the theory to organize interpretation without predetermining the codes. This sequence was intended to preserve the descriptive purpose of the design while still using theory to explain relationships among the findings.

Researcher Characteristics and Reflexivity

The researcher was an Iranian American man whose early socialization occurred in a cultural context he described as overtly patriarchal. His commitment to feminism, human rights, and gender equality created both sensitivity to the topic and a risk of interpreting participants' accounts through prior convictions. His gender also placed him outside the participant group, although qualitative positionality can involve movement between insider and outsider locations rather than a simple binary [23]. These positions were treated as methodological conditions rather than claims to neutrality.

Reflexive practices included maintaining a journal of assumptions, emotional reactions, and analytic decisions; revisiting the research question during coding; using nonleading prompts; and asking participants to correct the researcher's understanding when clarification was needed. The researcher also discussed his outsider position with participants. They generally reported that his gender did not inhibit discussion of this topic, although the possibility of constrained disclosure cannot be excluded. Member feedback and comparison of interview and focus-group material were used to examine whether interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Participants and Recruitment

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit 12 college-educated women from the greater Seattle metropolitan area. Eligibility required a bachelor's degree or higher, current or previous professional employment in the United States, and sufficient workplace experience to address the research question. Recruitment intentionally sought information-rich participants from varied occupational sectors, including banking, engineering, health care, veterinary services, psychology, counseling, social work, human resources, and education. Several participants were known to have an interest in women's rights or workplace gender equity, a feature considered in the limitations.

All participants were older than 23, were born and raised in the United States, spoke English as their first language, and identified as White. Two held bachelor's degrees, eight held master's degrees, and two held doctoral degrees. Eight occupied supervisory, managerial, or executive roles. Six of the 12 interview participants also took part in one of two focus groups. Participants received a \$50 electronic gift card for the interview and a second \$50 gift card if they participated in a focus group. Participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Sample	12 college-educated women
Geographic context	Greater Seattle metropolitan area
Education	2 bachelor's; 8 master's; 2 doctoral degrees
Occupational sectors	Banking, engineering, health care, veterinary services, psychology, counseling, social work, human resources, and education
Leadership responsibility	8 participants in supervisory, managerial, or executive roles
Focus-group participation	6 interview participants; 3 in each focus group
Shared demographic context	All participants were White, U.S.-born, English-speaking women older than 23

Recruitment was originally planned for a larger sample, but scheduling and geographic constraints limited participation. The researcher continued interviewing while monitoring repetition in the codes and themes. By the final interviews and focus groups, analysis was yielding repetition rather than substantively new patterns, and the researcher judged that thematic saturation had been reached. This judgment is reported as an analytic decision rather than proof that additional participants could not have contributed new perspectives [24].

Data Collection

Data were collected through 12 individual semistructured interviews and two focus groups conducted by Zoom in 2024. The interviews were guided by an adaptation of the Formative Influences Timeline procedure described by Jones and Donmoyer [25], which is designed to elicit participants' own accounts of influential experiences across stages of life while reducing the imposition of researchers' a priori assumptions. The semistructured interview guide itself was developed specifically for this study rather than obtained as a pre-existing questionnaire. Before data collection, the guide was pilot-tested with a small group to assess the clarity, relevance, sequencing, and feasibility of the questions and was revised as needed. Questions invited reflection on family, education, peers, religion, culture, media, intimate relationships, and workplace experiences. Follow-up prompts asked participants to clarify how these experiences influenced their self-concept, occupational choices, and perceptions of leadership. The complete English-language interview guide used in the study is provided as Additional file 1.

Interviews lasted 58 to 127 minutes ($M = 94.6$ minutes) and generated 322 transcript pages. The two focus groups included three participants each and lasted 93 and 97 minutes. Focus groups allowed participants to compare, question, and expand on issues raised during the interviews; because the

focus-group members came from the interview sample, the groups provided elaboration across contexts rather than independent-sample confirmation.

Zoom generated initial transcripts from the audio and video recordings. The researcher listened to each recording, corrected transcription errors, removed identifying information, and assigned pseudonyms. The edited transcripts preserved participants' intended meaning while removing false starts and verbal fillers when they impeded readability. A demographic questionnaire provided information on education, occupational sector, and professional role.

Data Analysis

Interview and focus-group transcripts were imported into MAXQDA 2024. Analysis followed the recursive phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke [26]: familiarization, initial coding, pattern development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The researcher read each transcript at least four times, coded meaningful units of text at the semantic level, grouped related codes into categories, and compared patterns across participants and data-collection contexts. Analytic memos and a codebook documented changes in code definitions and relationships among themes.

The full analysis produced 13 descriptive themes. For the present article, conceptually overlapping themes were consolidated into five integrative themes aligned with the single research question. Family dynamics remained distinct; academic and peer influences were combined; cultural and religious material was integrated; media remained distinct; and patterns concerning agency, resistance, reframing, workplace identity, supportive relationships, and aspirations for change were brought together as reconstructing the looking-glass self. This consolidation did not involve recoding the transcripts or excluding contradictory accounts. It was a manuscript-level synthesis intended to clarify how the findings related to self-concept development.

Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Openness

The study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [27]. Credibility procedures included transcript review, member feedback on transcripts and interpretive summaries, extended engagement with the dataset, and comparison of interview and focus-group accounts. Participants who responded to the member-checking request reported that the materials accurately reflected what they had shared. Transferability was supported through description of the sample, occupational contexts, and researcher position. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through a codebook, MAXQDA memos, an audit trail of analytic decisions, and reflexive journaling.

The study received an exempt determination from the Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board on May 9, 2024 (IRB-2024-6401; Category 3). All procedures involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participants

provided written informed consent and were informed of recording, confidentiality procedures, compensation, and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms are used throughout. The study was not preregistered. Deidentified transcripts and the study codebook are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Audio and video recordings are not publicly available because participants' voices and images may permit identification.

Use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies

During preparation of this article, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with organizing, condensing, and adapting material from the author's dissertation into journal-article format. The author reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted output and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, citations, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the article.

Results

Participants described self-concept as the accumulated product of messages received across family life, education, peer relationships, religious and cultural environments, media, and work. Their accounts were not uniformly limiting. The same social settings could communicate constraint, possibility, or both. Five integrative themes captured these patterns: family as the first looking glass; schools and peers as reinforcers of gender expectations; religion and cultural expectations; media and societal messages; and reconstructing the looking-glass self.

Family as the First Looking Glass

Participants consistently identified the family as the earliest setting in which gender acquired meaning. Parents and siblings communicated expectations through explicit statements, unequal freedoms, divisions of household labor, and the different futures imagined for sons and daughters. For some participants, these reflected appraisals were empowering. Caroline described a mother who modeled independence and a father who treated college attendance as certain: "There was never a question about whether I would go, just where I would go." Such messages linked womanhood with competence and educational opportunity.

Other accounts communicated lower value or narrower possibility. Sue, who later became a banking executive, recalled an unmistakable preference for sons:

I grew up in a family with three brothers, and it was always made clear that the boys were the higher priority. When I asked my dad, who was the cook in the family, to teach me some cooking skills, he told me it was not worth his time because I was not a male child and would not be carrying on the family name.

The importance of this account was not that it prevented Sue's professional success; it did not. Rather, she connected her later ambition to defiance while still describing an internal boundary around how far women were expected to rise. Participants also recalled brothers receiving greater freedom and fewer domestic responsibilities. These experiences taught girls that independence, risk, and authority were more available to boys, while care and accountability for others were treated as feminine duties.

Family messages also followed women into employment. Participants described being expected to take notes, coordinate celebrations, manage emotions, or preserve group cohesion even when those tasks did not belong to their formal roles. The workplace could therefore reproduce the domestic division between leadership and support. At the same time, supportive parents and egalitarian households provided reflected appraisals that helped participants recognize competence and challenge later bias. Family socialization functioned less as a fixed destiny than as the first set of meanings against which subsequent experiences were interpreted.

Schools and Peers as Reinforcers of Gender Expectations

Educational settings offered both corrective and restrictive mirrors. Lydia credited sustained encouragement from teachers with helping her enter engineering and later assume a leadership role: "They assured me that I had the skills and capabilities to go far." For her, educators' attention communicated belonging in academic and professional spaces that were not always presented as feminine.

Other participants described institutionalized differences in what girls and boys were invited to imagine. They recalled girls being directed toward home economics and clerical preparation while boys were offered shop, forestry, mechanics, and other courses associated with technical authority. Olivia described an eighth-grade aptitude assessment that made the contrast explicit:

My top suggestion was that I would be a great housewife. The second was that I would make a great social worker. Everything on my list pointed to roles that said, "You are meant to be at home" or "You are meant to be a caretaker." Meanwhile, my guy friends had results like marine, trucker, firefighter, [and] cop—roles that involved leadership, power, and recognition, not just caretaking.

Peers amplified these messages by rewarding conformity and attaching social costs to deviation. Participants recalled girls downplaying academic ability, avoiding interests described as masculine, or modifying appearance and behavior to preserve acceptance. Olivia explained that the threat of being "socially shunned" could be more powerful than holding onto a genuine interest. The looking glass here was collective: young people learned to anticipate not simply one person's judgment but the judgment of a peer group.

Peer influence was not uniformly restrictive. In adulthood, supportive coworkers and friends became sources of reflected appraisal that sustained ambition. Tiffany described encouragement from peers as "the saving grace for women's quality of life in the workplace," particularly when peers urged women to seek promotions and affirmed the value of their contributions. Participants' disagreements during focus

groups were also instructive. Some described scarcity and competition among women in male-dominated organizations; others described women-led spaces characterized by solidarity. Together, these accounts suggest that peer relationships can either reproduce perceived scarcity or create alternative mirrors in which leadership and mutual support are compatible.

Religion and Cultural Expectations

Many participants described religious institutions and culturally embedded faith traditions as powerful sources of gender hierarchy. Their accounts focused less on private spirituality than on institutional teachings, leadership structures, and narratives that associated women with obedience, caregiving, and service. Olivia described religious narratives as communicating that women found “value and worth” through serving men rather than through independent action. Destiny connected male religious authority directly to the absence of women from leadership:

A lot of religions are very man-centric, putting men in power and women in roles to support their men and children. Women are not really placed in leadership roles. Women are there to make their husbands and families look good.

Participants described these teachings as extending beyond worship. If male authority was represented as natural or divinely sanctioned, it could affect whose judgment was trusted, who was heard, and who was considered suitable to lead in other institutions. Several women recalled marriage and motherhood being represented as the central measures of female success, producing conflict when professional ambition demanded time, visibility, or authority.

Not every participant identified as religious, and some described rejecting organized religion. Yet rejection did not mean the messages had been irrelevant. For several participants, distancing themselves from religion was itself part of reconstructing self-concept. Others drew distinctions among faiths, denominations, congregations, and individual religious leaders. The shared pattern was therefore not that religion inevitably diminishes women. It was that participants experienced institutional religious authority and gendered cultural traditions as consequential reflected appraisals that could define the boundaries of appropriate womanhood.

Media and Societal Messages

Participants described media as a diffuse but persistent looking glass that amplified messages already present in family, school, and religion. Television, advertising, film, news, and social media supplied repeated images of women as caregivers, romantic partners, sexual objects, or exceptional leaders whose appearance remained open to public judgment. Serena summarized the pattern: “How often do you see a powerful professional woman who is not perfectly put together? How often do you see an older, overweight woman in a position of authority in the media? Probably almost never.”

The emphasis on appearance was experienced as professionally consequential. Olivia described being unable to leave for work without makeup even when she consciously intended to do so because going

without it reduced her confidence. Participants also contrasted the treatment of women's and men's domestic behavior. Men were praised as unusually supportive for performing household work that women were expected to complete without recognition. Media representations therefore taught not only what women should look like, but also which work should be visible, valued, or taken for granted.

Social media intensified the imagined audience behind reflected appraisal. Sue described curated images as a "comparison trap" that led women and girls to ask why they did not look or perform like the people they saw online. Bethany noted that platform algorithms repeatedly supplied content consistent with users' prior interests and gendered expectations, creating an echo chamber rather than a neutral range of possibilities. Participants did not claim that media acted alone. They emphasized its cumulative function: media made gender norms appear widespread, consensual, and continuously observed.

Reconstructing the Looking-Glass Self

Participants did not portray self-concept as permanently determined by childhood. Education, professional accomplishment, mentoring, supportive partners, women's networks, and exposure to women leaders provided new reflected appraisals that allowed earlier beliefs to be questioned. This process was not simply replacement of a negative self with a positive one. Participants described an ongoing negotiation in which old expectations could persist even after they were consciously rejected.

Olivia linked a difficult adolescent experience to an emerging sense of agency. After resisting abuse within her family, she recalled recognizing, "I have a voice, and I can use it to hold people accountable." She described learning that she did not have to accept what men decided for her and could instead claim "empowerment and control and assertiveness." Her account illustrates how a new appraisal of one's own action can reorganize earlier meanings.

Kayla connected leadership development to the freedom to differ from prescribed roles. When children are allowed to be "outside of the mold," she explained, difference can become "pushing the envelope [and] challenging the status quo," which later may be recognized as leadership. Other participants reconstructed leadership itself. Rather than accepting a model based exclusively on dominance, competition, and emotional restraint, they emphasized empathy, collaboration, mentoring, communication, and development of others. Tiffany asked whether supervisors were "fostering skills, nurturing growth, or supporting [their] team in unique ways," reframing traits conventionally labeled feminine as leadership resources rather than evidence of unsuitability.

Reconstruction nevertheless remained socially contingent. Participants described adjusting their appearance, tone, or assertiveness to secure credibility before acting more authentically. Some continued to feel guilt when professional responsibility competed with caregiving. Others reported that early messages still influenced which opportunities felt attainable. The dynamic quality of self-concept was therefore neither simple liberation nor permanent constraint. It was an iterative process in which new relationships and accomplishments could revise, but not necessarily erase, earlier reflected appraisals.

Discussion

This study examined how college-educated women described socialization experiences that shaped their self-concept and perceptions of women's workplace roles. Participants traced these influences across family, education, peers, religion, culture, media, and employment. Their accounts support three central conclusions. First, leadership identity develops across the life course rather than beginning at organizational entry. Second, the same institutions can provide limiting and empowering reflected appraisals. Third, self-concept remains open to reconstruction, although early gendered expectations can persist even after women attain advanced education and professional success.

The findings extend organizational accounts of workplace inequality by identifying a developmental pathway through which social structures may influence later aspirations and behavior. Research has documented the effects of bias, stereotypes, mentoring, managerial accountability, and unequal household labor [5, 8, 9, 11]. Participants in this study described entering those environments with expectations already formed through earlier socialization. Workplaces then confirmed or challenged those expectations. Being asked to perform support work, having assertiveness judged differently, or seeing leadership defined in masculine terms could reproduce earlier appraisals. Encouragement from a mentor, recognition of expertise, or visible women leaders could provide corrective appraisals.

Cooley's [17, 18] looking-glass self helps explain this continuity because it locates self-concept in perceived social evaluation. Participants' accounts showed that the relevant "other" was sometimes a parent or teacher and sometimes a larger imagined audience produced through religion, culture, or media. Social media expanded this audience further by making comparison continuous and measurable. The findings also add an important qualification to the theory: participants were not passive mirrors. They interpreted, resisted, selected among, and sometimes deliberately disrupted reflected appraisals. Reconstruction was possible when alternative relationships and institutions made different identities socially credible.

These findings must not be interpreted as evidence that women's beliefs are the primary cause of their underrepresentation. Such a conclusion would individualize a structural problem and reproduce the very inequality under study. Participants' internal conflicts were described as consequences of repeated social messages and material arrangements, including unequal freedom, gendered educational opportunity, exclusion from authority, and disproportionate responsibility for care. Internalized expectations and organizational barriers were mutually reinforcing, not interchangeable. Changing self-concept without changing institutions would leave the source of many appraisals intact; changing policies without attending to how leadership identity develops may leave some effects of earlier socialization unaddressed.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study connects gender socialization, self-concept development, and organizational inequality across levels of analysis. The looking-glass self provides a mechanism through which social

structures become psychologically consequential without treating those consequences as natural traits of women. It also explains why representation matters beyond numerical inclusion. When women occupy visible positions of authority and are evaluated through equitable standards, they provide reflected appraisals that can expand what other women and girls regard as possible.

For organizations, the results support interventions that combine structural accountability with attention to leadership identity. Promotion criteria should be reviewed for gendered definitions of assertiveness, availability, and executive presence. Managers should monitor who is assigned note taking, emotional labor, event coordination, and other undervalued support tasks. Mentoring and sponsorship should not be used as substitutes for institutional change, but they can provide important recognition and access when paired with transparent promotion systems, pay equity, and leadership accountability.

Leadership development programs may also benefit from treating communal and agentic qualities as complementary. Participants did not ask organizations to replace one gender stereotype with another. They described effective leadership as flexible enough to include decisiveness, empathy, collaboration, and development of others. Programs that invite participants to identify and challenge gendered assumptions about authority may help women and men recognize how conventional leadership standards are socially produced.

The findings also point to earlier sites of intervention. Families and schools communicate leadership possibility through ordinary practices: divisions of chores, freedom to take risks, reactions to failure, course availability, career guidance, and recognition of girls' expertise. Educational settings can provide countervailing reflected appraisals through equitable access to technical subjects, women role models, mentoring, and opportunities to exercise authority without penalty for gender nonconformity. Media literacy can help young people recognize how representation and algorithmic repetition make unequal expectations appear inevitable.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's purpose was descriptive depth, not statistical generalization, but several features limit transferability. The sample was small, regional, and entirely White. All participants were born and raised in the United States and lived in the greater Seattle area, a context they sometimes described as more progressive than other regions. The findings therefore cannot represent the experiences of women of color, immigrant women, transgender women, women without college degrees, or women in other geographic and cultural contexts. The absence of racial diversity is especially consequential because gendered appraisals happen at the intersection of race, class, sexuality, disability, and other positions.

Recruitment also favored information-rich participants with professional experience and, in some cases, an established interest in women's rights or gender equity. Volunteers may have been more reflective or critical of gender socialization than women who did not participate. Most participants had already risen to supervisory or leadership roles, making the study particularly informative about resistance and

professional success but less able to explain the experiences of women who left the workforce or never pursued advancement.

The findings depended on retrospective accounts. Participants' current identities and professional experiences may have influenced how they reconstructed childhood events. The researcher's position as an Iranian American man and gender-equality advocate may also have influenced questioning, disclosure, coding, and interpretation despite reflexive procedures. Focus groups involved only six members of the interview sample and therefore added interactional elaboration rather than independent corroboration. Finally, the five integrative themes were created by consolidating a more detailed thematic structure for this article. Although the consolidation improved focus, it may have obscured distinctions among workplace experience, family responsibility, spousal support, and generational change.

Future research should examine these processes with racially and culturally diverse samples and with women at different educational and occupational levels. Longitudinal designs could clarify how reflected appraisals change from childhood through career entry and leadership transitions. Studies that include supervisors, partners, educators, and family members could compare women's interpretations with the messages others believe they communicate. Comparative research across organizational sectors and regions could also identify when workplaces reinforce early gendered expectations and when they successfully interrupt them.

Conclusions

The persistence of workplace gender inequality calls for attention to both the glass ceiling and the social mirrors through which leadership identity develops. Participants described family, schools, peers, religion, culture, media, and work as interconnected sources of reflected appraisal. These experiences influenced how women understood competence, care, authority, and the risks associated with violating gender expectations embedded in their self-concepts. Yet their accounts also demonstrated that the looking-glass self is not fixed. Education, supportive relationships, professional accomplishment, and resistance created opportunities to modify and revise earlier beliefs and redefine leadership.

Moving beyond the glass ceiling therefore does not mean turning from structural inequality to individual psychology. It means recognizing how structures enter psychological life and how organizations can either reproduce or challenge the messages women have received across their socialization. Lasting change requires both equitable institutions and social environments in which women and girls repeatedly encounter themselves as credible leaders.

Abbreviations

EBP

evidence-based practice

IRB

Institutional Review Board.

Declarations

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board determined the study exempt from further review on May 9, 2024 (IRB-2024-6401; Category 3). All procedures involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participants provided written informed consent to participate and to be recorded.

Consent for publication

All participants provided written informed consent for deidentified quotations to be published using pseudonyms.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

HHA conducted research and wrote the manuscript

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Data Availability

The deidentified transcripts and study codebook are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Audio and video recordings are not publicly available because participants' voices and images may permit identification.

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