

PURSUING ITHACA: THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY OF TOP EXECUTIVE WOMEN IN SPAIN

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DOI: 10.1108/GM-07-2024-0387

Domínguez-Soto, C., Labajo, V., & Labrador-Fernández, J. (2026), "Pursuing Ithaca: the leadership journey of top executive women in Spain", *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-07-2024-0387>

This is the Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published 24-Dec-2025 in *Gender in Management: An International Journal* by Emerald Publishing Limited.

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Abstract

Purpose. This paper explores the introspective journeys of women in top management positions, focusing on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors that shape their leadership identities and drive their commitment to social change through their life stories.

Design/methodology/approach. This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with 34 Spanish female executives who currently serve on boards or have the potential to attain board membership in male-dominated industries.

Findings. This study reveals that women executives present two essential leadership competency profiles represented by the archetypes of "Ulysses" and "Penelope," each embodying unique traits such as strategic planning and resilience, challenging traditional leadership models. Despite this diversity, transformational leadership, marked by idealized influence and individualized consideration, predominates, countering earlier claims that women in male-dominated sectors adopt transactional styles. The role of social context is central: while

some women develop within supportive “golden bubble” cultures, others confront exclusionary “men’s clubs” that impede progression, demonstrating how shifting environments shape leadership identity over time.

Originality/Practical Implications. Beyond enriching research on gender and leadership, this paper presents a process-oriented explanatory model that depicts how leadership identities emerge through the dynamic interaction of personal agency, interpersonal relationships, and organizational culture. For women managers, the study emphasizes the importance of key life and career experiences, highlighting the value of crafting a coherent life story to develop leadership for social change. For organizations, it emphasizes the importance of broadening access to top positions and fostering inclusive climates that enable women to grow, exercise transformational leadership, and contribute to more equitable organizational cultures.

Keywords: women on boards, female leadership, transformational leadership, gender diversity, in-depth interviews.

1. Introduction

In the epic journey to leadership, the tales of Ulysses and Penelope from the *Odyssey* provide rich metaphors for challenges in top management. Like Ulysses navigating treacherous waters to Ithaca, women leaders in male-dominated industries may exhibit a passion for adventure and a pioneering spirit. Penelope's balance and resourcefulness could mirror the resilience and tenacity present in some female executives. Despite advancements in gender equality, women still encounter significant barriers to top leadership roles (Samuelson *et al.*, 2019). Women hold only 20.5% of leadership positions (BoardEx, 2023). In the European Union, women occupy 21% of executive committee roles and 32% of board positions (EIGE, 2023), partly due to regulatory quotas (Post & Byron, 2015). In Spain, women comprised 19% of management positions and 36% of board roles within IBEX 35 companies in 2022, aligning with the European average (EIGE, 2023). These statistics underscore persistent challenges but indicate a gradual move towards inclusive leadership, making Spain relevant for examining leadership and gender dynamics (Hernandez Bark *et al.*, 2014).

This research builds on the theoretical foundations of Korabik and Ayman's (2007) integrative model of gender-related processes (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social structural perspectives) and Lyness and Grotto's (2018) model of barriers and facilitators. We aim to enrich these frameworks while contributing to the gender and leadership literature. Additionally, this study employs the life-stories approach to leadership development as proposed by Shamir and

Eilam (2005), supporting the suitability of this methodological approach for studying leadership modeling through the analysis of top executive women's narratives.

This paper addresses the following research questions: Which elements contribute to shaping the leadership identity of women in top management positions within male-dominated industries? How have these women built their leadership style?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 34 female top executives in Spain, we answer this question by exploring their life stories. Interpretative qualitative research through semi-structured interviews allows for an understanding of their unique and complex experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Our study fills a gap by examining the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual elements that model the leadership of senior female executives, generating effective leadership styles oriented towards social transformation and breaking barriers and stereotypes.

Regarding our contribution, this paper offers a process-oriented explanatory model that maps how leadership identities are shaped at the intersection of personal agency, interpersonal dynamics, and structural conditions. By integrating three existing frameworks—Korabik and Ayman's multilevel model, Lyness and Grotto's empowerment approach, and Shamir and Eilam's life-stories method—we develop an analytical scaffold that captures the dynamic ways in which elite women in male-dominated industries negotiate and craft their leadership identities. Rather than describing isolated factors, the model highlights the interdependence between identity formation and organizational context. Alongside this analytical contribution, the paper offers practical implications: for women, it emphasizes the value of reflecting on pivotal life and career events; for organizations, it underscores the necessity of promoting women's access to top roles and establishing supportive environments that foster their professional development, thereby enabling social change.

2. Theoretical background

The academic literature offers several metaphors to illustrate the barriers women face in accessing top management: the “glass ceiling” (Bass & Avolio, 1994), the “glass cliff” (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), and the “labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These metaphors highlight structural and symbolic obstacles shaping women's leadership trajectories. The labyrinth, in particular, emphasizes the complex, non-linear path women often follow—marked by resistance, contradiction, and adaptation (Samuelson et al., 2019). This paper draws on these framings and on Homeric archetypes—Ulysses and Penelope—to evoke strategic resilience in pursuit of leadership legitimacy. As Dobel (2006) suggests, these figures represent foresight and emotional

strength. Similarly, Olsson (2000) introduced Xena as a counter-archetype, disrupting heroic norms and offering alternative leadership models.

Role Congruity Theory (RCT) provides a foundational framework to understand women's underrepresentation in leadership. Eagly and Karau (2002) identify leadership role bias—linking leadership with agentic (masculine-coded) traits—and gender role bias—associating women with communal traits. Despite updated findings indicating some softening of these expectations (Eagly et al., 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2024), tensions persist. Women continue to face role incongruity in leadership settings, particularly in male-dominated contexts.

Korabik and Ayman (2007) offer a multilevel model integrating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural dimensions shaping women's leadership experiences. Lyness and Grotto (2018) expand this by identifying enablers and barriers operating across organizational levels. These frameworks help contextualize women's positioning within systems, but often treat levels of analysis separately, with limited attention to how these interact dynamically in lived experience.

Research on leadership identity has emphasized its dynamic, context-sensitive nature. Ryan et al. (2021) examine how systemic barriers and the absence of role models shape women's internalization of leadership. Ramarajan (2014) explores how women navigate conflicting identities, while Komives et al. (2005) propose a developmental model that links leadership identity to personal and relational milestones. Together, these works underline that becoming a leader involves more than competence—it requires continuous negotiation and legitimization.

The literature on leadership styles reinforces these dynamics. Transformational leadership—defined by inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1995)—has been widely associated with female leaders. Eagly et al. (2003) found that women often score higher than men in transformational dimensions. Recent research (Kehr et al., 2023; Parkinson et al., 2019; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023) explores how organizational culture and gender norms condition women's development of this style.

Gender-diverse leadership is associated with enhanced resilience, especially during crises. Fernando et al. (2020) show that the presence of women in senior roles improves firm performance, with transformational traits mediating this effect. Case studies from South Africa and the UAE reinforce how women foster cohesion and responsiveness in supportive cultures (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Shaya & Abu Khait, 2017), affirming their role in shaping adaptive organizations (Tibus, 2010).

Despite these advances, a significant gap remains. While previous studies have addressed structural barriers and identity tensions, few have explored how leadership identities are actively constructed through the interplay of personal agency, organizational culture, and interpersonal relationships. Much of the existing research either isolates variables or remains at a theoretical level, without offering an integrated, process-based account grounded in empirical experience.

To address this gap, we adopt the life-stories approach. Shamir and Eilam (2005) emphasize that leadership emerges through the narrative integration of personal values, self-perception, and lived experience. Life stories allow researchers to trace how leadership identities evolve, shift, and gain meaning over time.

In this study, we integrate the life-stories approach with the frameworks of Korabik and Ayman (2007) and Lyness and Grotto (2018) to develop a process-oriented explanatory model. This allows us to explore how leadership identities emerge in narratives through the interplay of personal agency, interpersonal dynamics, and structural constraints. Our aim is not to propose a new theory, but to offer an empirically grounded, analytically integrative framework that captures how women in male-dominated environments negotiate, embody, and legitimize leadership. The model moves beyond listing influences to show how identity is actively shaped by the interplay of experience, context, and interpretation over time.

This model is underpinned by a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology (McNay, 2000; Clarke et al., 2009), which views identity as relational, negotiated, and contingent. Leadership identity is understood not as a fixed outcome, but as a discursive process through which individuals position themselves within institutional contexts. The life-stories method serves not only as a data collection tool but as an analytical lens to examine how meaning is constructed over time. Our framework builds on interpretive models of situated identity work (Ely et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2009; Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021), foregrounding identity as contextually embedded and continuously evolving.

3. Methodology

We employed an interpretative phenomenological approach, using in-depth interviews to explore leadership development among female executives. This method encouraged self-reflection, allowing participants to articulate their life journeys and integrate personal traits with social interactions. The narrative approach offered profound insights into their leadership journeys and the influences shaping their leadership (Bertola et al., 2023; Mashele & Alagidede,

2022; Ryan *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, how these stories are conveyed is an important information source (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Our sample comprised 34 Spanish female senior executives in male-dominated industries who hold board positions or are potential board candidates. Access to this elite minority group began with purposeful sampling through the research team's professional network and the university's alumni network, maximizing acceptance rates (Cycyota & Harrison, 2006). Initial contacts included five women known through one researcher's professional experience and ten more identified via alumni referrals. Snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was then employed to expand the pool, with early participants recommending additional interviewees across sectors. The sample is diverse, covering a broad range of industries and generational backgrounds (Baby Boomers and Generation X, born 1958–1981). Table 1 details participants' profiles, including birth year, number of children, C-suite role, international experience, and board membership. One-third of the participants lived only in Spain, while another third resided in three or more countries.

Sampling bias is addressed in the Limitations section.

TABLE I. Demographic and professional profiles of interviewees (n=34)

Code	Generation	Birth year	# Countries of residence	# Children	Industry sector	C-suite function	Board member
P1	Generación X	1965	3	2	FMCG	Operations	No
P2	Generación X	1965	1	2	Investment banking	General management	Yes
P3	Generación X	1973	2	3	Consulting	General management	No
P4	Generación X	1965	2	3	FMCG	Operations	No
P5	Baby Boom	1964	2	0	Retail	General management	No
P6	Baby Boom	1958	2	2	Investment banking	General management	No
P7	Generación X	1966	2	3	FMCG	Human resources	No
P8	Generación X	1972	2	1	Retail Banking	Human resources	No
P9	Generación X	1971	2	2	Retail Banking	General management	No
P10	Generación X	1967	3	2	Third Sector	General management	No
P11	Baby Boom	1964	3	2	Technology	General management	Yes
P12	Generación X	1969	3	3	Retail Banking	General management	Yes
P13	Generación X	1962	4	2	Public Administration	Legal	No
P14	Generación X	1981	1	3	Real Estate	Finance	No
P15	Generación X	1966	4	2	FMCG	General management	No
P16	Generación X	1968	1	0	Real Estate	Finance	No
P17	Generación X	1967	1	2	Public Administration	Finance	No
P18	Generación X	1976	1	3	FMCG	General Management	No
P19	Baby Boom	1974	3	1	Retail Banking	Finance	No
P20	Generación X	1974	2	5	Education	General management	Yes

P21	Generación X	1966	1	1	Retail	General management	No
P22	Generación X	1969	3	2	FMCG	General management	No
P23	Generación X	1970	1	2	Retail	Human resources	No
P24	Generación X	1978	1	0	Technology	General management	Yes
P25	Generación X	1971	1	2	Retail	General management	No
P26	Generación X	1965	3	0	FMCG	General management	No
P27	Generación X	1975	2	2	Public Administration	General management	No
P28	Generación X	1969	3	2	FMCG	Marketing	No
P29	Baby Boom	1963	3	0	Investment banking	General management	Yes
P30	Generación X	1970	1	3	FMCG	Finance	No
P31	Generación X	1969	1	3	Energy	Human resources	Yes
P32	Generación X	1967	1	2	Investment banking	General management	No
P33	Generación X	1965	1	3	Construction	General management	Yes
P34	Generación X	1979	6	4	Technology	General management	Yes

Source: Authors own work

Grounded theory techniques were employed for both data collection and analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The initial researcher conducted the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and made annotations, which were subsequently shared with the rest of the research team. After every six interviews, the team convened to discuss recurring findings, refine the interview protocol, and consult the existing literature. This iterative data collection and analysis process continued until, after four meetings, concept saturation was evident. Nonetheless, five additional pre-scheduled interviews were conducted to confirm this saturation after coding 34 interviews. To ensure data credibility, participants were offered the option to review their transcripts. Only two opted to do so, with no substantive changes requested.

The coding process adhered to Charmaz's (2006) approach and was conducted using Nvivo 1.5 software to manage the 2142 minutes of interview data. The content analysis commenced with initial coding. In this phase, researchers identified key categories through readings. Secondly, focused coding was employed to discern themes and sub-themes via inductive coding from interviews. It is worth noting that many themes were pre-determined based on existing literature (theory-driven), whereas sub-themes emerged directly from the interview data (data-driven).

The third phase, axial coding, involved a thorough review of each category to ensure coherence and organization of the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the coding, we adopted a triangulation approach during axial coding. The second and third authors independently

analyzed two theme codes from randomly selected interviews, discussing and resolving any minor discrepancies to refine the coding. Any differences at the sub-theme level were explored and discussed, leading to refined categories and adjusted sub-theme codes.

The coding process, combined with an iterative approach, integrated theoretical frameworks to align the findings with the study's conceptual foundations. Korabik and Ayman's (2007) model provided a structure for identifying themes, while data-driven coding informed sub-themes and revealed unexpected nodes in participants' narratives. RCT offered a lens to interpret sub-themes, addressing challenges such as navigating male-dominated environments, managing gender role pressures, and exhibiting transformational leadership traits aligned with communal expectations. Additionally, RCT bridged the gap between data and interpretation, grounding the archetypes of Ulysses and Penelope. This approach connected participants' experiences to broader theoretical constructs, deepening the understanding of how leadership traits and societal expectations shape their journeys.

4. Findings

We applied Korabik and Ayman's (2007) gender and leadership model to analyze participants' discourse, organizing narratives with their framework. Initially, we examined interviews through an intrapersonal lens, identifying typologies. Then, from an interpersonal perspective, we analyzed relationships' influence on their development, including transformational leadership. Finally, we explored the social context, distinguishing between hostile and enabling cultures, and highlighted the interviewees' roles as change agents. The themes and codes generated are presented in Table 2.

TABLE II. Themes and codes generated (n=34)

Theme 1: Intrapersonal perspective

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Ulysses or adventurous	225 (19)	<i>"I was like, 'Okay, but I want more. I want to learn and challenge myself.' So, I decided to step out. I had spent ten years at the multinational in different positions and countries, but within a huge company, and yet, I left." (P5)</i>
Penelope or resilient	143 (15)	<i>"Do I want to take all this on? Do I have to travel more? Do I have to manage a lot more people? Or look, do I stay stuck in my own thing, where I'm already fine and earning a lot of money?" It was a pivotal moment because my kids were little. Hard to decide, "Do I take it on or not?." (P2)</i>

Theme 2: Interpersonal perspective

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Main relationships	219 (34)	
Boss	93 (30)	<i>"I tell you, one of the great fortunes in my career is that I've always had incredible bosses." (P6)</i>
Team	126 (34)	<i>"One of my qualities has been to create good teams. It's part of the key to my career success to always surround myself with people I consider to be better than me, more brilliant, and diverse." (P3)</i>
Transformational leadership	197 (33)	
Individual consideration	51 (22)	<i>"Knowing how to assign everyone in their place and bring out the best in each one." (P10)</i>
Intellectual stimulation	31 (19)	<i>"Look, your role is reporting manager, or your role is an accountant. It doesn't matter what it says here, on paper. I mean, you can be whatever you want to be. If you want to take on more things, you take them." (P14)</i>
Idealized influence	61 (24)	<i>"They still call me boss after a few years, but boss, affectionately, I mean, they adore me. I've been the godmother at their weddings and whatnot, so I say my leadership style has been very family-like." (P2)</i>
Inspirational motivation	40 (19)	<i>"I believe it's good for organizations and individuals to understand that we can achieve what we set out to do to a large extent. It's a matter of having a clear vision and working persistently towards our goals." (P34)</i>
Transactional evolution	14 (8)	<i>"You evolve, being a mother also helps, and you start to realize that when you're a leader, your success isn't an individual triumph, but instead your success is the success of your teams." (P15)</i>

Theme 3: Social context perspective

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Enabling culture	172 (32)	
Career development	118 (32)	<i>"What was done for high-potential people is to ensure they have mixed experiences, line with client, back office, front office, back office. Each time from positions where you can see the company from different angles." (P11)</i>
Normalization of diversity	54 (28)	<i>"My parents have always strongly promoted that we develop ourselves and that we have to break barriers... So that seed was very established." (P34)</i>
Hostile culture	115 (25)	
Male-dominated environment	83 (24)	<i>"My natural position would have been to move from where I am to global head of technology. They're not going to assign it to me because the guy there plays golf once a month with the president, and that's it." (P5)</i>
Gender role pressure	32 (14)	<i>"Subliminally sends you messages like 'this woman is a brute, for her to get where she is, to leave her three children, and the poor husband, the husband is a 'henpecked man.' (P4)</i>
Social change	57 (22)	<i>"People need references... I think we have a bit of a responsibility. Because talking to other women, I have seen that they have dared to take steps because they have seen you take them." (P24)</i>

Source: Authors own work

Theme 1: Intrapersonal perspective

You can be whatever you want to be. (P 14)

Interviews focused on professional journeys, relationships, successes, and failures. We identified two archetypes: (1) Ulysses (adventurous) and (2) Penelope (resilient), named after mythical figures to highlight their high-quality leadership traits.

Ulysses or adventurous

Nineteen women were classified as adventurous women, or "Ulysses," as they shared a love of new challenges, a thirst for knowledge, a passion for work, and a pioneering spirit.

They threw themselves with determination into challenging endeavors. As Participant 5 confessed, "You don't put on your fears..., you don't stop to think it's impossible, you just start and go for it." Participant 33 referred to herself using the metaphor "Miura bull¹" because, when she had a clear purpose, she did not stop fighting until she succeeded in taking on the challenge.

This eagerness for challenges is sometimes closely linked to a desire for continuous learning "I have always invested a lot in training, and I continue to do so, because otherwise you stay dead" (P26). These women quickly walked away when they saw they were not learning enough.

Work was fun for them. They wanted to enjoy working with their teams, exuding contagious energy.

It was very interesting because we were caught up in the whole transition from the peseta to the euro. I had a great time. I was on that team managing it, which was a lot of fun. We sold Japanese stock, and we did everything. It was very, very fun. (P32)

Women identified as adventurous were in continuous pursuit of innovation.

This company has allowed me to be quite creative. I am like a pioneer in changing the business model by choosing different people. I have already done a lot of talent selection in the company, but maybe they were in the back office or secretaries. (P29)

Some had become the first woman in a factory, on a construction site, as the first CEO, or on a board, being great pioneers.

¹ Miura is the name of one of the most famous fierce and determined fighting bulls' Spanish ranches.

Penelope or resilient

Fifteen interviewees fit the "Penelope" profile characterized by thoughtfulness, persistence, balance, and the ability to "ride the wave" when offered opportunities.

These women demonstrated tenacity "I was always meeting expectations, I was a hard worker, I was technically competent, and I was very committed to the job" (P11).

They were reflective women who measured the consequences of their decision-making. "It was one of the changes that I assumed and grew from because otherwise I would have remained stagnant and would not have progressed" (P2). They did not take challenges lightly and practiced "recognition of failure and internalized and metabolized experience" (P11).

Another characteristic of these women was the openness to opportunities, distinguishing them from "adventurous" women, as they waited to be "pulled" and "rode the wave" rather than seeking change.

My boss told me, "A great opportunity has arisen in England. It fits you perfectly." ...So I said to her: "Well, how much time do I have to think about it? (P7)

In addition to reflection, they sought harmony and planned to find a life balance.

Ultimately, what weighed the most in our decision was that if we went there and my husband could not find a position, I think it would have destroyed our family. (P30)

Theme 2: Interpersonal perspective

I feel very proud of the human quality of the people I have had the privilege to work with, who are truly responsible for my growth and development in the way I have achieved. (P 11)

Interpersonal relationships, especially with teams and bosses, were pivotal to these women's success. Transformational leadership dominated their narratives.

Boss

Bosses were key sources of learning and support, breaking mental barriers and offering opportunities. P29 noted: "I have had bosses who gave me every opportunity".

Bosses could be great teachers. Participant 9 shared:

My boss would turn off my computer and say, '20 people are working for you here. Turn this on in the afternoon'. (P9)

Negative experiences also offered lessons in what not to do.

Team

Nearly all participants credited their teams as critical to their success. They spoke of them with pride and a sense of ownership.

One of my qualities has always been to create good teams. It is part of the key to my professional success, always surrounding myself with people I consider better than me, more brilliant, and very diverse. (P3)

As conveyed in the interviews, knowing how to create "tribes" (P6) was a basic competency of a good leader. Achieving a balance between cohesion and divergence was a source of pride, and all interviews ended with a common question about what they felt most proud of in their careers, with teams being the focal point of their responses.

I feel super proud of the people who have grown with me and with whom I still maintain contact. Because life is about people. (P5)

Women emphasized meaningful connections with collaborators, fostering opportunities and loyalty.

They still call me 'boss' after a few years, but affectionately, they adore me. I have been a godmother at their weddings. My leadership style has been family-oriented and about helping and protecting. (P2)

Caring and sensitivity were increasingly valued leadership traits, aligning with transformational leadership principles.

Transformational leadership: Idealized influence

Observed in 24 participants, this trait emphasized meaningful relationships, influencing and being influenced by their collaborators.

Having much better connections with highly talented people who are my team members has driven me to grow and improve, and to help them grow and transform. (P9)

Integrity and positive values were central.

I have to equip the young women in my sales organization to defend themselves in this still male-dominated environment, but I also have to ensure that, within my humble capacity to influence, the environment improves. (P22)

Transformational Leadership: Individualized consideration

The collaborator's relevance extended beyond merely fulfilling their job. Concern for people was very present in these executives' discourse:

I genuinely care about people who have been on my team. I have tried to get to know them, understand what is happening in their lives, put myself in their shoes, and help them professionally and personally. And when I see talent, I encourage it. (P1)

Enhancing their collaborators' careers was a mandate they considered necessary in their own trajectories: "for me, promoting not just myself but also my people was my goal" (P29).

Transformational Leadership: Inspirational Motivation and Intellectual Stimulation

In the women's narratives, the desire to motivate and stimulate others' growth was evident in nineteen discourses. Motivating and stimulating were closely related concepts, so they were sometimes difficult to distinguish. Nevertheless, the executives were actively interested in serving as examples and stimuli for their collaborators. Having a clear vision and communicating it, fostering innovation, change, and even nonconformity, were other ways they related to others.

Every time I hire someone, I tell them, 'Look, your role is reporting manager or your role is accountant.' It doesn't matter what it says on paper. You can be whatever you want to be. So, if you want to take on more responsibilities, do it. (P14)

Transactional evolution

The predominant leadership style among these women was transformational. However, eight informants admitted starting with more authoritarian and transactional styles. They described an evolution toward more collaborative approaches. Sometimes, through significant experiences:

You evolve, and being a mother also helps. You realize that when you're a leader, your success isn't an individual triumph but your team's success. (P15)

Other times, more intentionally with professional help:

I was becoming a very good manager but not such a good leader. You must learn your true leadership style and vision, and how to lead your team. Working with coaches was crucial for me. They helped me understand myself, my strengths and weaknesses, and how to use those to bring out the best in others. (P12)

Theme 3: Social context perspective

Fight to become a leader, because leaders can change the world, and when you do, people follow, seek you out, and want to work with you. (P29)

The interviewees' narratives provided insight into the personal and professional contexts of their careers, illustrating how they shaped their trajectories. The stories of top female executives highlighted career levers, including enabling cultures, and barriers like hostile environments. These women became protagonists of social change, opening new paths for future women leaders.

Enabling culture: Career development

The term "golden bubbles," coined by a participant, describes supportive organizational environments that foster leadership through inclusive experiences. Most participants (32 of 34) reported such positive cultures, and 23 encountered them while also navigating male-dominated or hostile settings—highlighting the coexistence of both models in their careers.

What was done for high-potential people is to ensure they have mixed experiences, line with client, back office, front office, and back office. Each time, from positions where you can see the company from different angles. (P11)

Enabling cultures provided challenging assignments, such as international roles, cross-departmental shifts, and projects during mergers or acquisitions. Continuous changes advanced their careers, and participants expressed gratitude for these opportunities. Three-quarters of the interviewees had international roles. Living abroad broadened their mind and exposed them to very different career styles, as illustrated by this quote:

The company told me that if I wanted to advance my career, I needed international experience. My self-employed husband and I moved to Miami with my children. I held a very senior position again in procurement management, leading a team of over fifty people from various countries. It was an amazing international experience. (P15)

The focus on training and a culture of feedback were also key elements in enhancing talent. One interviewee noted, "I was perfectly fine within this program for three years with three different

mentors, and then I took several coaching courses" (P24). Another interviewee emphasized the importance of companies that "helped develop your leadership and invested heavily in training and people" (P28).

Enabling culture: Normalization of diversity

In addition to contexts fostering career development, these interviewees described environments where diversity was normalized. Some companies were guided by meritocracy, featuring flexible environments and valuing diversity, thus breaking stereotypes.

One-third of the interviewees mentioned experiencing meritocratic environments at some point in their careers, where promotions were based on results and talent. Participant 11 described being promoted to an international position a month before her maternity leave because she had elevated the role's significance, which was recognized before her departure.

Some corporate cultures enhanced work-life balance tools, such as flexible schedules (P1), remote work (P31), and reduced working hours (P35). The interviewees appreciated environments where no differences existed between men and women (P14) and where multicultural teams worked seamlessly together, "a diverse team that functioned phenomenally" (P10). Several interviews highlighted company support during personal circumstances, such as pregnancy or illness. For instance, Participant 33, diagnosed with cancer after changing companies, was told, "Since you will surely overcome this, we will wait for you" (P33). Participant shared:

In advanced stages of the selection process, I said, "I am trying to get pregnant, and I won't delay it because I've been trying for three years". "They responded, "We support maternity." And I said, "This is the company. This is my place." (P2)

Several interviewees (P22, 25, 26, 27, 29, and 34) referred to prejudice-free environments that gradually allowed them to design their careers without limitations. Some reflected on the equality they received in their education and the encouragement around them: "I would have imposed more limits on myself if I hadn't had these people around me saying, 'Why not?'" (P22).

Hostile culture: Male-dominated environment

In their narratives, 25 interviewees described obstacles in their careers, grouped into male normalization and gender role pressure. References to hostile culture accounted for about half of the comments related to enabling culture. Only two women mentioned a hostile culture without referencing enabling elements. Taken together, these patterns suggest that hostile

environments are not anecdotal but reflect a widespread structural challenge, particularly in industries with entrenched masculine norms. The participants discussed the systemic prevalence of male-dominated environments in industries such as factories, logistics, consulting, investment banking, commerce, and senior management committees and boards. These cultures were recurrent across sectors traditionally marked by masculine norms and practices, rather than being isolated expressions of bias. "Men's club" was the term used to describe groups of men in senior management who were difficult to access.

I have been invited to London for weekends and events, and I have said no, no, no to playing golf. When you say no, you are no longer part of the club. No, I'm not from the club. (P3)

Some narratives revealed a perception of very masculine environments. At times, this environment was less palpable, though still present in the background. Five women recounted how, in some contexts, being young and female resulted in being addressed with terms like "my girl" (P17) or "beautiful" (P2), reflecting paternalism. Gender stereotypes often led to prejudice and judgments made without sufficient information. As one participant noted, "This woman is ruthless to have reached her position, leaving her three children and poor husband behind. The husband must be a henpecked man" (P4).

Hostile culture: Gender role pressures

Other elements of hostile culture were grouped under gender role pressure, such as wage discrimination (P1, P2), harassment, and the impossibility of achieving work-life balance. Four participants endured mobbing in silence to avoid confrontation. Although unbearable, overcoming these situations made these women stronger. Participant 33, for example, changed companies to regain her emotional balance.

Beyond the four cases of harassment, nine women spoke about setting boundaries to avoid uncomfortable situations of harassment, abuse, or being disregarded. They emphasized drawing red lines to prevent friendliness from being mistaken for unwarranted familiarity.

Social Change

The narratives of female executives depicted a process of social change in which they were active protagonists, transitioning from organizations without restrooms for women to workplaces where female executives were common.

In my first project as a civil engineer on a construction site, the foreman, one of the best in the company, got extremely angry and complained to the group leader, asking what he had done wrong to deserve having the only woman as his boss. (P33)

Today, some senior executives in Spain have grown up in environments of equality, experiencing no limitations due to being women. Some interviewees participated in executive committees with balanced gender ratios, even joking about it.

Don't worry, until there are as many incompetent men on an executive committee as there are women, there is still a long way to go to make mistakes. (P8).

Despite progress, some women still faced wage discrimination, abuse, fewer promotions, and a lack of work-life balance. They took on leadership roles to influence these less inclusive environments, becoming role models and mentors. These women felt responsible for helping others take bold steps, fight for change, and move away from victimhood. Many pioneered in various fields, from requesting reduced working hours to joining executive committees and encouraging others through their example.

People need role models, and those of us who have been fortunate to be in such positions have a bit of responsibility. I've seen that other women dared to take steps because they saw you take them. (P24).

5. Discussion

Two distinct leadership approaches emerged from the women's narratives. One aligns with the archetype of Homeric Ulysses—defined by bold vision, adaptability, and a willingness to take risks with energy and creativity. The other reflects Penelope's archetype—marked by resilience, patience, and reflective decision-making rooted in long-term thinking. Olsson (2000) noted the absence of an archetypal profile for female leadership. Ulysses and Penelope are used here to describe women who, despite facing discrimination, do not present themselves as victims but trust in their leadership abilities. Adventurous women, or “Ulysses,” embrace new challenges, thirst for knowledge, passion for work, and a pioneering spirit. Resilient women, or “Penelope,” exhibit thoughtfulness, persistence, balance, and the ability to “ride the wave” when opportunity arises. These profiles show how leadership manifests through different combinations of transformational traits and contextual adaptability. As Dobel (2006) noted, both figures illustrate contrasting yet effective leadership forms. These archetypes enrich our understanding of leadership diversity among women executives and challenge one-size-fits-all models of effectiveness (Derue *et al.*, 2011).

Despite their diverse profiles, transformational leadership emerged as the dominant style among these executives, consistent with findings on Emirati and South African women leaders (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022; Shaya & Abu Khait, 2017). This supports our research question by showing how different paths converge around traits linked to organizational success (Tibus, 2010). Among the transformational factors, Ulysses and Penelope types shared “idealized influence” and “individualized consideration” as the most prominent. These leaders remained true to their principles and prioritized their teams’ needs. In contrast, “inspirational motivation” appeared less frequently, differing from Vinkenburg *et al.* (2011), who identified it as key to attaining CEO roles. They also noted that both men and women must demonstrate “individualized consideration” to align with gender expectations—echoing our findings, where this trait was widely emphasized as a driver of individual development (Bass, 1985).

Building on the shared transformational traits described above, this study underscores their predominance among women executives in male-dominated organizations, challenging earlier claims that they often adopt a masculine, transactional style (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Druskat, 1994). Most participants exhibited transformational leadership, aligning with previous research on Spanish female managers (Hernandez Bark *et al.*, 2014). A smaller group (8 of 34) began their careers with more transactional approaches before shifting toward transformational leadership through personal growth or coaching. Several participants described this evolution as moving from control-oriented, highly demanding early behaviors—often reinforced by organizational expectations—to a more purpose-driven and developmental style. As they advanced, they learned to articulate a broader vision, develop employees as future leaders, and foster innovation. This transition also involved managing their own egos, letting go of self-imposed perfectionism, and reframing leadership from a stance of personal rigor to one of motivation, service, and empowerment. These cases suggest that transactional behaviors may reflect early adaptations rather than enduring leadership identities. Our findings position transformational leadership not only as prevalent but also as a developmental outcome among women executives.

While emphasizing the importance of interpersonal interactions in creating social capital, this study supports previous research on the impact of social context on women's leadership style (Badura *et al.*, 2018; Morgenroth *et al.*, 2020; Górska *et al.*, 2021). Participants shared experiences of challenges in reaching top management and the support from their organizations, describing some as “golden bubbles” for career development. The concept of “golden bubbles,” emerging from participant narratives, aligns with existing literature on inclusive organizational cultures. Amin *et al.* (2018) emphasize “person-centered leadership”

that fosters empowerment and a sense of belonging, while Longman *et al.* (2018) highlight “pull factors” that encourage women’s advancement. Common features—such as exposure to diverse roles, mentoring, meritocracy, and normalized diversity—reflect the characteristics of the “golden bubbles” described by our interviewees. Flexibility and respect for diversity, preferred by participants over formal equality frameworks, were also linked to innovation and improved performance (Lee & Jung, 2024). In addition to organizational support, the development of leadership identity plays a pivotal role in how women navigate structural and interpersonal challenges. Our findings align with Ryan *et al.* (2021), who emphasize the dual challenges women face in managing structural and agentic risks during leader identity formation. Similarly, the dynamic negotiation between “leader” and “woman” identities observed in our participants reflects Ramarajan’s (2014) intrapersonal network approach, which highlights the interplay of multiple identities and the role of external validation. Participants described male-dominated environments in industries like factories, logistics, consulting, investment banking, commerce, and management committees as settings where women are often relegated to secondary positions. Some referred to these male-dominated groups as “men’s clubs,” difficult for women to enter, echoing Parkinson *et al.* (2019). Though gender stereotypes have softened (Eagly *et al.*, 2020), participants still faced unconscious bias and male norms that organizations must address to prevent career decisions shaped by persistent patterns (Hoobler *et al.*, 2014).

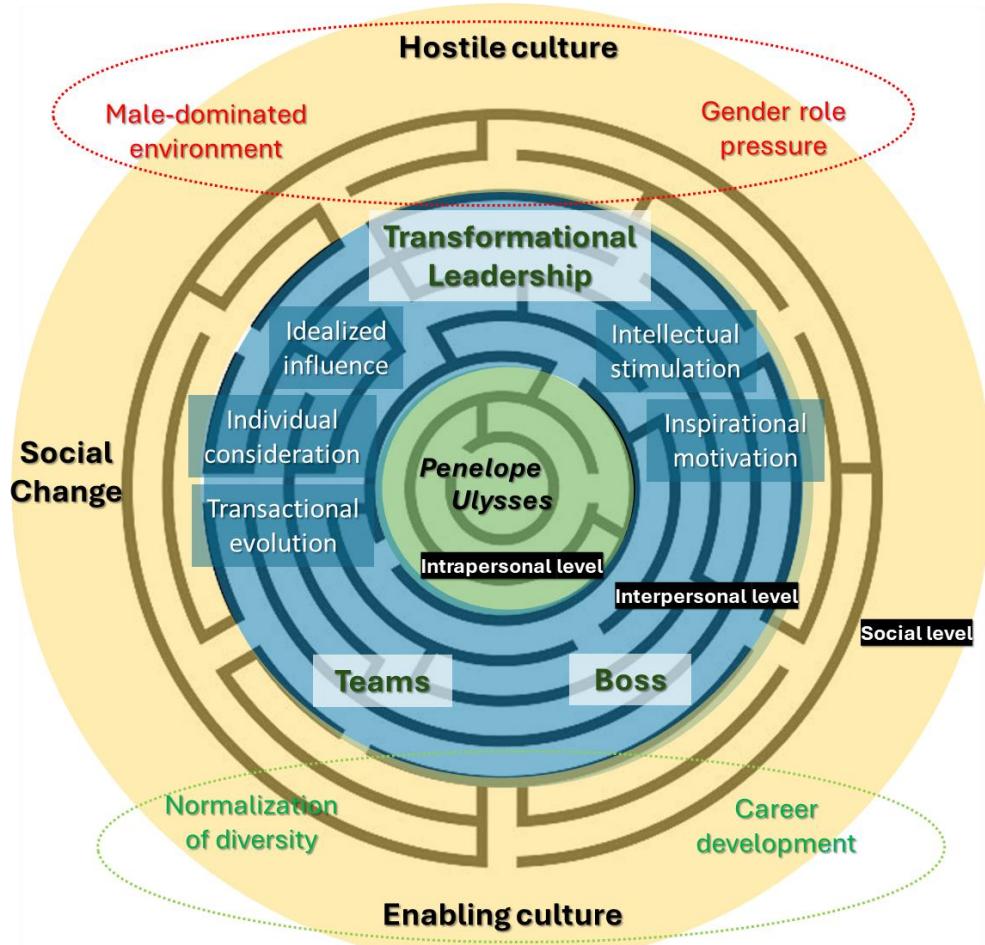
The lack of work-life balance emerged as a significant barrier, echoing Cárdenas *et al.* (2014), who found it a key challenge for senior Latin American female managers. Like their participants, most women in our study were married with children, countering the idea that motherhood limits access to CEO positions (Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). Participants managed balance by negotiating shorter hours, roles with less travel, flexible work arrangements, and shared family responsibilities, with support at home also playing a critical role. While both studies highlight the influence of gendered leadership stereotypes, our findings diverge in how success is interpreted. Cárdenas *et al.*’s participants largely attributed their progress to individual effort, whereas many women in our study reflected on interpersonal influences, acknowledged experiencing the impostor phenomenon, and at times attributed their achievements to luck (Domínguez-Soto *et al.*, 2024). This contrast adds nuance to the role of internal narratives and self-perception in women’s leadership development, complementing role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

This research presents a process-oriented explanatory model showing how women’s leadership identities form through the interplay of personal agency, interpersonal dynamics, and

structural conditions. By integrating the frameworks of Korabik and Ayman (2007), Lyness and Grotto (2018), and Shamir and Eilam (2005), the model highlights identity–context interdependence and depicts the complex journey female executives navigate through the labyrinth to reach top leadership roles. Represented in Figure 1, the three concentric rings reflect the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social levels proposed by Korabik and Ayman (2007), organizing the key themes that emerged from the narratives and illustrating the dynamic process through which senior executive women construct their leadership identities within gendered organizational environments.

The journey begins with self-knowledge and the belief in reaching the destination, rooted in ontological optimism. At the core, understanding one's intrapersonal characteristics is crucial. Whether adventurous and passionate like "Ulysses" or perseverant and resilient like "Penelope," these women build strong relationships with their environments and collaborators. Unlike Homeric heroic archetypes, they prioritize care and teamwork as fundamental to success. Engagement with others becomes transformative, learning from supervisors, investing in team development, and building trust repeatedly appeared as conditions that made "Ithaca" attainable.

Figure 1. Pursuing Ithaca: A Process Model of Women's Leadership Identity Development



Source: Authors own work

Progressing outward, leadership is enacted interpersonally. These women build strong, reciprocal relationships with teams and superiors, prioritizing care and collaboration over heroic individualism. Team building, mentoring, and learning from positive role models consistently shaped their progression, while adverse “companions” serve as cautionary examples that refine their leadership choices. Transformational leadership, particularly idealized influence and individualized consideration, was the dominant style.

The outer layer illustrates the shifting cultural environments these executives traverse. Like a modern “Odyssey,” their careers unfold through alternating hostile and enabling contexts. Many navigated male-dominated cultures, exclusionary norms, and persistent gender-role pressures. Yet they also encountered inclusive climates that normalized diversity and offered developmental opportunities. These contrasting forces, reflecting Lyness and Grotto’s (2018) barriers and enablers, acted as catalysts for identity work and adaptive agency.

Ultimately, these executives become pioneers of social change. Having confronted wage discrimination, exclusion, limited promotions, and work-life imbalance, they intentionally used their leadership roles to transform the very environments that challenged them. As role models and mentors, they helped others take bold steps, resist victimhood, and pursue more inclusive futures, advancing not only their own “Ithaca” but also that of the women who follow.

Practical implications

Beyond its theoretical contributions to the literature on gender and leadership modeling, this paper offers significant practical implications for women aspiring to leadership positions and for the organizations that employ them.

For women aspiring to senior positions, this study emphasizes the importance of focusing on pivotal life and professional events to construct meaningful life stories. Such reflection helps women draw strength from their experiences, countering self-doubt linked to the impostor phenomenon. Addressing this phenomenon through self-reflection, communication, and positive habits can foster leadership growth (Domínguez-Soto *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, cultivating a healthy leadership identity is vital for overcoming challenges outlined in RCT (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This involves supporting competent women hesitant to assert themselves.

For organizations, the findings underscore the need to promote women's access to top management roles and create supportive environments for their professional growth. Companies should actively eliminate conscious and unconscious gender biases (Lyness & Grotto, 2018), ensuring fair and equitable hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes.

Human Resources (HR) departments play a crucial role by advocating for gender diversity at senior levels (Lee & Jung, 2024) and fostering an inclusive culture that values female talent. Organizations should implement HR practices that address internal barriers to women's career progression (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), favoring work-life policies that are fair for women's careers (Bertola *et al.*, 2023), including flexible working arrangements, leadership training programs tailored for women, and initiatives promoting work-life balance. Furthermore, increasing women's representation in leadership roles can create a pipeline of future women leaders (Spencer *et al.*, 2019). Showcasing role models can inspire and motivate female employees, demonstrating the attainability of leadership positions.

As suggested in previous studies, structured mentoring programs should include all women aspiring to or currently in management roles (Haar & de Jong, 2022; Manongsong & Ghosh,

2021). The importance of challenging job assignments and action learning is a clear option highlighted by our participants for career development (Day, 2000). Additionally, implementing a curated top-down sponsoring system can support women struggling with self-promotion, helping them maintain agency, effectiveness, and authenticity despite identity tensions. Leadership development training programs should integrate interventions aimed at fostering both authentic and transformational leadership (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2017).

Limitations

The present study has several limitations that can pave the way for future research. First, our exploratory study focused on 34 female Spanish senior leaders. Future research could benefit from larger, more diverse samples drawn from different cultures and nationalities to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including a sample of women who did not attain top management positions would be highly enriching. The narratives of achievement and triumph differ significantly from those of frustration or incomplete career trajectories.

Second, although this study offers insights into the leadership development and experiences of female executives, it does not examine these within broader organizational contexts. Future research should explore how being in a numerical minority influences leadership behaviors and experiences in such environments. Lastly, there is a possibility that biases may have influenced our interpretations, leading other researchers to different conclusions, themes, and categories. However, we endeavored to maintain objectivity and rigor in conducting and analyzing this research, adhering to established qualitative principles of transparency and consistency (Patton, 2015).

6. Conclusion

This study presents a process-oriented explanatory model (Figure 1), illustrating how women's leadership identities develop through the interplay of personal agency, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational culture. By integrating the models of Korabik and Ayman (2007), Lyness and Grotto (2018), and Shamir and Eilam (2005), the model captures the dynamic ways female executives in male-dominated environments negotiate and craft their identities. Like Ulysses and Penelope, their journeys highlight the importance of self-knowledge, meaningful relationships, and transformational leadership. By understanding and overcoming challenges in male-dominated environments, these women reach their own "Ithaca" while fostering the growth and success of those they lead.

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