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Women as leaders in male-dominated sectors: A bifocal analysis of gendered organizational practices

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Abstract

Women in male-dominated sectors face significant challenges to progress their leadership aspirations. While organizations have activated policies and practices that ostensibly assist women to progress, they still face entrenched gendered practices and cultures that create ongoing obstacles. In this paper, we examine the gendered social practices from insights of 15 women leaders in Australia as they attempt to advance their careers. In particular, on formal policies, informal practices, narratives and social interactions, and informal patterns of unconscious bias and merit, they negotiate in three male-dominated sectors: Trades, Sport, and Surgery. The findings indicate a disconnect between policies and their application. Women were conflicted about the importance of quotas, and often felt unable to access flexible work arrangements upon returning to work after parental leave. Career pathways were often unclear, and women felt a lack of support from their organization, particularly when they attempted to navigate dominant masculine cultures. Drawing on these findings, we argue that executive leaders are central to changing the systemic sexism and discrimination in organizations that persist in male-dominated sectors. To create organizational changes necessary for women to step into leadership roles, we propose four target areas: create

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accessible and visible career pathways, provide networking support, activate mentoring opportunities, and address unconscious bias.

KEYWORDS

bifocal approach, gender analysis, male-dominated sectors, women leaders

1 | INTRODUCTION

Women have slowly begun to make inroads into sectors that have traditionally been considered as the domain of men. Despite an increasing number of women in these sectors, they still struggle to rise to leadership positions. Informal organizational practices reinforce gendered structures of dominance, which privilege males and masculinity, and normalize and naturalize their positions as leaders (Piggott & Pike, 2019). This occurs not only in sport (Piggott & Pike, 2019) but also in other sectors, such as surgery (Meyer et al., 2019) and the skilled trades (Clarsen, 2019; Wulff, et al., 2021).

Within these three sectors, women face significant obstacles in their leadership aspirations. In sport, the paucity of female leaders has been recognized as a worldwide issue. Women remain in a minority and face barriers and challenges in their leadership aspirations in sports organizations (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Pape, 2020; Thornton & Etxebarria, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality underlie the problem (Hindman & Walker, 2020). Women in trades in Western nations also comprise a low percentage of the overall workforce (Bridges et al., 2020), and in Australia face barriers associated with the masculine cultures and lack definable career pathways (Jenkins et al., 2018). Few women are role models in leadership positions (Galea et al., 2015; Simon & Clarke, 2016) and fewer still are in management roles (Bigelow et al., 2016). In surgery, women in North America, Europe, and Oceania are likewise underrepresented in leadership positions despite the rise in the number of women entering the profession (Wu et al., 2019). While research from the United States suggests that this disparity is beginning to change (Pories et al., 2019), gender inequality in leadership positions remains an issue (Battaglia, et al., 2020; Carr et al., 2017; Lyons et al., 2019). The situation in Australia is similar with women surgeons facing a range of entrenched gendered biases that requires systemic change (Hutchinson, 2020).

While cross-sectorial research has explored barriers faced by women in male-dominated industries (e.g., Bridges et al., 2021; Foley et al., 2022), few of these inquiries have extended their focus to specifically consider the organizational barriers that women encounter when attempting to move into leadership positions. In this article, we outline the initial phase of a longitudinal and transformative intervention in Australia designed to embed policies and practices to assist women in their leadership aspirations in three male-dominated industries, such as Sport, Trades, and Surgery. The purpose of the first phase was to identify and understand the gendered social practices perceived by women leaders within organizations in each sector. In our inquiry, we were inspired by the analytic framework suggested by Ely and Meyerson (2000) to identify practices that could be the focus of organizational change (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016).

1.1 | Literature review

Research within male-dominated sectors identifies that women attempting to rise to leadership roles face similar organizational barriers. To advance as leaders, for example, women in IT and engineering had to outperform their male counterparts, and their achievements were rarely made visible nor were they appreciated (Clerc & Kels, 2013). Other

male-dominated industries likewise suggest that women aspiring to leadership positions were commonly expected to demonstrate higher levels of expertise or efficacy than male counterparts (Buse et al., 2013; Clerc & Kels, 2013; Esser et al., 2018). In Australia, research on women's career progression in the construction industry indicated that not only did women believe they had to constantly prove their abilities, but their progression was also impeded by the need to develop alliances with men (Galea et al., 2020). Organizational factors that impacted women's career progression despite the increase in numbers include presenteeism, long hours, total availability, and lack of accessibility to forms of flexible work (Baker & French, 2017; Galea et al., 2020; Williamson & Colley, 2018).

Lack of consistency and coherence in company policies directed at addressing gender inequalities often resulted in a disconnect between company values and policies (Galea et al., 2020; Williamson & Colley, 2018). Rather than enabling change, the mismatched messaging enabled dominant masculine organizational culture to remain untouched and policy implementation difficult to maintain (Galea et al., 2015). In addition, gendered norms within organizations not only reproduce masculine privilege (Galea & Chappell, 2022), but men within these organizations also maintain control and dominance through harassment and discrimination (Powell & Sang, 2015). Consequently, women were often not willing to take up flexible work arrangements, fearing their career progression might be slowed (Huppatz et al., 2018), and parental leave was often compromised by informal rules relating to women's caring role (Galea et al., 2020). In addition, unconscious bias, which is perpetuated by both women and men (Begeny et al., 2020; Faniko et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2009; Powell & Sang, 2015), reinforced informal and unregulated work practices. Resistance to flexible work arrangements resulted in women having to negotiate their way back to work, which slowed their career progression (Bridges, Wulff, Bamberry, Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2020).

Transformational gender equality interventions, such as mentoring, networking, and role modeling, are suggested strategies to assist women navigate masculine-dominated institutions and industries (Bridges Wulff, Bamberry, Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2020; Clerc & Kels, 2013; Germain et al., 2012; Lansu et al., 2019; Leenders et al., 2020; Rosa et al., 2017). Bridges et al. (2021) propose a gender inclusion model that draws on a suite of practices, mentoring, women in leadership, networking, and equitable policies to develop both individual and organizational resilience within male-dominated occupations. They further argue that resilience is a learned behavior "enacted by employees and organizations" (Bridges et al., 2021, p. 8, italics in original). Khilji and Pumroy (2018) also argue that to succeed in male-dominated industries, women have to be strong and resilient. We, as the authors, are sympathetic to these approaches, certainly Bridges et al.'s (2021) nexus between organizations and employees is instructive; however, we also argue that learning behaviors to ensure resilience continues to place responsibility on women to change rather than the organization. As other research has illustrated (e.g., Foley et al., 2022; O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015), change must occur at an organizational level to dismantle entrenched masculine practices. Senior men and women can play complementary roles in advancing change, while also dismantling dominant masculine cultures (De Vries, 2015). For example, women are often not able to access the informal networks that enable men to progress in organizations (Galea et al., 2020; Wulff et al., 2021). O'Neil et al. (2011) suggest that women's networks can not only offer opportunities for them to advance as leaders, but when supported by upper management who are committed to gender diversity, can promote organizational change along with changes in career path options.

However, in order to transform these norms within gendered organizations, detailed knowledge of processes and practices is required (Lansu et al., 2019). A "systemic gender knowledge examines the interacting processes that are both the cause and consequence of the systemic problem of gender inequality" (Lansu et al., 2019, p. 1593). To assist build such knowledge, a before and after staged intervention was proposed by Lansu and colleagues designed to explore the changes in knowledge produced through raising awareness of systemic gender knowledge. While this intervention was not ongoing, the research is informative as it contains a before and after assessment of an intervention to support transformational organizational change.

Despite the literature identifying a broad range of gendered practices that continually hindered women's progression in the workplace, it cannot be assumed that an understanding is therefore gained on what practices impact women's career progression. To address this assumption, we draw on theorists to frame our study (e.g., Ely & Meyerson, 2000; de Vries & van den Brink, 2016), who indicate that before any intervention proceeds, it is crucial

to gain insight into the current inequalities that may exist within the workplace under study. Without this insight, we could not provide the executive leaders, who were to be tasked with implementing policies and practices in the intervention, with an accurate account of the current situation within their sectors. In this case, our purpose was to uncover the gendered social practices that women leaders in male-dominated industries face as they attempt to advance their careers. Armed with this knowledge, we could then begin to strategize with the executive leaders to empower them to become agents of change through embedding and implementing policies designed to assist women into leadership roles. We now outline in more detail our theoretical approach to analyze organizational practices (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) and how we intend to reframe the bifocal approach (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) to emphasize the necessity of a feminist intervention to engage more directly with executive leaders to initiate change within organizations. These two theoretical approaches will guide us on addressing the purpose of our study.

1.2 | Theoretical approach to analyzing gendered organizations

Our theoretical approach draws on de Vries and van den Brink's (2016) bifocal lens, as a feminist intervention, which provides us with a tool to reflect on the role that executive members of organizations can play in enacting the change. A bifocal approach uses the notion of "small wins" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 144) to promote broader organizational change rather than trying to "fix women." We also employ the analytic categories of Ely and Meyerson (2000) to consider the multiple and complex ways that gendering processes within organizations impede women's leadership. Both of these approaches are critical of commonly ill-conceived interventions that position women as a "problem" with remedial interventions framed largely around teaching women masculine traits so they can be more successful in organizations (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016). These types of interventions do little to reframe gendered structures and processes within organizations (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016). Foregrounding this suggestion, we extend on the intent of the bifocal approach to shift responsibility for change onto the organizations through executive leaders. We have chosen executive leaders as the drivers of change, as challenging the norms in gendered organizational practices requires this level of intervention (O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015). As Meyerson and Fletcher (2000, p. 135) noted over 2 decades ago, "the problems are systemic not individual." Our theoretical contribution is to specifically focus on the change agency of executive leaders, who as "organizational insiders" (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016, p. 432), can potentially embed practices that challenge persistent inequalities to assist women to step into leadership positions.

However, the first step in transformational interventions is to identify practices that work to create barriers to women's leadership (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). In this way, executive leaders can gain an insight into the "gendering processes of their own organization and the part they could play in creating change" as well as how these changes can develop the capacities of women leaders (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016, p. 434). Identifying common gendered organizational practices offers the opportunity to propose interventions to counter their effects. As de Vries and van den Brink (2016, p. 442) further note, a "bifocal approach" can create a "ripple effect" ... which in turn can "transform the gendered organization."

Change also occurs through challenging and resisting existing power relations in which gender is an "axis of power" and shapes the organization of knowledge, social structures, and identities (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 132). Focusing on incremental change within organizations, Ely and Meyerson argue that any one intervention can work to provide points of resistance that over time create broader organizational change. Ely and Meyerson (2000, p. 135) outline three phases through which to identify gendered practices through an "iterative process of critique, narrative revision and experimentation." In this article, we focus primarily on the first phase, critique, to identify the organizational gendered social practices across sectors. Critique was central to gain an understanding of the barriers women faced in their leadership aspirations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Ely and Meyerson (2000) propose four analytic categories to explore the norms that govern social practices within organizations. We outline these briefly here, and then return to them in our analysis and discussion. The four categories as we deploy them are: formal policies; informal practices; narratives and social interaction; informal patterns, unconscious bias, and merit (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 114). The

categories also inform our research questions with the first directed at asking what elements within these categories create barriers to women's leadership progression? The second seeks to understand how identifying commonalities across the male-dominated sectors can guide a focused approach to initiating and embedding change.

2 | METHODOLOGY

This project forms the first phase of a larger investigation focused on addressing organizational practices to advance women into leadership roles in Australia. The purpose of the current project, phase one, was to uncover the gendered social practices and obstacles that potential women leaders in three male-dominated industries face as they attempt to pursue their leadership goals. We identified Trades, Sport, and Surgery as our targeted sectors as women remain vastly underrepresented in leadership positions despite increasing numbers entering these sectors (Bigelow et al., 2016; Bridges et al., 2020; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Hutchinson, 2020; Pape, 2020; Wu et al., 2019). Associations and Organizations within these sectors have also recognized the issue and initiated a range of programs designed to promote/bring women into leadership positions. We invited the National Member Association in each of the three sectors to be involved in the study. Upon acceptance, a senior manager from each of these Associations invited a Chief Executive Officer or senior leader from an Organization that the Association identified as being nationally recognized for their interest to advance women as leaders. Two Organizations were public and one was a private/commercial Organization. Regarding employees, one Organization was relatively small (50–500 employees), another was medium (1500–2000 employees), and the final Organization was large (2000 or more employees). All were located in urban settings. We have not identified the Organizations, to do so would compromise the anonymity of the participants based on the very few women who are current leaders.

2.1 | Participants

The three Organizational managers invited women employees, who were broadly identified as emerging or current leaders to partake in a survey to establish baseline issues and barriers within their employing organizations. Participants indicated in their survey responses their willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews. This ensured managers from the Organizations were unable to identify which women had agreed to be involved in the study. The result was a sample of 15 emerging or current leaders (Trades = 9, Sport = 3, and Surgery = 3). The small number of participants is indicative of the few women who were in leadership positions in these sectors. Despite the small sample size, we were confident that the interviews contained *information power*, rich with information that could be deployed to guide our research and address our research questions (Malterud, et al., 2016, our emphasis). Throughout the interview process, women continually sought assurances that their details would not be published in any form. We also wanted to ensure that women were guaranteed anonymity, for them to feel comfortable and speak freely, without the fear that if identified they might encounter repercussions. As a result, to provide participant demographic details, given the modest number, may have compromised the anonymity that these women sought when they asked for reassurance. Ellard-Gray et al. (2015, p. 3) argue that it is often difficult to maintain anonymity and confidentiality when participants “are contained in small communities where members tend to know one another.” Ellard-Gray et al. (2015, p. 8) further argue that, in order to protect participant's identity, it is important to exercise “extreme caution and attention to maintaining confidentiality”. To further maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

2.2 | Data collection

In this paper, we attend to the interview responses from these women to gain an insight into the obstacles they experienced as they negotiate the social practices and processes in gendered organizations across three sectors. Qualitative data are suggested to enable researchers to “gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge”

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1) about the gendered practices in male-dominated sectors and their impact on women as they attempt to progress their leadership goals. Ely and Meyerson (2000) also argue that it is important to create a detailed picture of gendered organizational practices. Interview questions were formed from a literature review of successfully implemented practices to advance women as leaders. Interviews were conducted for up to 80 min and transcribed verbatim. It is this data set that is drawn on to frame our inquiry. The interviews allowed participants to discuss the gendered barriers they encountered and how their organization addressed gendered issues and supported, or not, women into leadership positions.

2.3 | Analysis

Data analysis was initially guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The interview data were read repeatedly to gain an insight into the "complicated story" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93) of women's leadership aspirations. Key concepts were identified within the interviews and these in turn guided the formation of themes within NVivo. Coded concepts were clustered into themes, which were revisited several times in an iterative process to define and refine. While data were specifically collected to gain insights into the barriers women faced in their leadership aspirations, thematic analysis was initially data driven, and as such, we did not attempt to fit it into a pre-existing coding framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moving between coding and writing, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion that writing is an integral part of the analysis, beginning at the first stage of the research and continuing as an ongoing process. This suggestion helped us to think through the analysis, finding usefulness in their proposal that analysis moves from a "descriptive level to an interpretive level" (p. 93). The descriptive level was refined as we drew on our readings of literature and developed our approach to data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis can be situated within different theoretical approaches. Employing this proposition, we turned firstly to de Vries and van den Brink's (2016, p. 433) proposal that in order to move toward a transformative ideal, an inquiry must first understand the "current organizational reality." This was a key point that we built on to enable us to identify common barriers across sectors and draw on these insights to initiate programs designed to embed change.

We also employed Ely and Meyerson's (2000, p. 114) theories of gender in organizations to analyze the "work practices, norms and patterns of work" within each sector and how gendered perceptions impacted the workplace. A crucial aspect of our inquiry was to gain an insight into the current practices impeding women's leadership aspirations. These insights will be utilized to develop our second phase of the broader project that proposes a pilot intervention to build practices in the workplace.

Ely and Myerson's (2000, p. 137) four analytic categories guided our thematic analysis of the organizational practices across sectors that presented barriers to women's leadership aspirations. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) suggest that a theme "represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set". Foregrounding this suggestion, the first category focuses on formal organizational policies designed to create a gender-neutral work environment including reference to quotas. The second category is the gendering of informal practices, such as flexible work hours and knowledge of career pathways that articulate the norms of the organization and sector. Our third category examines the narratives with each sector to gain an insight into stories of success and who is able to speak or who may be silenced. Finally, we identify how informal patterns of unconscious bias and merit work to reproduce patterns of inequality. Our aim was to start "where people are" (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016, p. 444) to ensure that the executive leader's broad insight could be deepened to consider the ongoing barriers women face and the associated commonalities across sectors.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Formal policies

Some participants, particularly in Trades, noted that their organization had a range of formal policies to address gender inequalities such as 50:50 gender balance in management, diversity policies, and quotas. However, there was a noted

mismatch between the policies and their implementation. Participants from all three sectors discussed how policy often did not filter down through the various management levels. For example, within the Trades sector, Kerry noted that her organization had a gender balanced policy to assist women when they moved into management positions. In practice, however, Penelope (Trades) indicated that a gender balance was not evident throughout the organization, and at various management levels, opportunities were less available, "We always seem to focus at the higher-level Leadership Team but the next level of leaders I would probably say we've not given them that opportunity to be elevated." In this case, the gender-based policy did not apply across all levels, with a mismatch existing between the policy and its implementation.

While organizational policies promoted diversity, there was little focus on how to support women into leadership positions:

Maybe they need to start to publish how many women they have in the organization in a very non-traditional kind of area and how many of those are actually senior leaders commensurate to how many there are as men. You want to talk about data, how many people have they identified as future leaders in the organization and what are they doing to support them? (Jane, Trades).

Trades had also adopted zero tolerance toward behaviors that were considered biased toward any gender. Policies and procedures were in place to prevent this from occurring; there were also key performance indicators to ensure a gender balance in decision-making and ensuring that the workplace is more inclusive. Yet, as participants noted, gender bias was still a persistent factor within the industry.

The same issues were repeated within the Sports and Surgery sectors with women suggesting they were unaware of what policies were in place to ensure gender equity. If any existed, these had not "filtered" down to the operational level. As reinforced by Amelia (Sport):

... they have got a lot of quality procedures and documentation, how much of that is actually then filtered down to our section ... not much. I would not know if there were any specific strategies. I have not certainly seen any or thought that there has been any ...

However, not all women were unsuccessful in their leadership aspirations, Layla (Surgery) suggested that her organization "has done very well" in promoting women into leadership positions. She attributed this success to the organization having a woman "at the top."

3.1.1 | Quotas

Women expressed a range of conflicting opinions regarding the application of quotas for leadership positions. They felt that on one hand the quota system held no benefit for women, yet on the other, thought that perhaps it was the only way for them to obtain leadership positions, providing they were the "best person for the job" (Layla, Surgery). It was also suggested that the organizational culture needed to change to remove the necessity of quotas. Kerry (Trades) was optimistic that this may occur at some point in the future, "So I think you do need them when you don't just have a culture that's already diverse. I'd like to think that 1 day you wouldn't need them anymore but we're probably not there yet."

Participants also indicated that they felt that quotas singled women out for preferential treatment. In this case, if successful, promotion was not genuine, "So I think if ever there were specific recruitment opportunities that were female only, I do not think I would ever want to apply for that role because it would not feel like I entered genuinely" (Sophia, Sport). Another concern was that gendered quotas could set women up to fail. Elena (Surgery) suggested that when a woman was promoted because of her gender and not the skill set and fails in the management position, it then creates a difficult position for women to follow:

... let's just say a female is given a job because we need to fill the quota, and there were eight extremely competent well researched, core operating men and one dubious incompetent woman and then give

the job to the dubious incompetent woman who then goes and causes all sorts of surgical complications, and whatever. That does not help ... When a man could be doing the same job to a higher standard, or not to a bad standard. That thing gives women a bad name, and every subsequent woman who is then appointed, gets the "Oh well, she was just appointed because of the quota, she will be incompetent."

3.2 | Informal practices

While flexible work arrangements and parental leave fell under the purview of formal policies, informal norms and patterns undermined their intended purpose. Traditional caring notions and work patterns, such as assumptions of long hours and presenteeism, complicated women's decisions around when to have children. Women often grappled with the appropriate time to have children, and the impact this would have on their careers:

When you get into your 30s, like you are going to be around in two years, you are going to be round in four years or you are just going to go and have kids ... but as soon as you sort of hit that age bracket, I think you feel like people are looking at you differently, it is like are you are at that childbearing age? (Amelia, Sport).

If women decided to have children, they were often discouraged when attempting to take on leadership roles. One woman, for example, was told that it might be better "to wait until her children were older" (Alanna, Surgery) before pursuing leadership aspirations. Similar concerns were expressed by participants who did not have children. Women felt if they chose to have children they were perceived as not being committed or dedicated enough and were concerned that they would not be offered the same management level position upon return from family/parental leave.

Career advancement was also hindered by the perception that women were not interested in leadership positions because they had children. Elena (Surgery) suggested that having young children was equated with a lack of interest in leadership roles:

Other gender perceptions I guess, from some of our older colleagues. It can be 'well, she has got young children, she won't want to take that on' ... Yes, it is an assumption before they ask. Which I thought there are blokes who have got young children, so why is that any different? But look it is hard when you have a young child, to do this and I recognize it is harder for the mother of a young child to do some of these things, than it might be for a father in that society; to assume that we can't or don't want to without asking us first, is a bit rude. We should be given the choice.

For women who did not work traditional working hours, such as those in Sport or Surgery, the situation was a little more complex. These women faced the challenge of finding childcare that catered to their out of hour's needs: "Child-care is 9 to 5 but you do not work in the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job ... often we are working very early in the morning or late at night with athletes training" (Ivy, Sport).

3.2.1 | Unclear leadership pathways

Women across all three sectors commented that knowledge of pathways into leadership positions were unclear. Women discussed a range of key strategies to strengthen career pathways; these included the need for open communication; clear processes; managerial support; self-creating opportunities; and to feel supported when in a management role.

Often higher-level management positions were not advertised, and promotion for women rested on being “fortunate enough” to get a “tap on the shoulder.”

But how it is specifically done I really don't know. And I think certainly at my organization ... it is really the managers are the ones who may encourage and push you or give you a tap on the shoulder. But I don't know from the very top if that is specifically directed or encouraged (Alanna, Surgery).

Women often independently searched for programs directed at helping their career aspirations. Several women indicated that they had to seek external support or find ways to create their own opportunities. Sofia (Sport) explained how lack of career paths had led her to attempt to create her own opportunities, “there are none. There is no real pathway, not clear, not accessible. It is pretty much that if I find a way to make it happen myself, then potentially something can happen.” Other women suggested that managerial support from either a male or female in a higher position was essential in their career progression. In Trades, Danielle, who had been successful in moving through into leadership positions, indicated that without the help of her male manager, advancement would not have been possible. As far as Danielle was aware, there were no visible pathways; instead, advancement was reliant on a male manager to champion Danielle's career progression.

However, other women were not as fortunate as Danielle and experienced tokenistic management support. Such support worked to further exclude women from advancing in their organization with women perceiving that they do not necessarily “fit” the organization's criteria for career progression:

I think a program targeted at the development of women in leadership would be amazing, but I also think the people that make the decisions need to actually believe, engage and be part of that and show that women have a place in senior leadership in any program (Jane, Trades).

This lack of management support also extended to women feeling they were unsupported when they were successful in gaining a new role. Amelia (Sport) described being “thrown into” a new management position and felt that the expectations of the role were not clearly communicated. Similar frustrations were expressed in Trades and Surgery with Elena (Surgery) indicating that the organization suggested that the “medical education allowance” might be used to find a “coach” who could assist in the new role.

3.3 | Narratives and social interaction

In everyday social interactions, women indicated that they regularly encountered a dominant masculine culture which they felt stifled their career. This culture worked to exclude women from management positions through the lack of visible role models in key management positions. Women experienced intimidation, at times lacked confidence, and were reluctant to speak up, feeling that to do so would attract a negative response. Participants felt they had to develop an element of resilience to advance their own leadership ambitions.

The absence of visible women in key management positions made it difficult to pursue a related role with women believing that they had little opportunity to advance. As typified by Alana (Surgery), “I think the usual perception is that most head of units or managers are males.” Narratives of the successful male also undermined women's confidence in their abilities with male panels also working to intimidate them. Ivy (Sport) discussed how she felt regarding women meeting all the requirements of respective leadership job descriptions:

If we look at a job description, we do not kind of tick all the boxes. We think we are probably not ready for that yet whereas males probably think, “Oh I will tick a few of those, or I tick most of those so I will just go for it.” ... for females, we necessarily do not have the confidence to go for it ... obviously it

depends if it is in a male dominated industry where it is likely to be ... an all-male panel and ... maybe we just do not have the confidence to go for it.

Women also felt that despite their experience, they had to continue to prove themselves whenever they moved into a new management position. Kathy (Trades) explained how women had to exceed the performance of men to gain respect within the sector. She also suggested that men would search for “chinks in the armour” or an “Achilles heel” to indicate that a woman had been promoted beyond their capability. Other women indicated that each time they moved from one position into another they had to “earn respect again” (Ivy, Sport) despite previous employment successes. Layla described a similar situation in Surgery with women having to “earn their stripes” whenever they entered a new position. To an extent, Layla also played down this expectation, indicating that this occurred for anyone that was new. However, Layla also suggested that if there were more women in surgery, it would take less time for women to be “the same as the boys.”

Other women, particularly in Sport, faced working with male managers who had attempted to intimidate them to the point of overriding their leadership aspirations. Sophia (Sport) explained how potential leadership pathways had been denied by her manager who was unwilling to change perceptions of who progresses within the organization, “I have been saying to my manager that I want to be a leader. I want to go into more of a leadership role in probably 12–18 months and he has gone no way ...”

Women also suggested that they were reluctant to be vocal during social interactions, hence less able to challenge gendered hierarchies in organizations. Elena (Surgery) suggested that speaking up in meetings was “not particularly well looked upon.” This situation was repeated within the sport sector, where women who spoke up were seen as “bossy”, whereas a male was simply being strong in their convictions (Amelia, Sport). Ella (Trades) also discussed the difficulty with being heard or listened to in settings where there were both males and females.

To address this dominant masculine culture, participants recognized the need to develop a degree of confidence and resilience. This particularly related to following their leadership aspirations:

Look I think self-confidence is a big one and I think unfortunately the opinions of others, you just don't know what sort of environment you are walking into when you are applying for a job. So, some people will maybe not consider a woman you know, a female leader, and others maybe, so you've really just got to have the confidence to go in and I guess the resilience to keep trying (Kerry, Trades).

3.4 | Informal patterns: Unconscious bias and merit

Informal patterns of everyday expression worked to perpetuate gendered biases. Other issues such as merit and overt sexism created further complexity to seemingly neutral selection processes. Gender bias was experienced differentially across the participating organizations in the three sectors. Some women identified that gender bias was being addressed, others were uncertain whether it existed, and some women thought perhaps it had swung too far in the direction of favoring women. For example, several participants suggested that leadership opportunities should be based on merit rather than any sort of preferential treatment for women. Rather than allowing women to progress in the workplace, merit can also work to reinforce unconscious gender bias:

If you are capable and you deserve to be on it. From my point of view, it doesn't matter whether you are male or female, obviously they do not want any barriers that may stop women from doing it, but I don't know if there is any specific move to make a particular sort of committee, or gender balanced (Alanna, Surgery).

While the women indicated that the sectors had policies in place to prevent gender bias occurring, it still did not result in dismantling gender patterns that held women back. Several other participants noted, working with men who

had entrenched ideas about women's role presented an additional hurdle they had to overcome. Stella (Trades), for example, noted the difficulty working in an environment dominated by "90%–95% men who were also "10–15 years older." Stella was not alone in expressing frustration with intractable gender biases. The situation was similar in Surgery, and attempting to undo unconscious bias was a difficult undertaking, and as Elena explained seeking promotion could also attract the ire of male surgeons who were in higher managerial positions:

But you have got to establish that respect before you can even consider a leadership position. So, it is actually quite a struggle to even get to the point where you could be considered and also in doing that, you will then have to not earn the enmity ... Or the hostility of, anyone more senior than that, who is going to put an end to that promotion and in hospitals that is, unfortunately with the male surgeons sitting very high in the hierarchy, a real risk (Elena, Surgery).

The hostility Elena faced left her feeling that little could be done to change the status quo. Attempting to overcome the obstacles that Elena faced was a waste of time. However, the experience suggests that education on how to address discriminatory male behavior would be beneficial.

Participants also noted that it was not only men who fell under the purview of informal gendered patterns. Women also fell into its scope, "... it is not just those ingrained biases that are ingrained in men, they are also ingrained in females ... some of the females are probably even harsher critics" (Amelia, Sport). Several other women were uncertain how to respond to the question related to how their organization addresses gender bias. Jane (Trades) suggested that perhaps undoing gender bias now favored women, "I actually think we've had some bias toward some female in leadership roles."

4 | DISCUSSION

The four analytic categories of Ely and Meyerson (2000) formal policies and quotas; informal practices and unclear leadership pathways; narratives and social interactions; and informal patterns comprising unconscious bias and merit highlighted that across the three sectors, women encountered similar barriers. Our focus was not to gain an understanding of each sector, but to seek insights into commonalities 'across' sectors. As we have illustrated a broad range of gendered organizational power relations positioned women as outsiders (Foley, et al., 2022), and as a consequence, it was difficult for them to individually challenge the systemic norms that govern male-dominated workplaces. Drawing on the reframed intent of the bifocal approach (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) gave us insights into where organizational change might occur. In doing so begins to challenge the gendered social practices hindering women's career progression.

4.1 | Formal policies and quotas

Within formal policies, participants highlighted the disconnect between policy and its implementation across all levels of the organizations. As our participants often highlighted, the intention of policies was diluted, and those further down the management chain were unaware of their existence or felt no impact or change. Williamson and Colley (2018) also indicate that frequently the intention of policies does not filter down to lower levels of organizations. Women in the three sectors indicated that a mismatch existed between the intention of policies designed to assist them into leadership positions and their implementation. These findings reinforce the discrepancy between company policies and related impacts on challenging gender norms in organizations often due to entrenched informal masculine norms (Galea et al., 2015). Policies did not filter down through the various levels of the organizations, which left women questioning how they might advance their careers. This is an important finding as it highlights that

organizations are failing to provide women with information regarding how they can begin and continue with their leadership progression. Similar to Galea et al.'s (2015) results, we also argue that decades of gender equality initiatives from both government and business have not resulted in these sectors addressing gendered practices in organizations. As such, there is a need for a critical review of legislation and regulations in Government organizations such as Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) to ensure workplaces adhere with the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012. The degree of discriminatory practices and entrenched masculine culture that appears to persist in organizations implies that despite over a decade of legislation, inequalities remain. The census from WGEA (2021–22) indicates that leadership positions are still held predominantly by men and women's representation in leadership roles declines with seniority. Extending on this line of thought, we argue that gender biases persist and hinder the dissemination of organizational strategies ostensibly designed to assist women to progress through leadership positions. It is therefore crucial that career pathways become embedded in and part of formal policies and procedures and are made visible and accessible. Galea et al. (2015, p. 381) argue that when gender equality policies are linked to company values, they are more likely to "become entrenched and 'stick' over time."

The impact of government and business initiatives on affirmative action has also worked in negative ways with women feeling conflict regarding the implementation of quotas. Participants indicated that quotas singled them out for preferential treatment, and if they did advance, their promotion was questionable and not genuine. Women also suggested that quotas drew attention to them and in some ways set them up to fail. Women felt that there was a perception that they were being promoted because of their gender and not for their management skills. This can reinforce male privilege, does little to challenge the status quo, and in some cases, women face backlash if they fail to fit in with male standards of success (Galea & Chappell, 2021). Faniko et al. (2017) argue that senior women managers perpetuate notions of the unfairness of quotas, expecting younger women to endure the same sacrifices they have made in their career progression. While our findings are somewhat different, we argue that in reinforcing unconscious bias, women are perpetuating dominant masculine cultures. We suggest that education across organizations was required to ensure the gendered context of quotas and the ways that gendered power relations worked to limit women's actions were understood. While not passive in pursuing their leadership goals, women require organizational support to navigate their way through gendered structures. Similarities are echoed in Bridges et al.'s (2021) assertion that building women's resilience in male-dominated industries relies on employees (women) and organizations learning and enacting behaviors to create more inclusive cultures. While we support the argument that organizational policies need to be inclusive, our participants indicated that they lacked resilience and confidence. This suggests their belief in the need to take self-responsibility to professionally develop in order to change feelings of deficiency. We argue that changing discriminatory practices is the responsibility of the organization, and women should not have to self-learn behaviors so they can succeed in male-dominated organizations.

Suggestions for support from our participants indicated that formal policy intent needed to be matched by actual practices that were not merely tokenistic. In addition, while practices may be in place to enable women to advance through an organization, often the lack of visible women leaders meant that more visible men were potentially favored. Visibility and networking were important considerations in women's career advancement (Williamson & Colley, 2018). Formal policies can be embedded in the into organizations, to emphasize gender equality initiatives, including the visibility of women leaders.

4.2 | Informal practices and unclear leadership pathways

Like other research (Huppertz et al., 2018), informal work practices and norms resulted in women struggling with pressures associated with the "right" time to have children, fearing their career aspirations would be stymied. Women were also reluctant to take up flexible work arrangements including parental leave. One reason for this reluctance could be that when returning to work, women encounter resistance to the agreed arrangements (Bridges et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that women required organizational support to navigate informal

work patterns associated with the decision around having children, ensuring flexible work arrangements did not disadvantage them and instead assisted to create opportunities to advance. Our findings also indicate that there were gendered subtexts that hindered decisions around having children. Previous research, for example, identified that long hours, presenteeism, and perceptions of not being interested or committed to take on leadership positions were presented as hurdles that women had to overcome in order to progress (Baker & French, 2017; Galea et al., 2015; Williamson & Colley, 2018). Our findings support these assertions, and we argue along with Williamson and Colley (2018) that entrenched masculine cultures must be challenged in ways that allow women to have children and at the same time become leaders in their organizations. Through the potential change capacity of the executive leaders, these practices need to be continually challenged so that informal practices do not negate policies designed to assist women to advance.

Lack of clarity and accessibility of pathways meant that women felt they had to create their own career pathway with uncertainty plaguing women's career aspirations leaving them feeling excluded and frustrated. At other times, the support was perfunctory, particularly when women were promoted, and expectations within the new position were not effectively communicated. Some women were fortunate to have a manager or champion who had provided guidance and mentoring into career pathways. These findings are important as they indicate that uncertainty and unclear career pathways impact negatively on how women advance as leaders. Similar to Galea's et al. (2020) findings that men and women in the construction industry did not have the same access to opportunities and resources, we also suggest that women in male-dominated industries require both support and clear career pathways and processes to progress into leadership positions. We argue that mentoring, such as that provided by a manager or champion, provides important guidance for women to advance into leadership. As with the other analytic categories, we also suggest it is important that organizations assume responsibility to provide clear career pathways and mentoring opportunities.

4.3 | Narratives and social interactions

In everyday social interactions, women indicated that narratives were dominated by masculine cultures, which undermined their confidence and left them feeling intimidated and apprehensive about following their career aspirations. The absence of visible women in leadership roles reinforced the perception that management positions were the domain of men. This lack of 'fit' and assumptions surrounding men's capabilities also worked to hinder women's opportunities for advancement (Galea et al., 2020). Similar to previous research (e.g., Buse, et al., 2013; Clerc & Kels, 2013; Esser et al., 2018; Galea et al., 2020), when women moved into a new management position, they felt they had to either prove their worth or indeed exceed the performance of their male counterparts. As Galea et al. (2020) further argue, such work left women feeling undervalued and their opinion or voice overridden or diminished by dominant masculine cultures. Ely and Meyerson (2000) point out that who is permitted to speak and who listens can work to reinforce gendered power relations in organizations. Reframing these relations requires organizations to enforce policies directed at dismantling gendered logics and ensure these policies filter down through all levels. This would include education programs that address unconscious bias across the organization. As Williamson and Foley (2018, p. 357) note, a "staged, iterative approach" may over time address systemic gendered inequalities. We concur with this suggestion having found that women continually negotiate masculine cultures in their everyday interactions in their workplace. We suggest that creating transparent and gender equitable pathways along with highlighting stories of women's successes may assist them to feel more confident when seeking promotion and contest perceptions of who succeeds in organizations. Organizational support for women, such as mentoring, and challenging cultures that silence women would also help them feel confident in gendered workplaces. In a similar way to embedding career pathways into formal policies, so too must mentoring be framed as a policy initiative that also recognizes women's successes (Germain et al., 2012). "Bifocal" mentoring can assist with transformative change (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) through involving mentors who challenge the status quo while also guiding women through gendered environments.

4.4 | Informal patterns: Unconscious bias and merit

As our findings have illustrated, informal patterns of work reinforced unconscious gendered bias evident across a range of processes including selection and promotion, despite policies designed to prevent its occurrence. Unconscious bias was also entangled in merit and often perpetuated the status quo. Williamson and Colley (2018) note that merit and its assumptions of gender neutrality are problematic for women as they conceal gendered power relations in organizations. Often gender bias is perpetuated by men and women who think it no longer exists (Begeny et al., 2020). Within the present study, unconscious bias was insidious, and participants described how it was perpetuated by men and women. Gender bias in the workplace meant that women often felt they have to become like their male colleagues in order to succeed (Powell et al., 2009; Powell & Sang, 2015). Women who can endure working and progressing in a masculine environment can also perceive themselves as perhaps better than other women (Powell & Sang, 2015). As a consequence, they may perpetuate a work environment that is "hostile" toward women and reinforces gender discrimination (Powell et al., 2009, p. 426). In the present study, open hostility, overt discrimination, and sexism were expressions of bias that women found difficult to manage. The sense of discrimination was amplified by older men, who have been in the industry for some time, and employed the dominant male culture to intimidate and exclude women and signal that they will never be "one of the boys" (Foley et al., 2022, p. 1677). Williamson and Foley (2018) suggest that unconscious bias training must be accompanied by other measures, such as targets to increase the numbers of women in leadership roles in male-dominated sectors along with continuing multilevel workplace intervention. Given that women discussed the implications of other women perpetuating biases, any training should include all employees to negate its powerful effects. Senior men and women can play complementary roles to advance change, while also dismantling dominant masculine cultures (de Vries, 2015) that effect women and men. We argue that addressing unconscious bias must be approached through multilevel, multiphased interventions generated at an organizational level and more broadly across the sector in collaboration with national sector Associations.

Our empirical contribution has been to identify women leader's cross-sector insights into the inequalities encountered as they attempt to progress their leadership aspirations in male-dominated sectors. As our discussion has highlighted, women require support to navigate persistent masculine cultures and this support needs to be generated at an organizational level. These findings will go on to inform a targeted intervention that will focus on four key areas: creating accessible and visible career pathways, providing networking opportunities, offering mentoring prospects, and addressing unconscious bias. Embedding and sustaining practices will be led by Association and Organizational executive leaders, not by the women leaders themselves.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our organizational analysis (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) and bifocal approach (de Vries and van den Brink (2016) provided the tools to examine the gendered social practices in three organizations across three male-dominated sectors. Through the process of critique (Ely & Meyerson, 2000), we examined how women's leadership aspirations were impacted by organizational practices, which at times did not support or worked against them. Returning to our research questions, we identified a range of commonalities across sectors that women indicated created barriers to their leadership aspirations. These related to the lack of follow through on formal policies, which resulted in women being unaware of their existence. Across the sectors, informal practices undermined the equality intent of many policies. Narratives and social interaction and unconscious bias similarly worked to exclude women, and they felt they were constantly negotiating and butting up against a dominant masculine culture. Similar to previous research (Khilji & Pumroy, 2018), our study identified that women were not passive in their leadership aspirations and had attempted to equip themselves with tools and skills to progress their leadership ambitions. However, as our inquiry has highlighted, women struggled with negotiating entrenched gendered workplace practices. The degree to which women continued to be impacted by sexism and discrimination is reflected in their requests that their demographic details were not published, perhaps concerned of

potential backlash. Without organizational support, the focus remains on women attempting to initiate changes, often leaving them feeling as if they are the problem that requires “fixing.” As we have argued, it is important that these practices are challenged at an organizational level. In addition, our analysis also highlights the need to contest the connections between systemic, structural, and cultural dynamics that contribute to the gendering of organizations. The second phase of our project will aim to challenge these organizational practices via a strategic intervention. The intervention will focus on working with champions of change within organizations and member associations within male-dominated sectors to provide support to initiate practices and policies that encourage women to advance as leaders. Hence, our intention is to advance the bifocal approach (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016) by building the change agency of executive leaders through a supportive and informed Advisory Group. Without an understanding of these practices, it would be difficult to build the partnerships necessary to challenge gendered power relations. As “organizational insiders” (de Vries & van den Brink, 2016, p. 432, p. 432), the Advisory Group members are better placed to potentially initiate and sustain change. The Advisory Group will concentrate on the “how to” of initiating change, prompting the leaders from the three Organizations and three Associations to devise solutions, while also being guided by resources drawn from industry and academia.

Moving to the next phase of organizational change, narrative revision, and experimentation (Ely & Meyer-son, 2000), our intervention will focus on experimenting with practices, within the focus areas identified at the end of the discussion section, that can be embedded into organizations in ways that sustain change. We are hopeful that the results of this next stage may provide guidance to assist Organizations and Associations, in other male-dominated industries, to form Advisory Groups to advance women as leaders. If successful, the notion of the bifocal approach and “small wins” may be useful across these sectors, where the issues women face may “have shifted from overt to covert” (Khilji & Pumroy, 2018, p. 1048).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Professor Vasso Apostolopoulos is a renowned immunologist with translational research outcomes and development of drugs and vaccines. She has a keen interest in keeping the immune system healthy via physical activity in particular to prevent and manage chronic diseases, cancer, and mental health. Vasso is Victoria University's Vice-Chancellors Distinguished Professorial Fellow as a recognition of her outstanding contribution to research. Vasso is also the Patron of Food for Thought Network, which focuses on encouraging and supporting women in leadership roles and gender bias issues.

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