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# Empowering Women Through Education: Strategies for Leadership Development in Malaysia Towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

Sharmila Devi Ramachandaran , Tan Zu Yi , Lim Ming Joon ,  
Sukhmeet Kaur  and Fang Wen Jie   
INTI International University, Nilai, Malaysia

Urvesh Chaudery   
Gitarattan International Business School, Delhi, India

**Abstract.** This study aims to identify effective educational strategies to empower women for leadership roles in Malaysia's corporate sector and evaluate their impact on advancing gender equality (SDG 5) and quality education (SDG 4). Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research utilizes purposive and snowball sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with senior female executives in Malaysia, exploring their experiences and perceptions of educational strategies for leadership empowerment. The findings reveal six effective strategies: comprehensive leadership development programmes, mentorship from female leaders and coaching by business experts, gender diversity and inclusivity initiatives, networking and collaborative learning programmes, professional skill development workshops, and return-to-work programmes. However, due to geographical and work-related constraints, the study is limited by a small sample size of five participants. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights for empowering women and learning in organizations. The identified strategies provide practical direction for designing targeted learning programmes that address the unique challenges faced by women in the corporate sector, enhancing their leadership potential and contributing to the achievement of SDG 5 and SDG 4. The originality of this research in educational strategies lies in equipping women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary for leadership roles in Malaysia that contribute to academic literature and practical frameworks for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment; Educational Strategies; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Gender Equality; Learning Organization

## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development has been a cornerstone of Malaysia's national agenda since the 1970s, initiated by the New Economic Policy (NEP), which aimed to eradicate poverty and address societal imbalances as part of fostering national unity (Jomo, 2005). In 2015, Malaysia joined 192 other United Nations member states in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a global framework comprising 17 goals and 169 targets designed to address critical environmental, social, and economic challenges by 2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2023). Central to this agenda, Goal 5 underscores the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women, while Goal 4 emphasizes the provision of quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. These goals are interconnected, reflecting the necessity of education as a driver for gender equality and sustainable societal progress.

Although Malaysia has made significant progress in areas such as poverty, availability of health care, and quality of education, a significant gender gap remains, especially when it comes to women holding leadership positions in both the public and private sectors. Women, who constitute almost half of the population, are still underrepresented in decision-making positions due to dislodged societal norms and the heavy weight of institutions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The Global Gender Gap Report 2023 ranks Malaysia 102 out of 146 countries, with a Gender Gap Index score of 0.682, indicating significant disparities in economic participation and political empowerment despite high educational attainment among women (World Economic Forum, 2023). This progress has not translated into equitable leadership representation, exposing a critical gap in the nation's development trajectory.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has undermined this, setting back decades of global progress towards gender equality (United Nations, 2024). Current estimates suggest that it may take 300 years to achieve gender equality and 140 years for women to achieve equal leadership representation in the workplace (United Nations Women, 2022). The underlying realities underscore the urgency of addressing systemic barriers to women's leadership, particularly through targeted education strategies (Al-Naqbi & Aderibigbe, 2024; Alshdiefat et al., 2024; Parmaxi et al., 2024; Widiastuti et al., 2024). However, while existing research has expanded the study of barriers to gender equality, limited attention has been paid to actionable strategies and their effectiveness in empowering women to take on leadership roles, particularly in the context of Malaysia.

This study fills this critical gap by exploring how educational strategies can empower women to advance into leadership roles, aligning with Malaysia's commitments to SDG 4 and SDG 5. The research adopts a case study approach to capture the lived experiences of women leaders, providing qualitative insights into the effectiveness of these strategies within the Malaysian context. By examining the interplay between education, cultural norms, and institutional biases, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators.

In this context, the study's objectives are to evaluate the effectiveness of educational strategies in equipping women with the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary for leadership roles in Malaysia. It seeks to answer how women leaders perceive the impact of these strategies on their empowerment and leadership readiness. The research emphasizes the broader implications of women's leadership empowerment, which extends beyond eliminating gender disparities to fostering societal transformation, economic growth, and sustainable development. Addressing these dimensions is essential for Malaysia to achieve its 2030 Agenda commitments and realize the transformative potential of SDG 4 and SDG 5.

### **1.1 Research Question**

This study addresses the following research question: How can educational strategies effectively empower women in Malaysia to assume leadership roles, contributing to the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5?

This inquiry focuses on assessing the efficacy of educational initiatives aimed at empowering women by looking at how they affect women's capacity for leadership, skills development, and general empowerment. This study will shed light on how education, cultural norms, and institutional biases interact to determine how effective targeted educational strategies might be in reducing the gender leadership gap in Malaysia. The study also aims to evaluate how women leaders view education's influence on their leadership paths and whether these tactics support sustainable development and societal change.

The results of this study will aid in the creation of evidence-based suggestions for educators and legislators, providing tactics to increase the representation of women in leadership positions in a range of Malaysian industries. The study intends to promote wider societal change by emphasizing education as a crucial enabler, which is consistent with the nation's SDG commitments and advances long-term gender equality objectives.

### **1.2 Rationale of study**

By concentrating on educational approaches that can successfully enable women to take on leadership roles, particularly in the Malaysian context, this study seeks to fill the gap. Although the obstacles preventing women from assuming leadership roles have been extensively studied, little research has been done on the useful, focused educational approaches that can give women the abilities, know-how, and self-assurance they need to overcome these obstacles.

Additionally, the study supports Malaysia's efforts to fulfil Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5, which place a strong emphasis on gender equality and high-quality education. In order to provide evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers alike, this study will shed light on the interactions among cultural norms, institutional structures, and educational initiatives. The study's justification is the pressing need to give women the skills they need to take on leadership roles and to advance gender equality as a means of igniting larger social change and sustainable growth.

In line with Malaysia's commitments to SDGs 4 and 5, this study closes this crucial gap by examining how educational strategies can enable women to progress into leadership roles. In order to document the lived experiences of female leaders and offer qualitative insights into the efficacy of these tactics in the Malaysian context, the research uses a case study methodology. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers by analysing the interaction of education, cultural norms, and institutional biases.

In this regard, the study aims to assess how well educational approaches give women in Malaysia the abilities, know-how, and self-assurance required for leadership positions. It aims to address how female leaders view the influence of these tactics on their leadership readiness and empowerment. The study highlights the wider effects of women's leadership empowerment, which go beyond eradicating gender inequality to promote economic expansion, social change, and sustainable development. In order to fulfil its commitments under the 2030 Agenda and realize the transformative potential of SDGs 4 and 5, Malaysia must address these dimensions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Human Capital Theory**

Human Capital Theory is a theory that stresses the significance of educating women for leadership positions. It suggests that people can enhance their performance in production and accelerate economic growth rate through learning, skills, and capacities (Moodie & Wheelahan, 2023). Educational investment is seen as enhancing human capital, which is fundamental not only for personal economic success but also for the country's economic development. Human Capital Theory regards women's education as an essential investment that can generate high returns for the individual women and their families and for their communities, too. Educating women produces a wide range of favorable consequences, including lower child mortality, better family health, economic advantages, and general social progress (Stromquist, 2022). In the field of leadership, educated women bring diverse thoughts and leadership styles to problem-solving, and generally contribute to more innovative and effective governance and management of organizations. This could be realized through the creation of specific leadership training and mentorship platforms for women. Also, it is desirable to adopt policies that support gender diversity in leadership roles across society sectors (Anderson, 2024). The application of the theory in education reform and in the training of women leaders includes understanding the connected challenges of women due to gender bias, and the main economic factors that justify investment in women education.

### **2.2 Sustainable Development Goals**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global agenda, accepted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, consisting of 17 interconnected goals which serve as the international "*blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all*" by 2030 (Institutional Planning and Analytics Office, 2022). These objectives deal with the present global challenges, namely, poverty, inequality,

climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. To be more particular, SDG 4 and SDG 5 concentrate on education and gender equality, respectively. SDG 4 seeks to "*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and provide lifelong opportunities for all to learn*" (Institutional Planning and Analytics Office, 2022). That goal reaffirms the significance of quality education access as a fundamental human right and as the basis for the betterment of people's lives and sustainable development. Under this goal, activities are designed to remove disparities and deliver high-quality primary and secondary education to all children and enhance accessibility to vocational training and post-secondary education. The SDG 5, on the other side, is devoted to the attainment of "gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls" (Tonegawa, 2022). Therefore, achieving gender equality is imperative not only on moral grounds, but also as an essential prerequisite of a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. The goal of SDG 5 is to put an end discrimination and violence against women and girls, to abolish harmful practices like child marriage, early or forced marriage and to provide equal chances in leadership and decision-making in all sectors of society.

### **2.3 Significance of Women in Corporate Leadership**

The position of women in senior leadership in an organization should not be undervalued; women in these roles have been reported to have a positive impact on the organization and the society. Martínez-Jiménez et al. (2021) established that gender diversity in leadership and organizational performance is significantly positive. A specific case is McKinsey & Company's in-depth research which reveal that the companies within the top quartile for gender diversity in executive teams are 21% more probable to lead in profitability and 27% more likely to overperform in value creation (Green & Hand, 2024). Placing women in leadership enhances other advantages besides financial performance. Women leaders bring new ideas and techniques, thus the reinforcing the components that build good decision-making.

Women usually tend to be more participative and involved, characteristics that, in the end, bring to light employee satisfaction and job stability. Another important aspect of female leaders is that they become role-models for other women and girls who, through them, may learn and desire to emulate what they see them do. Additionally, other women leaders propagate corporate social responsibility, especially in environmental conservation, the wellbeing of the society and good governance. This participation is key to opening the door to a multifaceted and holistic approach to this problem, which correlates with the emerging consumers and society's desires to have ethical businesses. Women not only have to deal with the KPIs of the companies but are also responsible for making this world more equitable and sustainable.

### **2.4 Educational Strategies Towards Empowering Women in Leadership**

#### *2.4.1 Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Curriculum*

A gender-sensitive curriculum that is all-inclusive and empowers women is a fundamental tool for achieving gender equality in education. This syllabus must be well-rounded and illustrate the successes of women from different areas as diverse role-models, showing that leadership and achievement can be attained

by both genders (Agbevanu et al., 2021). Through the stories of women who have succeeded in science, politics, business, and other areas, the curriculum can motivate young women to pursue their dreams boldly. More closely, incorporating gender studies and the topics of gender equality into the educational content will contribute to the deconstruction of stereotypes and gender biases. Educators can use their discussions in such a way that the girls and the boys understand the importance of gender equality and support each other in their ambitions. This strategy not only boosts the confidence and capability of teenage girls, but also moulds the thinking of other students from the very beginning (Mohanan, 2021). Promoting both genders to value and fight for equality will build a conducive environment where gender equality will be honoured and advanced at all levels of society.

#### *2.4.2 Leadership Development Programmes*

The role of gender-specific leadership development programmes cannot be overstated as they are the tools which equip women to hold leadership positions. These programmes, integrated in higher education institutions and professional settings, target strategic decision-making, negotiation skills, public speaking, and team management, which are the key areas. The programmes give workshops, seminars, and mentorship opportunities. Therefore, women gain practical experience and valuable guidance from established leaders (Agbevanu et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the university-corporate collaboration can be a game changer in the success of these initiatives. These cooperative actions are made complete when women-specific training programmes that provide customized help for women are developed. These programmes help the development of skills that are necessary, besides the networks of support and mentorship which are crucial for career development. In essence, these programmes play a crucial part in generating a pipeline of qualified women leaders, eventually promoting gender diversity and equality by enabling the presence of women in leadership roles in different sectors.

#### *2.4.3 Mentorship, Sponsorship and Networking Initiatives*

Mentorship and sponsorship programmes are crucial for women's professional development, providing them with the necessary help and opportunities to move up the ladder. Mentorship programmes provide a venue for the emerging women leaders to engage with knowledgeable mentors who give advice, share experiences, and network on their behalf (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). This is obtained through the relationships where they can learn ways of overcoming challenges, acquire self-confidence and develop leadership capabilities. Sponsorship is the second side of the female's coin. Capable and influential leaders who recognise women employees' potential and competency actively support these women's growth by creating work opportunities, showcasing their achievements, and connecting them with valuable networks. Therefore structured mentorship programmes and sponsorship programmes are essential within Malaysian educational institutions and workplaces (Mohamed Yunos et al., 2021). The mentorship and sponsorship process by female leaders may reduce the distance between what women are capable of and what they achieve. They give space for diversity and inclusivity and help the organization achieve sustainable development.

#### *2.4.4 STEM Education Initiatives*

Women inclusion in STEM education is a key feature of gender equality processes that provide them with leadership positions in high-end employment. The gender gap in education is still widening in Malaysia, just as it is in most other countries all over the world (Karunagharan, 2023). To bridge this gender gap, Malaysia can take initiatives such as scholarship opportunities, contests and STEM courses specifically tailored for girls and women. These projects attempt to achieve enthusiasm and self-confidence to pursue STEM careers by involving experimental work, providing mentorship opportunities, and meeting female STEM role-models. Through coding boot camps, science clubs, and engineering workshops, girls can explore STEM subjects in an enjoyable and lively way (Essig et al., 2020). Eliminating barriers and building a culture of inclusivity in STEM education can open more space for women to take top positions in innovative sectors that promote creativity, economic development and sustainability.

#### *2.4.5 Lifelong Learning and Career Development*

Encouraging a lifelong education and continuous job development is a critical issue for empowering women to lead in a successful manner. Educational institutions, workplaces and various other organizations provide ongoing training and upskilling programmes designed to help women. The possibilities are of advanced degree programmes, specialized certifications as well as professional development courses that improve leadership abilities and keep women aware of trends in their field. Building a culture of continuing improvement and learning helps women become anywhere in dynamic and complex jobs. Lifelong learning is not only useful for the acquisition of professional skills but also contributes to the development of adaptability, persistence, and innovativeness, all important features for effective leadership (Carvajal et al., 2023). In addition to the availability of ongoing training and development programmes, women may also be able to achieve their full leadership potential at all stages of their career, giving rise to greater gender diversity and more representation in leadership positions in various sectors of Malaysian society.

### **2.5 Temporal and Social Contexts of Women's Experiences in the Corporate Sector**

The sociocultural and economic environments in which women work significantly influence their experiences in leadership positions in the corporate sector, alongside their personal abilities, opportunities, and education. The organizational environment is equally significant, as managerial practices, workplace cultures, and institutional policies can either support or impede women's career advancement (Abdullah & Ismail, 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). Significant shifts in Malaysia's economic structure, cultural norms, and societal expectations have occurred over time, and these changes have impacted women's career paths. The opportunities and difficulties faced by women in leadership positions evolve as the nation continues to modernize and integrate into the global economy.

Although women's access to leadership roles may have been restricted in previous decades, recent changes in governmental regulations and public perceptions of gender equality are opening the door to a more welcoming workplace (Yusoff & Ramin, 2013). Nevertheless, these shifts frequently occur unevenly across various sectors, institutions, and geographical areas. For instance, the economic boom's increase in the number of women in the workforce has resulted in improved female representation in industries like retail, healthcare, and education, but other industries, like engineering and technology, continue to have lower levels of female leadership (Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development [MWFCD], 2022). These patterns often stem not only from sectoral differences but also from the presence—or absence—of supportive organizational policies and practices, such as mentorship programmes, leadership development initiatives, and flexible work arrangements (Ramli et al., 2023; Kaur & Singh, 2020).

Furthermore, women's career paths are still greatly influenced by sociocultural elements like traditional gender roles and family obligations (Ahmad et al., 2021). Given Malaysia's multicultural society, it is crucial to take into account the cultural distinctions among different groups in order to comprehend the opportunities and difficulties faced by women in leadership roles. If these cultural factors are left out, the results could be constrained and insufficiently inclusive. Specifically, women's career paths and leadership opportunities are greatly impacted by the intersectionality of ethnic identities, religious beliefs, and cultural values. A more thorough understanding of the difficulties faced by women from various cultural backgrounds in the multicultural Malaysian context will help to clarify the barriers they face, and the tactics required to effectively empower them in the corporate sector. Although more progressive gender equality initiatives have been made possible by cultural shifts in Malaysia, women's advancement into leadership positions is frequently influenced by the difficult balancing act between family expectations and professional aspirations (Kaur & Singh, 2020).

It is crucial to understand that women's leadership experiences are dynamic. The environment for female leadership in Malaysia is changing along with the country's cultural and economic changes, bringing with it both opportunities and challenges (Ramli et al., 2023). It is imperative to investigate how particular organizational policies, work environments, and managerial practices impact women's empowerment and leadership opportunities in order to support recommendations for empowering women in the corporate sector. When creating policies and interventions targeted at empowering women in the corporate sector, these temporal and social dimensions must be taken into account because they are essential to comprehending the larger context in which women navigate their professional lives.

## **2.6 Gender Gaps and Leadership Challenges: A Balanced Perspective**

It is essential to emphasize the advancements made in recent years, even though women still encounter obstacles in leadership roles, such as unconscious bias, cultural norms, and a lack of representation in senior positions. The number of



women in senior positions has steadily increased as a result of gender equality policies, such as gender quotas in Malaysia's corporate sector. For example, the 30% Club has quantifiably increased the number of women on corporate boards and promotes a gender-diverse leadership pipeline.

The obstacles women encounter in leadership roles include societal norms that frequently place an excessive amount of responsibility for unpaid domestic work on women, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and restricted access to networks. According to research, one major barrier to women's advancement in leadership roles is unconscious bias in hiring and promotion practices (Green & Hand, 2024). Strategies like affinity groups, bias training for leadership teams, and flexible work policies are essential to removing these institutional barriers. It has been demonstrated that these programmes help women progress in business environments by fostering work-life balance and career advancement.

### **2.7 The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Malaysia**

Women have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made gender inequality worse, especially when it comes to access to education and economic participation. Many women experienced higher levels of stress and burnout as a result of having to juggle more household chores and professional obligations during the lockdown. According to a recent study conducted by the Institute of Public Policy (IPP) Malaysia, almost 70% of women said that the pandemic significantly increased their household responsibilities, which had a detrimental impact on their ability to balance work and life and advance in their careers.

The pandemic also exacerbated already existing issues in the education sector, as a lack of resources made it difficult for many students, especially those in rural areas, to access online learning. Women, who are more likely to be the primary caregivers, frequently found it difficult to balance their work obligations with their children's remote learning. According to a UN Women's Report from 2021, the disruption brought on by COVID-19 affected women's leadership opportunities as well as gender disparities in education, as many were compelled to take on roles that impeded their ability to advance in their careers.

However, the pandemic also offered a chance for reform. Numerous companies adopted digital tools and flexible work schedules that might help advance gender equality in the future. In order to ensure that women are not left behind in the post-pandemic world, it is imperative that such COVID-19 recovery plans go forward with provisions for assisting women's leadership development, employment, and education.

### **3. Method**

For this study on women's empowerment through educational strategies in the Malaysia corporate sector, the research setting focuses on women leaders from various corporate organisations in Malaysia. This multifaceted research environment is essential to examine the gender disparity and women's

empowerment, providing effective educational strategies to promote equality and empowerment within Malaysia's corporate sector.

### **3.1 Research Design**

Using Yin's (2017) framework for case study research as a foundation, this methodology makes it possible to conduct an in-depth investigation of complicated phenomena within the contexts in which they occur in real life. The purpose of this research is to reveal emerging patterns of collaboration and value creation among multiple data. This research follows the perspective of Rashid et al. (2019), which highlights the importance of theory testing. The data and the informants were investigated in their natural environments to uncover the underlying processes and relational dynamics. The discussion was based on thorough interview, observation, documentation, and interpretation of empirical evidence.

This study provides a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of women leaders in Malaysia's corporate sector. The case study design is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of complex phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2017). Semi-structured interviews form the primary method of data collection, offering flexibility to explore participant perspectives while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. Unlike the previously stated phenomenology approach, a case study method ensures broader applicability and mitigates biases by incorporating multiple cases across industries. The research also applies an inductive approach for data analysis, aligning with the grounded theory principles to systematically generate insights from the collected data (Charmaz, 2014). This enhances the robustness of findings by anchoring them in participants' narratives and theoretical frameworks.

### **3.2 Participant Selection**

This study utilized an integration of purposive sampling methods to select research participants. Firstly, potential participants were identified who best fitted the research interest, namely department heads and senior female executives with more than 10 years' experience in people-management roles. Based on their career and leadership experiences, these individuals are assumed to have a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by female professionals and are therefore able to provide context-rich evidence on workplace gender equity, women empowerment and educational strategies in Malaysia's corporate sector. After that, the snowball sampling approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and to expand the participant pool (Marcus et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2020). As the researcher had limited personal access to women leaders in various corporate organizations and industries, the study needed to rely on initial participant to recommend new participants who met the study's criteria and could provide valuable insights into the research focus.

To begin the process of participant selection for the study, the researcher used personal connection with female professionals in various organizations that most closely matched the targeted population. The first step of participant

selection involved identifying the existing female acquaintances with their current job positions through social media platforms, including LinkedIn and Facebook. Six (6) female individuals were identified with diverse professional backgrounds, including two (2) from the Accounting field, two (2) from the Banking field, one (1) from Information Technology (IT) and one (1) from Human Resources (HR). These individuals were contacted through phone conversations and platform mailbox to explain the study's purpose and seek their consent for research participation. Among these contacted individuals, only two agreed to the interviews and recommended other potential participants to the researchers, making a total of five (5) participants who contributed to this study. Upon obtaining the list of potential participants, the researcher approached the potential individuals with general personal questions, such as gender, age and professional experience to ensure their relevance to the study focus. Once research relevance was confirmed, the researcher scheduled personal interviews with the participants, depending on their geographical locations and availability.

The sample size of five participants is appropriate for this study, considering the qualitative nature of the research. Research by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggests that data saturation in which when no new insights are emerging, can often be reached with as few as 5-10 participants. Moreover, Creswell (2013) highlights that qualitative research aims to explore in-depth, context-driven experiences rather than achieving statistical representation. The five women selected for this study hold senior leadership roles and possess extensive professional experience, which provides rich, valuable insights into the research topic. Therefore, while the sample size is small, it is well-suited to the aims and scope of this qualitative investigation.

### **3.3 Research Instrument and Validity Procedures**

The interview schedule for this study was developed based on a comprehensive literature review and was pre-tested through expert evaluation. The questions were designed to elicit participants' insights into the challenges, opportunities, and educational strategies for women's empowerment in the corporate sector.

#### **Reliability of data**

Before data collection, the reliability of the interview guide was established through a two-step process. At first, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in the field of women empowerment and qualitative research. These experts evaluated the clarity, relevance, and consistency of the questions. Their feedback was used to refine the questions and ensure that they effectively addressed the research objectives. This was followed by a pilot test that was conducted with a participant who matched the study's criteria. This helped to identify any issues related to question clarity, wording, and flow. The feedback from the pilot test was used to revise and improve the interview guide before it was used for actual data collection.

During data collection, a standardized interview protocol was used. All interviews were conducted using a consistent set of questions which ensured that each participant was asked the same questions, so facilitating comparability

across interviews. Regular notes were prepared during and after each interview to reflect on potential biases, challenges, and issues that arose. This self-reflection allowed the researcher to identify any inconsistencies and adjust the interview process as necessary to maintain reliability.

After data collection, the reliability of the analysis was achieved through the following steps of independent coding: to ensure the reliability of the data analysis, an independent coder was hired to analyse the interview transcripts. The coder was given detailed coding instructions to ensure consistency in the coding process. A reliability check was performed by comparing the coding results from the independent coder with those from the primary researcher. The agreement rate was calculated, and a 90% agreement rate was achieved, indicating strong consistency in the coding process.

By following these three stages, the study ensured the reliability of the interview guide, the data collection process, and the analysis, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing to accommodate participants' availability and geographic constraints. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The questions were carefully developed based on the research objectives, focusing on themes relevant to the participants' leadership experiences. These questions were designed to capture both the technical and soft skills essential for leadership development and were refined through pilot testing to ensure clarity and relevance to the participants' real-world experiences. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed for the exploration of emerging themes, ensuring that the questions remained adaptable to reflect individual experiences.

While the study sought to explore the impact of leadership development programmes across diverse sectors and frameworks, the chosen methodological approach primarily focused on corporate organizations. This procedural scope, though effective for in-depth insights, may have limited the broader applicability of findings. Further exploration using a mixed-method or larger-scale design could better address the objectives comprehensively.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

More information on the ethical standards governing the research methodology will be supplied to ensure participant rights and privacy concerns. Although the study guarantees adherence to ethical standards, it is crucial to make clear the precise steps taken to protect participants' privacy and comfort during the data collection procedure.

Personal identifiers and other sensitive information gathered during the interviews were kept safely in a password-protected database. Each participant was given a code, which anonymized the data and made sure that no personally identifiable information was connected to the answers. Additionally, no

identifying information was included in the transcription of any audio recordings, and any identifiable information was eliminated during analysis.

Prior to the interview, participants received information about their rights, including the freedom to leave the study at any time without incurring penalties. Additionally, they were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that it would not affect their professional status or their relationships with the research team. In order to further guarantee the comfort and security of the participants, there were established channels for reporting any issues or infractions. Participants were encouraged to raise any concerns they had about their involvement in the study and were provided with the contact details of a designated ethics officer.

In order to ensure that their answers were appropriately recorded and that they were comfortable with the information shared, participants were also given the chance to examine and approve their interview transcripts. This procedure reaffirmed the study's dedication to upholding participant rights, privacy, and ethical standards.

### **Question Formulation and Selection Criteria**

The semi-structured interview questions were thoughtfully designed to support the study's main goal of examining women's experiences in leadership development programmes, especially in light of Malaysia's educational initiatives aimed at accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A careful analysis of the body of research on gender equality, women's leadership development, and the SDGs guided the formulation process, guaranteeing that the questions were thorough and representative of the main ideas of the study.

### **Formulation Process:**

1. **Literature Review:** To lay the theoretical groundwork for the study, a thorough analysis of pertinent scholarly works on women's empowerment, leadership development, and the SDGs was carried out. Questions that specifically address these issues were developed with the help of this review, which brought to light the opportunities and difficulties faced by women in leadership positions.
2. **Expert Consultation:** To confirm the questions' applicability and clarity, specialists in the domains of gender equality, leadership development, and SDGs were consulted. Their input ensured that the questions not only represented the goals of the study but also included the range of viewpoints required to thoroughly examine women's experiences in leadership development initiatives.
3. **Pilot Testing:** A small group of participants who had traits in common with the study's target sample were interviewed in a pilot study. Any ambiguities or unclear items could be found during this pilot phase, and the questions were modified to increase their relevance and clarity, based on the input received.

### **Selection Criteria for Questions**

With an emphasis on comprehending the effects of leadership development programmes on women, the obstacles they encounter, and the function of educational strategies in fostering leadership within the framework of the SDGs, every interview question was thoughtfully constructed to directly address the study's research objectives. In order to ensure that they captured a range of viewpoints from participants with different backgrounds and levels of experience, the questions were created to be inclusive. This inclusiveness made it possible to ensure that a wide variety of experiences was represented in the data gathered.

In order to guarantee accuracy and clarity, the language of the questions was simple and easy to understand, avoiding technical or complicated terms that could cause misunderstandings. Thanks to this method, participants were able to express their ideas and experiences clearly and completely. The questions were primarily open-ended to promote thoughtful and in-depth responses, highlighting the significance of participant experience and facilitating the emergence of themes that were directly related to the study's goals.

Throughout the interview process, the questions were continuously reviewed and improved to further guarantee the thoroughness and applicability of the data. As participants shared their experiences, the semi-structured interview format allowed for the flexibility needed to explore emerging themes. A nuanced understanding of the difficulties faced by women in leadership positions and the efficacy of leadership development programmes was made possible by this dynamic process, which also made sure that the data gathered was rich, thorough, and closely related to the objectives of the study.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was employed to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. This process included familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Codes were derived inductively to ensure findings were grounded in participants' experiences, and thematic development was complemented by phenomenological principles (Colaizzi, 1978; van Manen, 1990).

To enhance reliability, the coding process was reviewed independently by multiple researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Triangulation with existing leadership and empowerment frameworks, such as transformational and authentic leadership theories, ensured contextual relevance and interpretive depth.

The analysis involved the following steps:

1. **Familiarization with Data:** Interview transcripts were read and re-read to immerse the researchers in participants' lived experiences, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the data.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** An inductive approach was used to highlight significant statements and create codes that reflected recurring patterns and key insights.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on their relevance to the research questions, capturing both shared and unique aspects of participants' experiences.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were refined and cross-validated for coherence and distinctiveness, with independent researchers reviewing the process to enhance reliability.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Final themes were defined and aligned with participants' lived experiences, ensuring authenticity through phenomenological methods.
6. **Producing the Report:** The themes were contextualized within broader literature on leadership and empowerment to enhance the findings' interpretive depth (Northouse, 2022; Sheherazade et al., 2022).

To maintain rigour, peer debriefing, member-checking with participants, and the use of reflexive journals were employed. These steps ensured that the analysis process was transparent and the interpretations remained true to the data, capturing the complexities of women's leadership development experiences.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews conducted with five participants revealed six key themes related to educational strategies and women's empowerment in leadership roles within Malaysia's corporate sector. Key findings of the interviews are presented in response to the research object of this study. The following are the six themes identified:

##### 4.1 Comprehensive Leadership Development Programme

The significance of a thorough leadership development programme for improving women's leadership abilities was a major theme that the respondents underlined. The respondents emphasized the importance of frameworks, simulations, and structured leadership training in preparing women for leadership positions in intricate corporate settings. They proposed that cross-functional work experiences, senior management coaching, and customized action plans are essential components that enable women to confidently assume leadership roles. For example, one respondent mentioned:

*Leadership training programmes has [sic] a significant impact on my ability to take on and fulfil leadership roles. It helps me to develop important soft skills, build confidence and overcome the challenges associated with being a woman in a leadership position. (Respondent 1)*

On top of that, cross-functional working experiences and business case simulation allow women to think outside of the box beyond their regular job task perspective, expanding to more holistic viewpoints that consider the broader organizational impact. These viewpoints further enhance their critical thinking and decision-making capabilities, empowering women to challenge the status quo and take on leadership roles with greater confidence and competence. For example respondents 2, 4 and 5 mentioned:

*Through leadership and workshops mainly focusing on leadership skills and project management, have help[ed] me gain my confidence when tak[ing] up leadership role. People management requires skills and knowledge that are different from normal audit tasks; it requires communication skills, ability to sympathy with others, solve internal conflict and the capability to motivate and guide your team members. (Respondent 2)*

*Cross functional experiences and leadership simulations, including role-playing, tackle the specific challenges encountered by women by offering them opportunities to develop a variety of skills, enhance their visibility and refine essential leadership competencies within a nurturing environment. Also, my suggestion is to provide customised specific leadership training for women that addresses unique challenges they may have [to] face. (Respondent 4)*

*My company continuously develop[s] and grow[s] the people because they believe people are the cornerstone of our success, especially for leadership role. The company provides support for leadership through two strategies which are (1) leadership framework that offers insight into leadership values, responsibilities, and competencies; and (2) a comprehensive leadership development programme that blend[s] learning initiatives into modular setup to personalise women's career growth journey, integrate real-world business scenarios simulations and discussions to accelerate their leadership capabilities. (Respondent 5)*

Baker et al. (2020) postulate that on-the-job experiences and social cognitive learnings through observation and interaction in workplace have a bigger impact on women's leadership development than formal education. This highlights the importance of a comprehensive, work-sponsored leadership development programme which has high relevance to overall organizational needs and allows for well-structured and pertinent leadership learning. Nakamura et al., (2022) highlighted that empowering women to take up leadership role requires proper, tailored leadership programmes that address the specific needs of women by recognising the gendered nature of leadership and the societal and organisational challenges women often face. Moreover, this programme needs to include evaluation mechanisms to ensure its effectiveness in enhancing the leadership areas for women.

#### **4.2 Mentorship from Female Leaders and Coaching from Business Experts**

Respondents highlighted the importance of having mentorship and coaching programmes with senior female management for women's career advancement. These programmes allow experienced senior female executives to provide personalized guidance, mental support, and role modeling to empower the younger generation to take up leadership roles. These relationships help to navigate challenges, build confidence, and develop essential skills for both professional and personal growth as women. Two participants shared:



*One of the memorable approaches that I have found particularly effective is the mentoring programme, which pairs female managers with senior executives. This programme has given me valuable guidance and support from a woman's perspective. However, I would like to see more personalised coaching and mentoring programmes that cater to individual needs and goals. (Respondent 1)*

*Establish[ing] mentorship programmes for women aspiring to be in leadership would be good, because it allows the junior female officers to seek guidance and support from senior management which may be through more difficult events in both professional and personal lives, such as work relocation, office discrimination, marriage commitment, work impact due to pregnancy and more. (Respondent 3)*

Another respondent highlighted that coaching from a professional business coach is particularly important as this offers an external and objective perspective that complements the internal insights from senior female managers. A business coach helps the individual to discover and identify their personal leadership styles and drives, while senior managers tend to teach their own leadership style to the juniors.

*The latest initiative launched by the company is the coaching programme via CoachHub. It is a six-month programme with a digital, one-on-one coaching journey with an experienced business coach to enhance precisely the skills considered to be most relevant for growing. This is very empowering as senior management acts as a mentor; they use their experience to guide you. While this is not what we want as we believe everyone has their own working and leadership styles, business coach comes into the picture as they listen to you and bring the best out of you. (Respondent 5)*

Women-to-women mentorship has a substantial, positive long-term impact on women empowerment in the corporate sector; female leaders provide both technical and emotional support that is uniquely suited to address the challenges faced by women (Jones & Smith, 2022; Sheherazade et al., 2022). Through their experiences, female leaders have a better understanding of the gender-specific challenges, such as workplace discrimination and work-life balance issues, thus enabling them to provide career guidance and a safe space for mentees' professional development, and creating an endless cycle of empowerment and leadership development (Appie et al., 2020; Blaess et al., 2020). Having female role-models in the workplace allows women to feel inspired and motivated to pursue their career success.

The integration of professional coaching from external experts allows the individual to identify and address the challenges that traditional mentorship may not, especially in personal growth and self-awareness (Malicay, 2023). Compared to mentoring, coaching is a more client-centred and structured approach which focuses on helping individuals to develop their professional competence by providing individualised feedback and strategic guidance (Ahn

& Ziedonis, 2019; Grant, 2020). The combination of mentorship from female leaders with coaching from external business coaches can create a more comprehensive and effective leadership development programme for women.

### **4.3 Empowerment, Gender Diversity and Inclusivity Initiatives**

The respondents emphasized the importance of organizational initiatives focused on empowerment (Lara et al., 2021), gender diversity (Green & Hand, 2024) and inclusivity to create a supportive work environment where women feel valued and included (Jones & Smith, 2022). These initiatives help women to eradicate their personal mental barriers, promote equal opportunities and foster a work environment and culture of respect and equality (Parmaxi et al., 2024). These initiatives encourage diverse perspectives and voices, empower women to overcome workplace barriers and thus increase job satisfaction, productivity and overall organizational success. A few of the respondents highlighted their opinions as below:

*Empowerment workshops on gender diversity are effective in overcoming the challenges faced by women in leadership positions, such as unconscious bias, stereotyping and work-life balance. However, I believe there is still room for improvement, especially when it comes to the intersection of gender and other social identities. I would recommend soft-skill training on assertiveness and self-assertion would help women overcome prejudices and stereotypes. (Respondent 1)*

*Flexible work arrangement, diversity and inclusion training, together with supportive policies and benefits have been particularly effective in empowering women in my workplace. (Respondent 2)*

*[An] Awareness programme on unconscious workplace bias and stereotype is important to support women's career advancement and address challenges on implementing effective education strategies in the corporate sector. Equal opportunities should be given to women to increase their visibility to the management. (Respondent 3)*

*We have an online platforms called "Ladies OWN IT!", it is a platform that enables and supports women in the company in growing professionally and personally by encouraging discussions around gender diversity, women leadership, biases, etc. It allows the women users to exchange ideas and take careful steps to advance along the leadership ladder. (Respondent 4)*

*Another initiative is the self-awareness workshop which empower[s] women by helping them to gain a deeper understanding of their personal strengths, weaknesses, values and emotional triggers. This is important as, through my talent recruitment journey, women tend to be less aggressive when it comes to pay raise or job promotion as compared to men with similar professional backgrounds. Women are often lack of self-awareness of their value and have lower confidence; they don't voice*

*up unless they think they are 100% capable, while men may voice out when they are only 70% ready. (Respondent 5)*

As workplace gender biases and stereotypes, both conscious and unconscious, have significant negative impact on women's career development in term of leadership opportunities, the need for and importance of awareness initiatives and empowerment workshops for a more inclusive work environment are critical (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Pireddu et al., 2022; Rimnac, 2020). Often, women lack confidence in their leadership abilities which hinders their leadership development (Baker et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to build women's self-efficacy through initiatives that include self-awareness and confidence workshops (Bryan & Mendaglio, 2020; Denizci Guillet et al., 2019).

#### **4.4 Networking and Collaborative Learning Programmes**

In addition to mentorship from female leaders, collaboration and networking with female peer colleagues are equally important. A collaborative learning community and employee resources group create a supportive environment that encourages personal and professional growth where women can share ideas, insights, and experiences related to challenges their peers face (Sheherazade et al., 2022). Women of similar age may share recent events, such as pregnancy and child-caring and are able to provide relevant suggestions. In contrast, senior female managers with a bigger age gap may have experienced these situations several years earlier, and are thus unable to provide insights that are applicable at the current time. Younger peers may offer innovative ideas and fresh perspectives to their seniors who might not have considered them, owing to their experience. These networks and peer support groups allow women to build connections across departments, explore other possibilities, and collaborate on problem-solving thus ultimately empowering them to advance their career progress. Some of them shared their insights:

*At the same time, the networking opportunities have helped me to navigate my career development. It creates a network of female leaders who can support and guide each other. To overcome barriers of implementing effective educational strategies in [the] workplace, [an] employee resource group can be crucial, combining with flexible working arrangement and childcare services, these can help women to balance work and family life. (Respondent 1)*

*Networking opportunities are beneficial to overcome the barriers of women not advancing in their career, it provides additional insights and opportunities for women to explore. I have been switched from [the] audit department and promoted to HR department and [have] been excelling since then. (Respondent 2)*

*My company has cross-team WIN (Women Informal Network) circles which encourage women to share ideas among each other and encourage a growth mindset. We also have learning circles and communities that help foster collaboration and knowledge sharing. They create a supportive learning environment where learners can learn from one*

*another, share insights and ideas, and collaboratively solve problems. Moreover, interactive meeting sessions with female leaders and working mums would be helpful too. (Respondent 3)*

*Women's networks and resources group are equally effective in empowering women in my workplace. Moreover, my recommendation is to establish peer learning groups where women can connect with each other, regardless of their departments and positions, to share their insights on their career obstacles. (Respondent 4)*

According to Lara et al., (2021), a women's network circle promotes a sense of belonging to a support community and empowers women's professional development through peer-to-peer learning and support. The networking ecosystem can be within the internal departments of organizations or in collaboration with external companies, enabling women to connect with potential mentors, industry experts and peers for knowledge exchange, career guidance and opportunities. Yang et al. (2019) highlighted the important contribution of gender-specific networks in women's leadership success through access to diverse and exclusive information, and resources sharing.

#### **4.5 Professional Skill Development Workshops**

Two respondents revealed certain soft skills women can improve on to better support their personal and professional growth. These include strategic communication and negotiation skills that allow women to verbally express their ideas more effectively and assertively to pursue their goals. Often, these women have the capability to take on leadership roles, but they are held back from reaching their full potential by their weak communication and negotiation abilities. Time and stress management workshops are important to help women manage their professional and personal responsibilities effectively. These workshops would equip them with strategies to better manage their workload and a way to reduce mental stress, therefore improving their productivity and well-being. As two respondents stated:

*It's also important to have strategic communication and negotiation skills to increase influence and impact. (Respondent 1)*

*Through work-life balance initiatives and training, such as time and stress management workshops, combined with flexible working hours and ability to work from home one day in a week. This is most effective as it addresses practical concerns women face and allows women to still assume leadership and perform at work without having to choose between career and personal responsibilities. (Respondent 2)*

Studies highlight the importance of soft skills development including business negotiation, social and professional communication skills to empower them in career development (Danhauer et al., 2019; Simone et al., 2020). Negotiation and communication skills are essential especially in situation where women need to voice out and negotiate for their well-deserve job increments, handling difficult situation or team conflict resolution (Denizci Guillet et al., 2019; Ponnusamy &

Selvam, 2023). These skills build and improve a woman's confidence in her ability to advocate her wants effectively, which is crucial for leadership development.

Work-life balance has been a principal challenge hindering women's career advancement as it requires them to manage multiple responsibilities, including career, family and personal commitments all at once (Bashir & Khan, 2022; Essandoh et al., 2023; Mowpia, 2023). Therefore, to empower women for career advancement, time management and stress management skills are particularly crucial. Often, women leaders face additional work-life conflict and stress due to their particular role at work which makes time management even more critical (Ponnusamy & Selvam, 2023). To ensure a long-term career development, a stress management programme is vital to help women navigate the multiple demands of work and personal life, and enhance their overall well-being and leadership capabilities (Jadmiko & Azliyanti, 2023).

#### **4.6 Return-to-Work Programmes**

One respondent suggested the introduction of return-to-work programme as such a programme can help women re-entering the workforce after a career break due to personal responsibilities. This programme can provide technical and mental assistance to women who face hiccups in resuming their careers. It can help women to adapt and bridge the gap created by time away from work, allowing women to regain their confidence, update their skills and ensure a smooth transition back to their job.

*[A] Return-to-work programme which would provide support for women returning to work after a career break due to responsibilities at home. It is often difficult for women to return to work after a career break due to lack of opportunities. (Respondent 2)*

The study by Kaushiva and Joshi, (2020) found that structured support programmes benefit women re-entering the workplace and that these programmes help to mitigate negative, stereotypical views associated with a career break. Through skills rebuilding, women regain their confidence and feel empowered to explore their full career potential.

### **5. Discussion**

The findings emphasize tailored leadership development programmes, mentorship, and gender diversity initiatives that could empower women in their leadership roles within Malaysia's corporate sector. For instance, all-inclusive leadership development programmes, such as leadership frameworks, simulations, and cross-functional experiences, are highly important in equipping women with the relevant technical and soft skills for leadership positions. Respondents emphasized that these programmes enhance critical thinking, decision-making, and confidence in addressing complex corporate challenges (Nakamura et al., 2022).

Additionally, mentorship from senior female leaders and coaching from external business experts emerged as essential strategies for professional growth. While

female mentors provide guidance and emotional support, business coaches bring an objective perspective, helping women refine their leadership styles and self-awareness (Grant, 2020; Malicay, 2023). This combination creates a strong support network for personal and professional development.

While prior studies provide a foundational understanding of barriers and strategies in women's leadership, this research extends the discussion by highlighting the distinct challenges and opportunities within the Malaysian corporate sector. For instance, participants' lived experiences reveal that leadership development programmes are most effective when they incorporate cultural and regional nuances, such as sensitivity to local workplace dynamics and gender roles. Unlike general frameworks proposed in earlier studies, this research emphasizes the importance of mentorship from senior female leaders, which emerged as a critical factor in fostering confidence and resilience among aspiring women leaders. Additionally, the finding that return-to-work programmes play a pivotal role in addressing career interruptions adds a new dimension to existing literature. These insights underline the necessity of tailored interventions that align not only with global best practices but also with the specific socio-cultural and economic contexts of Malaysia. Thus, this study contributes to the discourse by offering actionable recommendations grounded in participants' lived experiences and contextual realities.

Skills development workshops and return-to-work programmes are crucial for addressing specific challenges faced by women in balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Strategic communication, negotiation, and stress management workshops empower women to navigate workplace challenges effectively and advocate for their career progression (Danhauer et al., 2019; Ponnusamy & Selvam, 2023). Return-to-work programmes support women re-entering the workforce after career breaks by bridging skills gaps and rebuilding confidence, ensuring a smooth transition back to leadership roles (Kaushiva & Joshi, 2020). Together, these strategies create an enabling environment that fosters gender equity, empowering women to excel and contribute to organizational success.

It is advised that leadership development programmes be created to specifically address the obstacles this study revealed, like unconscious bias and underrepresentation in senior positions, in order to build on these findings. To combat stereotypes and promote inclusivity, educational strategies should concentrate on incorporating gender diversity training throughout organizations.

In order to create customized mentoring and coaching programmes that address the particular difficulties faced by women in leadership roles, cooperation between business organizations and academic institutions is essential. Incorporating policies that offer childcare assistance and flexible work schedules will also reduce personal and professional conflicts, allowing women to take on more leadership roles. These customized strategies support Malaysia's

dedication to attaining gender parity within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## 6. Conclusion

This study identified six key educational strategies to empower women in leadership roles in the corporate sector in Malaysia: comprehensive leadership development programmes, mentoring and training, empowerment initiatives, networking opportunities, professional skills development and return-to-work programmes. Leadership development programmes were highlighted as the most impactful, providing women with essential skills and confidence. Mentoring, particularly by senior female leaders, addresses workplace challenges and enhances empowerment, while coaching by external experts enhances individual professional development. Organisational initiatives that promote gender diversity and inclusion are critical to creating a supportive environment that addresses unconscious bias and builds self-efficacy. Collaborative learning and networking programmes provide women with valuable professional resources and connections, facilitating their leadership readiness. Furthermore, professional skills development in areas such as communication and negotiation is critical to balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Return-to-work programmes support women on re-entering the labour market after a period of absence, rebuilding confidence and ensuring career progression. Together, these strategies contribute to strengthening Malaysia's commitment to gender equality and sustainable development.

However, this study is not without limitations. The small sample size of five participants limits the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on institutional organizations excludes perspectives from other sectors, such as government and non-profit organizations. Furthermore, while the qualitative approach provides in-depth insights, future research could benefit from other methods. The cultural and regional diversity in Malaysia and the impact of COVID-19 on women's leadership trajectories also merit further study. Future studies should consider a broader participant pool, cross-sector comparisons, and the incorporation of post-pandemic recovery strategies to build on this research and enhance its applicability

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