

Barriers to women's leadership in higher education: a case study of two universities in the UK and wartime Ukraine

Nadiia Herbut¹ ✉, Hazel Barrett², Alirza Mamedov³, Kalwinder Sandhu⁴, Andrii Shpakov⁵, & Richard Tomlins⁶

¹ Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine (ORCID: 0000-0001-9776-3386) | ² Coventry University, the UK (ORCID: 0000-0002-5474-0077) | ³ Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine (ORCID: 0000-0003-4703-2694) | ⁴ Coventry University, the UK (ORCID: 0000-0003-2484-7559) | ⁵ Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine (ORCID: 0000-0002-7498-4271) | ⁶ Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture, Ukraine (ORCID: 0000-0002-7826-0983) |

ABSTRACT: This study examines barriers to women's advancement in leadership in higher education through a comparative analysis of Coventry University (UK) and Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture (Ukraine). Using the Social-Ecological Model as an analytical framework, the research investigates barriers across five interconnected levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy. Data were collected from 71 participants through focus groups, with an online survey as an additional channel at Coventry University, including women at various career stages and men in leadership positions. Results reveal convergent barriers—confidence deficits, career-family conflict, informal exclusionary networks—alongside context-specific manifestations. At the UK university, participants described how an established equality framework can coexist with persistent barriers; at the Ukrainian university, participants foregrounded gaps in policy implementation. Participants at Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture linked wartime conditions to displacement, fragmentation of professional networks, and deprioritization of gender-equality initiatives. Analysed through the SEM, barriers emerged as connected across levels rather than operating in isolation, with crisis conditions in Ukraine intensifying several of these linkages simultaneously. The findings describe a cross-sectional pattern by career stage, in which active self-doubt appears alongside withdrawal from leadership consideration. The study contributes an empirically grounded account of how similar barrier mechanisms operate across two contrasting institutional contexts, one of them under full-scale war.

KEYWORDS: women's leadership | higher education | university | gender barriers | war | Social-Ecological Model | Ukraine | United Kingdom

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite women's growing presence in academia—including their majority among university graduates and substantial representation among academic staff—their advancement into se-



nior leadership in higher education remains disproportionately limited. This persistent vertical segregation—often described through metaphors such as the “glass ceiling” (Morrison et al., 1987), “sticky floor” (Berheide, 1992), or “leadership labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007)—is not merely a matter of numerical representation; it reflects deeper structural inequalities embedded within academic institutions and broader societal systems.

Women’s underrepresentation in academic leadership is not only a question of equity of access; it concerns the distribution of institutional power. Leadership positions control the resources through which universities operate—workload allocation, evaluation criteria, hiring and promotion decisions, and access to funding and influence. A persistent gender asymmetry in these positions, therefore, means that the authority to set the rules of academic work remains unevenly distributed by gender—a form of gendered stratification that operates, in Acker’s (2006) terms, as an “inequality regime” sustained through everyday institutional practice. This asymmetry is vertical as well as numerical: women remain concentrated in more junior and in feminised, service-oriented roles, while senior positions stay disproportionately male. At both universities, women remained underrepresented at the professorial level: 34% at CU (Coventry University, 2025b) and 34.7% at KNUCA (authors’ analysis of institutional records, June 2025). The asymmetry is also sustained across spheres—the gendered division of caring labour in the private sphere feeds directly into who is available for and recognised as suited to leadership in the public sphere—so that inequality in academic leadership is bound up with its wider social reproduction.

Previous research has identified multiple factors contributing to women’s underrepresentation in academic leadership, including individual-level barriers such as imposter feelings and internalised doubt (Clance & Imes, 1978; Parkman, 2016), interpersonal challenges such as work–family conflict and limited mentorship (Mason et al., 2013), organisational factors including gendered institutional cultures and biased evaluation processes (Acker, 1990, 2012), and broader community and policy contexts that shape career opportunities. However, much of this research has been conducted in Anglo-American and Western European settings, with limited attention to how barriers manifest in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet states. Moreover, the effects of crisis conditions on gendered patterns of academic leadership remain underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps through a comparative analysis of barriers to women’s advancement into leadership at Coventry University (CU) in the United Kingdom and Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture (KNUCA) in Ukraine. These institutions represent contrasting policy environments, with Ukraine additionally experiencing full-scale wartime disruption since February 2022. The comparative design allows us to examine barriers that appear in both universities and those that take shape in each setting. Including a Ukrainian university operating under wartime conditions offers insight into how participants describe gender and leadership in a context of acute disruption. Guided by the Social-Ecological Model (SEM; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), the study analyses barriers across interconnected levels, from individual experiences to policy and societal conditions. Accordingly, three research questions guide the study: mapping barriers across SEM levels, distinguishing convergent versus context-specific mechanisms, and assessing how wartime disruption bears on these patterns.

The study employs a qualitative comparative design, drawing on data from women at different career stages and men in leadership positions at both institutions. This multi-perspective approach enables examination of both experiences of barriers and interpretations of their underlying causes and potential solutions.

This research extends evidence on gendered leadership barriers to an under-researched Eastern European context, using a multi-level framework to trace how barriers connect across SEM levels in two contrasting institutional settings, one operating under full-scale war.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Research on women's leadership in higher education draws on several complementary perspectives. Critical and feminist approaches locate women leaders' experiences not in individual deficits but in power relations, gendered norms, and organisational cultures that shape opportunity (Vongalis-Macrow, 2016). An intersectional analysis—of how gender interacts with race, class, disability, and other axes to compound constraint (Henry, 2015)—would extend this account, but our data do not support it; we return to this as a limitation.

Role Congruity and Gendered Organisational Theories

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) explains prejudice against women leaders as a consequence of a perceived mismatch between conventional gender roles and leadership expectations. The enduring “think leader–think male” schema shapes evaluations of authority in academia, particularly within scientific and administrative environments (Morley, 2014), contributing to heightened scrutiny and doubts about leadership “fit.”

These dynamics are often summarised through the metaphors of the “glass ceiling” and the “leadership labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007), which capture the cumulative and multidirectional character of the obstacles women encounter, including the “double bind” whereby women are judged for both departing from and conforming to gendered expectations. Acker's theory of “gendered organisations” shifts attention to how apparently neutral institutional routines embed male-centred assumptions (Acker, 1990, 2012). In higher education, this may include norms around constant availability, informal networking expectations, and evaluation criteria that privilege historically masculinised career trajectories. Empirical studies describe academic workplaces as shaped by hidden bias or “old boys' club” dynamics (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2016). Acker's concept of “inequality regimes” has also been applied to illuminate how informal departmental practices—such as opaque promotion processes or disproportionate service burdens—systematically disadvantage women (Acker, 2006).

The Social-Ecological Model as Analytical Framework

Together, the perspectives above suggest that gender inequality in academic leadership is sustained by interacting mechanisms rather than by a simple “pipeline problem.” To organise analysis of these interlocking dynamics, this study adopts the Social-Ecological Model (SEM) as its primary analytical framework.

Originating in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1986) and widely used in

organisational and gender research, the SEM emphasises interdependence across levels of influence: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy. This aligns with feminist organisational theory, which conceptualises inequality as produced through reinforcing personal, cultural, and structural forces rather than individual deficits (Acker, 2012; O'Connor, 2020).

In this study, the individual level captures how women interpret and navigate professional identity within gendered environments. The interpersonal level focuses on the relational dynamics that shape access to mentoring, support, and sponsorship. The organisational level examines institutional policies, promotion procedures, workload arrangements, and workplace cultures within universities. The community level considers disciplinary and professional networks and academic norms beyond a single institution. The policy level addresses national legislation and gender-equality frameworks, alongside wider socio-political conditions—including crisis contexts such as Ukraine's ongoing conflict—that shape opportunities and constraints in higher education leadership. These levels operate reciprocally, supporting analysis of both persistent interaction patterns and context-specific dynamics.

2.2. CONCEPTUAL MAP: MULTI-LEVEL BARRIERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Previous research has identified barriers at each SEM level. At the individual level, the imposter phenomenon produces persistent self-doubt, increasingly understood as socially produced rather than individual pathology (Clance & Imes, 1978; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). At the interpersonal level, work–family conflict and the “double burden” generate cumulative constraints (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Mason et al., 2013), compounded by maternal wall bias (Williams, 2004) and undervalued relational labour (Guarino & Borden, 2017). At the organisational level, “glass ceiling” (Morrison et al., 1987; Jarboe, 2018) and “sticky floor” (Berheide, 1992) dynamics are reinforced by implicit bias in recruitment and promotion (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012) and by informal networks that circulate opportunities through male-dominated circles (Madera et al., 2019). At the community and policy levels, gendered leadership expectations—including “think leader – think male” bias (Eagly & Karau, 2002)—are sustained through disciplinary cultures, institutional rituals, and symbolic norms (Acker, 2006; Morley, 2013), with policy responses varying widely across institutional and national contexts.

2.3. COMPARATIVE POLICY CONTEXTS

While many barriers recur across settings, the policy environment differs substantially. Comparing these contexts clarifies how policy maturity, crisis conditions, and institutional trajectories shape both the expression of barriers and the prospects for change. In the UK, the Athena SWAN Charter (since 2005) has encouraged institutional self-assessment and action planning on gender equality (Munir et al., 2013). However, critical analyses caution that awards-based approaches can incentivise symbolic compliance rather than deep structural change (Armstrong & Sullivan, 2023; Department for Education & Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2020). Despite the maturity of equality frameworks, women hold only 30–32% of professorships and approximately one-third of vice-chancellorships (HESA, 2024; Harrison & Freeman, 2025), indicating persistent vertical segregation at senior academ-

ic ranks.

Ukrainian higher education is undergoing a gender policy transformation, influenced by pressures to align with Europe, though implementation remains fragmented and project-dependent (Nakonechna, 2025). Women constitute a majority of academic staff, yet pronounced vertical segregation persists: women hold roughly 17% of rector positions in Ukraine's top 200 universities (Education.ua, 2024; author's calculation), and comprise 46% of candidate-of-sciences holders but only 33% of those with doctor-of-sciences degrees (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2024). Unlike the electoral sphere, higher education legislation does not mandate gender balance in university leadership.

In December 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the Strategy for Gender Equality in Education until 2030, covering all education levels, including higher education (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022). However, the full-scale war since 2022 has reshaped academic careers. A survey of over 2,500 Ukrainian scientists found that by autumn 2022, approximately 18.5% had left the country, with women more likely to emigrate (74% of migrant scientists), and Ukraine lost roughly one-fifth of research capacity within eight months (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023). Research also reports higher levels of psychological distress and burnout among women faculty during wartime, and intensified demands for remote teaching and student support falling disproportionately on women (Marchenko, 2023; Zayachuk, 2025).

2.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Building on the frameworks and context analysis above, this study addresses three interrelated research questions:

RQ1: Which barriers to women's leadership advancement are shared across the two institutional contexts, and how do they map onto SEM levels?

RQ2: Which barriers are context-specific, and what institutional, cultural, and policy conditions help explain these differences?

RQ3: How do barriers interact across SEM levels within each setting, and how does crisis context—particularly wartime conditions in Ukraine—shape these cross-level dynamics?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN, PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

Guided by the Social-Ecological Model (SEM; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), this study employed a qualitative comparative case study design. It compares two universities—Coventry University (CU) and Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture (KNUCA)—to examine barriers to women's advancement into leadership across SEM levels. Recruitment used purposive sampling to ensure variation by career stage and leadership status, with attention to disciplinary and demographic diversity. Participation was voluntary. Overall, 71 participants contributed data across the two institutions. Both partner institutions followed a shared protocol—a common SEM-based topic guide, the same participatory focus-group activities, a shared pre-session questionnaire, and jointly delivered facilitator training—with a target of

five focus groups of 8-10 participants each, so that the design and instrumentation were held constant across sites even where local delivery conditions differed.

KNUCA (n = 44)

The KNUCA sample comprised 34 women and 10 men. Five focus groups were conducted:

FG1: Women with academic experience < 5 years (n = 8)

FG2: Women with academic experience 5–10 years (n = 8)

FG3: Women with academic experience > 10 years (n = 8)

FG4: Women in senior leadership positions (n = 10)

FG5: Men in senior leadership positions (n = 10)

Invitations were distributed via KNUCA's corporate email system. Due to wartime conditions and the university's blended operational format, focus groups with early- and mid-career academics (FG1–FG3) were conducted online.

CU (n = 27)

Recruitment coincided with institutional restructuring, contributing to low response rates. Following an ethics amendment, the study offered multiple participation modes: in-person focus groups, online focus groups, and an open-ended online survey. The Coventry sample comprised 22 women and 5 men.

Final participant distribution (analytic strata):

FG1 & FG2 (combined due to low enrolment): Women in academic posts < 10 years (n = 5; 3 participated in an in-person focus group; 2 completed the online survey)

FG3: Women in academic posts > 10 years, not in leadership (n = 7; 6 participated in an in-person focus group; 1 completed the online survey)

FG4: Women in leadership roles (n = 10; 9 participated in an in-person focus group; 1 completed the online survey)

FG5: Men in leadership roles (n = 5; 4 participated in an online focus group; 1 completed the online survey)

Among Coventry women, 18 participated in focus groups and 4 completed the online survey; among Coventry men, 4 participated in an online focus group and 1 completed the online survey. Online survey responses were treated as an additional qualitative source and analysed alongside focus group transcripts because the survey questions were designed to map onto the same analytic domains as the focus group guide.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected between March and June 2025. Sessions lasted approximately 75–90 minutes. Procedures differed by institution due to contextual constraints:

KNUCA: Senior management focus groups (FG4–FG5) were conducted in person, while ca-

reer-stage focus groups (FG1–FG3) were held online. Where consent was provided, sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed (FG3–FG5). Where participants declined audio recording (FG1–FG2), a research assistant produced contemporaneous stenographic notes of the discussion.

CU: Data were collected through a mixed approach combining in-person focus groups, online focus groups, and an open-ended online survey aligned with the focus group topic guide.

Across both institutions, facilitation followed a common sequence: participants brainstormed perceived barriers, ranked the most significant on a shared flip chart or whiteboard, discussed the ranking, and agreed recommendations, which facilitators photographed. These participatory techniques elicited barriers across SEM levels at both sites. Outputs from facilitator whiteboards and visual mapping were captured as photographs (for in-person sessions) and/or screenshots (for online sessions).

Before focus group sessions, participants at both institutions completed structured pre-session questionnaires covering demographic information (age, gender, position, years in higher education), educational qualifications, language proficiency, and short written reflections on career motivations, leadership aspirations, perceived barriers to leadership advancement, support received, and awareness of institutional mentoring programmes. The KNUCA questionnaire additionally included an item on war-related displacement status.

3.3. DATA SOURCES, TRANSLATION, AND MANAGEMENT

The primary data source was the focus-group material: audio-recorded transcripts of sessions (KNUCA FG3–FG5 and CU focus groups) and facilitator stenographic notes for those that were not (KNUCA FG1–FG2). At CU, five participants who were unable to attend the group instead completed an open-ended online survey. Pre-session questionnaire responses and whiteboard/visual-mapping documentation (photographs and/or screenshots, both institutions) served as supporting sources, used to contextualise and cross-check the focus-group material rather than as independent strands. Demographic questionnaire items were used to describe sample characteristics.

All KNUCA focus groups were conducted in Ukrainian and subsequently translated into English by the bilingual research team. Translation accuracy was checked through back-translation and team review.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS AND CROSS-CONTEXT COMPARISON

The study applied reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2006, 2021). SEM levels were used as sensitising concepts to support initial organisation of the material, while allowing additional inductive themes to be developed where participant accounts extended beyond SEM categories.

Analytic work was conducted manually and iteratively, involving: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) initial coding of meaningful segments, using SEM levels as sensitising concepts; (3) generating candidate themes through collaborative discussion; (4) reviewing and refining themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; (5)

defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the analytic narrative for reporting. The team held regular reflexive discussions to examine how researchers' positionality shaped their interpretations and to reduce context-specific misinterpretations.

To support cross-context interpretation, barrier mechanisms were treated as "convergent" when they met two criteria: (1) they were evident in both institutional contexts, and (2) within each context, they were supported by at least two participant groups and/or data sources. This heuristic was used to distinguish recurrent patterns from isolated mentions, rather than as a frequency-based measure.

Cross-case comparison examined barriers recurring in both settings, context-specific mechanisms (including crisis-related dynamics in Ukraine), and differences in how shared barriers were experienced and articulated.

3.5. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Credibility was strengthened through data/source triangulation across qualitative materials and formats, including audio-recorded focus group transcripts, facilitator notes, open-ended online survey responses, pre-session questionnaire narratives, and whiteboard/visual-mapping documentation. Given variation in data collection modes and participation conditions, analysis focused on barrier mechanisms and manifestations rather than prevalence; convergence across sources and formats was treated as strengthening interpretive confidence.

Ethical approval was obtained from both institutions' Research Ethics Committees. All participants provided written informed consent, including separate consent for audio recording where applicable. Participants could withdraw their data up to the point of anonymisation and commencement of analysis. All identifiers were pseudonymised, and data were stored securely using encrypted storage.

Across both cases, barriers to women's progression into higher education leadership were described as a multilevel system operating across SEM levels. While several mechanisms recurred across both institutional settings, their salience and expression were shaped by institutional climates, disciplinary cultures, and—in Ukraine—wartime disruption. Findings are therefore presented by SEM level, highlighting convergent mechanisms alongside context-specific dynamics, before synthesising cross-level interactions.

4. RESULTS

4.1. INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

Self-perception, confidence deficits, and internalised constraints

At CU, participants identified lack of confidence as a central barrier, framing it as an internalised effect of gendered socialisation: "Generally, women are penalised for assertiveness and often do not have the confidence/feel emboldened to drive forward their agenda, due to societal norms/way we are raised" (UK_Online Survey). At KNUCA, analogous constraints were articulated through the metaphor of an "internal censor"—internalised stereotypes that delimit perceived legitimacy of leadership (UA_FG2). Early-career participants described limited "voice" and platforms for ideas (UA_FG1), while others noted risk-aversion in applying

for advancement: “Women often avoid applying for positions unless they meet all criteria” (UA_FG2).

Imposter syndrome and career-stage differentiation

Imposter syndrome appeared in both settings. In the KNUCA dataset, participants’ accounts suggested differentiation by career stage: mid-career participants described deferring leadership aspiration (“For now, I want to focus on defending my PhD dissertation and improving teaching skills,” UA_FG2), while senior academics described a more passive form of self-exclusion from leadership consideration (UA_FG3). This difference—between more active self-doubt and more passive self-withdrawal—was articulated more explicitly in the Ukrainian accounts.

Emotional strain under crisis conditions (Ukraine)

A distinct pressure in the Ukrainian case concerned crisis-intensified emotional load. Participants described combining motherhood with early academic careers during wartime as “extremely difficult” (UA_FG1), and connected heightened empathy expectations in teaching to emotional burnout: “Psychological and moral student support eventually leads to emotional burnout, slowing career advancement” (UA_FG3).

Overwork, blurred boundaries, and reluctance to delegate

In both settings, workload pressures and boundary-blurring operated as mechanisms through which women absorbed organisational expectations. At CU, participants described working weekends and taking on unpaid work (UK_FG1-2; UK_FG3). At KNUCA, workload strain was narrated through standards of “doing everything properly”: “Women strive to complete every task perfectly, leading to overload” (UA_FG4), and difficulty delegating: “I’ll do it better myself” (UA_FG4). Participants also linked overload to organisational work not considered in evaluations (UA_FG1).

Context-specific individual constraints

CU accounts raised menopause as a relevant but under-acknowledged factor affecting confidence and performance (UK_FG3). KNUCA participants foregrounded war-related disruption: a shift toward “survival instead of development” (UA_FG2), displacement and loss of social connections (UA_FG2), and wartime family logistics reducing capacity for leadership (UA_FG1). Individual-level constraints were repeatedly described as outcomes of relational and institutional expectations, suggesting that “confidence” and “overwork” are connected across levels rather than being isolated personal limitations.

4.2. INTERPERSONAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

Career–family responsibility conflict

Across both cases, career–family conflict emerged as a central barrier. At CU, participants described negotiating ambition with caring duties: “I guess the biggest [barrier] one for me is choosing to have children” (...) “if I did not have those kids, I know I’d be like somewhere else quite special” (UK_FG4). At KNUCA, the same tension was reframed through wartime logistics: “At the start of the full-scale war, women automatically took the children and evacuated,

while male leaders stayed, explaining this by their responsibility for their position” (UA_FG4).

Maternity leave and career interruption

At CU, maternity leave was described as structurally difficult: “Taking maternity leave also removes you from the world of academia for considerable periods and it takes time to get back into the groove of academic life” (UK_Online Survey). At KNUCA, motherhood was framed as a longer interruption with downstream effects on research continuity and networks (UA_FG2).

Partner/family support dynamics and gender role expectations

At CU, guilt and perceived “ambition” were psychologically constraining: “it begins to make me feel like I’m too ambitious and putting my work or career first before the family” (UK_FG4). KNUCA participants emphasised more explicit constraints, including competition for leadership positions with male partners (UA_FG4), normative judgements about leadership as incompatible with “proper” family performance (UA_FG3; UA_FG4), and breadwinner stereotypes: “you’re not the family breadwinner” (UA_FG1).

Mentorship, collegial support, and role-model dynamics

Participants sometimes perceived women leaders as not being strong role models (UK_FG3; UK_FG4), while others emphasised the importance of women mentors: “my own managers and mentors and leaders have been strong women... and I guess I’ll try and be there... speak out on behalf of women.” (UK_FG4). At KNUCA, participants highlighted the limited availability of organic mentoring and the need for intentional peer-support infrastructure (UA_FG1; UA_FG2). Many interpersonal barriers were described as intensified or alleviated by organisational cultures, workload allocation, and promotion structures, directing attention to institutional climates and informal networks.

4.3. ORGANISATIONAL-LEVEL BARRIERS

Workplace culture and institutional climate

At CU, senior leadership culture was characterised as: “A toxic atmosphere on higher levels coupled with a hegemonic masculine, unethical, patronising and immoral style of leadership” (UK_FG3). At KNUCA, organisational constraints were described as institutional path dependence and conformity to established hierarchies (UA_FG3).

Informal networks (“old boys’ club”)

Informal networks were repeatedly described as gatekeeping mechanisms. At CU: “not being part of the club... not being invited to key events... We don’t play golf...” (UK_FG4). Another participant questioned whether formal equality policies can work “if you have ‘the club’... as powerful as we have” (UK_FG4). At KNUCA, important decisions were described as made beyond official meetings and channels (UA_FG2; UA_FG3).

Transparency of career progression

Limited clarity in progression pathways was discussed in both settings. At CU: “the organisational structure not having any clarity about what needs, opportunities there are” (UK_FG1-2).

At KNUCA, progression was shaped by unclear criteria and informal dominance (UA_FG1; UA_FG2; UA_FG3). In both cases, lack of transparency interacts with confidence-related constraints: unclear rules raise the perceived cost of “putting oneself forward.”

Invisible work and gendered task allocation

Both cases emphasised disproportionate allocation of unrecognised work to women. At CU: “a lot of the kind of care roles... Ethics Committee like mainly women... this takes time that is not recognised” (UK_FG5). At KNUCA: “Women’s invisible work—additional responsibilities that are not recognised in performance evaluations” (UA_FG2). One participant also described the ambivalence of organisational work—burdensome yet potentially enabling influence (UA_FG4).

Formal support systems and institutional initiatives

CU participants described initiatives (ASPiRE, Athena SWAN) ambivalently: “We’ve got the policy, but we don’t actually implement it. It just sits on the web” (UK_FG4). At KNUCA, participants described weaker institutionalisation of support, limited mentoring, and low visibility of available mechanisms (UA_FG2; UA_FG3).

Male leadership awareness and resistance narratives

At CU, male leaders expressed awareness of gender barriers alongside discomfort: “I struggle as well with the idea of ranking them just because I’m not an expert on this” (UK_FG5); “it’s very difficult for us as men to rank what is the biggest barrier” (UK_FG5). At KNUCA, men’s narratives combined “formal equality” framing with selective recognition of structural constraints. The group acknowledged barriers (double burden, stereotypes, motherhood-related interruption, limited mentoring) and reported supporting women’s advancement, while expressing reservations toward quotas and “artificial” acceleration (UA_FG5). Overall, the KNUCA men’s data are internally mixed: recognition of barriers coexisted with reservations toward interventionist tools. Organisational barriers were repeatedly framed as embedded within wider disciplinary and sectoral conditions, directing attention to community- and policy-level influences that shape institutional incentives and legitimacy norms.

4.4. COMMUNITY-LEVEL BARRIERS

Disciplinary cultures and field-level segregation

Participants’ accounts in both settings indicated that discipline-level norms shaped leadership models, legitimacy, and access to external recognition. In KNUCA, participants emphasised pronounced gender segregation in engineering and construction-related fields and described these disciplines as embedded in masculinised professional cultures that shape who is considered credible for senior roles. At Coventry University, participants similarly argued that dominant leadership ideals remain implicitly masculinised and may clash with women’s leadership styles: “female types of leadership do not fit in with the kind of models, you know, that we have dominating the world right now. They... don’t. They still don’t fit” (UK_FG4).

Professional associations and external networks

Across contexts, participants framed external professional networks as key “recognition are-

nas” that shape visibility and leadership legitimacy. At CU, participants described exclusion from key events and professional spaces linked to informal networks (UK_FG4), implying that external-facing networking opportunities can be patterned by access to male-dominated social circuits. In KNUCA, networking constraints were characterised by limited access to international engagement, which was further tightened under wartime conditions. Few early-career academics reported having participated in international conferences prior to the war (UA_FG1). Participants also linked career constraints to limited representation in editorial boards and professional committees (UA_FG3; UA_FG4).

National academic culture and field norms

Community-level norms were also described as shaping how careers are expected to unfold and what forms of seniority or legitimacy are valued. In KNUCA, sector conditions were framed through post-Soviet organisational legacies and informal expectations of “waiting your turn” (UA_FG3), alongside broader societal norms that shape perceptions of leadership legitimacy (UA_FG2; UA_FG3). In CU accounts, participants more often identified constraints in the everyday intensification of academic work and the competitive “performance” environment, linking these pressures to the ways recognition and advancement are pursued within the academic field (UK_Online Survey).

War impact on the academic community (Ukraine)

War-related fragmentation of professional networks was emphasised as both a collaboration constraint and a career-visibility barrier: “Many colleagues have left the country or moved to safer regions, breaking established collaborations” (UA_FG2). These community-level disruptions were narrated as linked to strain at other SEM levels—reducing networking and visibility, increasing care pressures, and intensifying emotional load and “survival-mode” reprioritisation.

4.5. POLICY-LEVEL BARRIERS

The UK context: policy as background, metrics as salient

At CU, national-level policy issues affecting higher education were rarely raised across focus groups; the main exception concerned the ethos of UK higher education and government expectations (UK_FG1-2; UK_FG3; UK_FG4). In online responses, critique centred on institutional “ethos” and metric-heavy priorities: the metrics they focus on—including league tables, accreditation processes, and REF criteria—were viewed as misguided, with calls for cultural change rather than emphasis on traditional metrics and promotion criteria (UK_Online Survey).

The Ukrainian context: policy gaps and enforcement as salient

In the Ukrainian case, policy was more frequently framed as a barrier through implementation gaps and weak enforcement. Women leaders identified the “absence of quotas or support mechanisms for women” and the “need for labour legislation reform” as systemic constraints (UA_FG4). Participants also raised the limited development of state-level gender policy, describing institutional inaction on gender equality as itself a barrier (UA_FG4).

Gender-differentiated policy perceptions

Across KNUCA groups, policy narratives were strongly gender-differentiated. Women's groups framed quotas and positive action as needed to counter cumulative disadvantage, whereas men's leadership accounts emphasised "equal conditions," opposed "forced mechanisms," and rejected quotas (UA_FG5). Economic constraints (e.g., salary levels) were also highlighted as major challenges, typically framed as gender-neutral within the men's group (UA_FG5).

War as a policy disruptor and reprioritisation mechanism

Participants described wartime effects on the salience and prioritisation of gender equality initiatives. KNUCA participants noted that gender equality initiatives had been deprioritised during wartime (UA_FG1; UA_FG2) and linked displacement-related disruption to altered career trajectories (UA_FG1).

Cross-level synthesis

Across both cases, barriers were seldom described as operating at a single SEM level; connections between individual, interpersonal, organisational, and community-level mechanisms recurred throughout the accounts, with crisis conditions in Ukraine intensifying several of these linkages simultaneously. These cross-level patterns are examined in the Discussion.

5. DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings show that barriers to women's leadership advancement in higher education operate as an interconnected set of mechanisms across SEM levels, while their salience and framing vary by institutional and national context. In this section, we interpret how the patterns observed in CU and KNUCA align with, extend, and nuance existing scholarship, and we consider what these results imply for theory, practice, and policy — particularly under crisis conditions.

5.1. SHARED BARRIERS ACROSS CONTEXTS (RQ1)

Across both cases, recurring barriers emerged at the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and community levels, suggesting that some gendered mechanisms shaping leadership advancement in higher education operate across both institutional contexts despite differing policy environments.

At the individual level, confidence deficits and imposter syndrome were reported in both settings, consistent with previous research (Clance & Imes, 1978; Parkman, 2016). The present study nuances this literature by suggesting career-stage differentiation in how imposter-related dynamics are experienced. Accounts point to a cross-sectional pattern in which heightened self-doubt among early-career women coexists with withdrawal from leadership consideration among more senior women (particularly pronounced in the Ukrainian dataset). This highlights the value of tailoring support to the career stage.

At the interpersonal level, findings confirm the centrality of career–family conflict documented in scholarship on academic motherhood and caregiving (Mason et al., 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). The data add nuance by indicating that maternity leave and career

interruption were described as affecting not only productivity but also the maintenance of professional networks. Participants in both contexts referred to challenges re-establishing collaborations, visibility, and informal connections after interruptions, suggesting that network disruption may compound well-documented productivity penalties.

At the organisational level, informal exclusion (“old boys’ club”) dynamics and the unequal burden of “academic housework” were evident in both universities, aligning with research on gendered organisations and invisible labour (Acker, 2012; Guarino & Borden, 2017). A notable cross-context pattern concerns the distance between recognising barriers and endorsing specific intervention tools. Male leaders in both settings acknowledged gendered constraints, yet the discussion often shifted toward incrementalism, uncertainty, or reservations about “how” to intervene. This suggests that awareness alone does not automatically translate into support for structural change and that institutional progress may depend on mechanisms that embed responsibility, follow-through, and accountability within leadership roles rather than relying on voluntary goodwill.

At the community level, convergence in disciplinary gender segregation and masculinised leadership ideals is consistent with the cross-cultural relevance of role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Despite institutional differences (including CU’s broader disciplinary scope), participants in both cases described dominant leadership models as implicitly masculinised and, in some accounts, misaligned with “female types of leadership,” indicating that perceived role incongruence can persist across national contexts. A feminist educational leadership perspective (Schiffecker & McNaughtan, 2022) helps clarify why this misalignment functions as a barrier rather than as a neutral difference in style. When participants described relational, care-oriented, or collaborative practices—for example, the observation that women academics “show greater empathy, especially during COVID and war” (UA_FG3)—these were valued in principle yet positioned outside the implicitly masculinised template of what senior leadership is taken to look like. Where such practices are also concentrated in feminised and undervalued pastoral roles, the qualities associated with women’s leadership become simultaneously expected of women and discounted as leadership credentials. On this reading, the difficulty is not that women lead differently, but that the prevailing model of leadership withholds legitimacy from the forms of authority they are most often expected to exercise.

5.2. CONTEXT-SPECIFIC BARRIERS (RQ2)

Alongside convergences, the findings show meaningful differences in barrier salience and framing, reflecting institutional cultures, national traditions, and variation in policy context.

At the individual level, UK participants explicitly discussed physiological issues—particularly menopause—as affecting wellbeing and confidence, whereas Ukrainian participants foregrounded a distinctive “internal censor” framing of internalised stereotypes. These contrasts may reflect differences in what is culturally discussable and institutionally legible as a “barrier,” suggesting that barrier identification, naming, and legitimisation are culturally mediated processes rather than neutral descriptions of experience.

At the organisational level, the two cases suggest that the same phenomenon—informal networks shaping access to leadership—can occupy a different structural position depending on

how leadership appointments are regulated. At CU, appointments below the Vice-Chancellor are not specified in the university's governing documents: the Board reserves only the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor; all other staff management is delegated to the executive; and the Academic Board has no role in appointments (Coventry University, 2021, 2025a). Against this formal vacuum, the CU participant who described "the organisational structure not having any clarity about what... opportunities there are" (UK_FG1-2) is not reporting a subjective impression but the absence of codified pathways; the "club" fills a space that formal rules leave open. At KNUCA, by contrast, access to each tier is prescribed by statute and law—the rector is elected by the academic community, and deans and heads of department are appointed or elected through the Academic Council, a body in which academic staff hold at least three-quarters of the seats (KNUCA, 2024; Law of Ukraine on Higher Education, 2014). Here, participants located informal influence not in the absence of procedure but running parallel to it: decisions "made beyond official meetings and channels" (UA_FG2). Informal power thus operates in both settings, but in one it substitutes for absent rules, and in the other it runs alongside dense ones—a difference in where, not whether, gatekeeping occurs.

The strongest divergence concerned the policy level. Coventry participants rarely framed national policy as a salient barrier, and when policy-related critique appeared, it centred on performance regimes and sector-wide priorities (e.g., REF/TEF) rather than gender-specific legislation. In contrast, Ukrainian participants repeatedly described policy implementation and enforcement gaps as structural constraints. This divergence is consistent with different stages of policy institutionalisation: in settings with more established equality infrastructures, policy can become backgrounded in everyday accounts, shifting attention toward implementation practices and their unintended effects; in settings where institutionalisation is uneven or contested, gaps in enforcement remain more visible and politically salient (cf. Nakonechna, 2025).

Debates about quotas illustrate this contrast. Quotas were absent from UK discussions but were central and polarising at KNUCA. Women advocated systemic mechanisms, whereas male leaders rejected "forced mechanisms" while supporting non-quota measures such as mentoring, training, and transparent criteria (UA_FG5)—suggesting that resistance targeted the instrument rather than gender-equality action per se (cf. Dean & Dos Santos, 2017). Interpersonal barriers also differed in their predominant form. While career–family conflict featured in both cases, KNUCA participants more often described direct discouragement within families and, in some accounts, competition with male partners for advancement. UK participants, by contrast, more frequently described internalised guilt about ambition. These patterns suggest that cultural norms can shape whether barriers are experienced primarily as external opposition or internal conflict, even when the underlying gendered expectations are comparable.

5.3. CROSS-LEVEL BARRIER PATTERNS (RQ3)

Participants seldom described barriers as operating in isolation: individual confidence and self-doubt were linked to interpersonal caregiving and support dynamics, embedded in organisational practices (workload allocation, informal networks, transparency), and shaped by broader disciplinary cultures and policy environments.

The same underlying mechanism could also take different forms across the two settings. For example, perfectionism was described as behavioural overextension in the UK (taking on excessive unpaid work) but as reluctance to delegate in Ukraine (“I’ll do it better myself”), suggesting that comparable pressures can generate distinct behavioural outcomes depending on organisational expectations and cultural norms.

Both institutions operated under disruption—the ongoing war in Ukraine and institutional change pressures at CU. In the Ukrainian case, participants described psychological distress, displacement, and a shift from “development” to “survival mode,” consistent with evidence of war-related disruption to research capacity and gendered emigration patterns (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023). Crisis touched several SEM levels at once: psychological strain (individual), intensified caregiving (interpersonal), operational disruption (organisational), network fragmentation (community), and deprioritisation of gender equality (policy).

There is also a concern that gains made during wartime—such as women moving into vacant roles—could be reversed during reconstruction if not deliberately institutionalised, with implications for the embedding of gender equality goals in post-conflict planning. At CU, institutional change pressures shaped participation constraints and morale, but participants did not consistently articulate these as gendered barrier mechanisms in the same direct way as in Ukraine. This contrast underscores that different forms of disruption may vary in salience and in how readily they become narrated as gendered constraints within academic workplaces.

5.4. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study advances understanding of gendered leadership barriers in three ways.

First, the comparison suggests a potential paradox: greater institutional maturity in equality policy may coexist with the normalisation of certain barrier mechanisms, rendering some policy dimensions less salient in everyday accounts. UK participants’ relative backgrounding of policy contrasts with Ukrainian participants’ explicit framing of policy absence and enforcement gaps as barriers, raising questions about how “settled” equality infrastructure becomes embedded in taken-for-granted practices and how it may mask persistent power dynamics.

Second, the findings indicate a recurring gap between recognising barriers and endorsing specific interventions among male leaders across both settings. This complicates assumptions that awareness alone generates support for structural change. Translating recognition into action may require institutional arrangements that distribute responsibility, specify implementation pathways, and create accountability for results.

Third, the Ukrainian case suggests how crisis contexts can function as a stress test for gendered organisational systems. In participants’ accounts, wartime disruption intensified barrier dynamics that also appear in non-crisis settings, providing insight into how gendered mechanisms become more visible and consequential under pressure—and how quickly gains can be reversed if not institutionalised.

5.5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Because participants described barriers at multiple interconnected levels, effective interven-

tions are likely to require a coordinated, multi-level approach.

At the individual level, career-stage differentiation in imposter-related dynamics implies that support should be tailored: strategies addressing active self-doubt among early-career women may differ from approaches needed for more senior women who describe withdrawing from leadership consideration.

At the interpersonal level, work–family initiatives should address not only formal provisions (leave, flexible working) but also informal expectations and the maintenance of professional networks during and after career interruptions.

At the organisational level, priorities include greater transparency in progression pathways, recognition of invisible work within evaluation and promotion criteria, and disruption of informal exclusionary networks. Participant scepticism toward initiatives experienced as compliance-oriented (e.g., ASPIRE, Athena SWAN) suggests value in evaluation frameworks that assess cultural impact, behavioural change, and accountability rather than procedural completion alone.

At the policy level, contrasting contexts imply different emphases. Accounts at KNUCA point to the value of stronger implementation mechanisms, while accounts at CU highlight the gendered effects of performance regimes and metrics-centred governance. Beyond these two cases, we would argue that integrating gender considerations into the reconstruction planning of crisis-affected institutions is important both to protect and to build on pathways into leadership.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be noted. First, although the shared protocol set a target of 8–10 participants per group, the achieved samples differed (44 at KNUCA, which met the target; 27 at CU, where recruitment was constrained by concurrent institutional restructuring), as did the composition of data modes. At CU, five of the 27 participants contributed through the online survey rather than a focus group, and recruitment of men was limited (five participants), which underrepresents UK men's perspectives and limits comparison of gender differences in barrier perception; at KNUCA, two of the five focus groups (FG1–FG2) were not audio-recorded and are represented through facilitator notes rather than transcripts. These differences have interpretive consequences: the two cases cannot be compared on the frequency or intensity of particular barriers, and themes drawn from written or note-based sources carry a different evidential texture from those drawn from full transcripts. We therefore treat the analysis as identifying which barriers appear in both settings and how they are framed, rather than measuring their relative prevalence. Second, the study does not undertake an intersectional analysis. Data collection did not systematically capture variation by race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background, so the study cannot examine how barriers may be compounded for those experiencing multiple forms of marginalisation (Henry, 2015). Future research should employ sampling strategies and instruments designed explicitly for intersectional analysis.

This study is cross-sectional: it captures participants' accounts at a single point during the war,

not changes over time. It therefore documents perceptions of how barriers operate and how wartime conditions bear on them, rather than establishing career trajectories or effects attributable to the war relative to a pre-war baseline. Future research should examine longitudinal trajectories to clarify how barriers accumulate and shift over time, particularly the relationship between early-career self-doubt and later withdrawal from leadership aspiration. As Ukraine enters post-war recovery, the crisis dimension warrants continued investigation, offering an opportunity to assess whether disruption opens pathways for change or reproduces established patterns.

6. CLOSING SYNTHESIS

Overall, the comparison of these two universities suggests that women's routes into leadership in higher education are shaped by connected barriers spanning self-positioning and confidence, care and support relations, organisational practices (work allocation, informal networks, transparency), and field-level norms of legitimacy. The contribution of the study lies in showing how similar barrier mechanisms "travel" across contexts yet are expressed through different institutional and cultural logics; in describing a cross-sectional pattern by career stage, in which self-doubt appears alongside non-consideration or withdrawal from leadership; and in describing how, in participants' accounts, crisis conditions coincided with stronger links between psychological load, caregiving pressures, organisational disruption, and network fragmentation. These findings underscore the limits of single-level interventions and point toward coordinated, multi-level strategies that remain robust under conditions of instability.

FUNDING: This work was supported by the British Council through the Going Global Partnerships programme (Application ID: GEP2024-041) "Addressing the underrepresentation of women in Higher Education leadership: Ukraine and UK" (SPRINGBOARD).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE HISTORY: Received 2026-01-09 / Accepted 2026-08-06

