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The year I found my voice: Transforming self-confidence through a women's leadership programme

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Women-only leadership development programmes are vital for reducing the global gender gap in senior management; however, research on their impact is limited. This study explores the effect of a transformational women's leadership development programme on self-confidence among female academics in a South African higher education institution. A mixed methods approach combines quantitative analysis to assess the changes in women leaders' communication confidence, while the qualitative analysis explores the women leaders' experiences in adopting new behaviour patterns. The quantitative results reveal significant enhancements in women leaders' confidence, underscoring the programme's ability to drive transformational change. The qualitative insights uncover a four-phase transformational learning process, which includes encountering a disorienting dilemma, meaning-making, achieving transformational insight and integrating these insights into leadership practice.

Contribution: This study provides new insights, recommendations for future research and guidance on developing, evaluating and implementing women's leadership programmes in higher education. It contributes significantly to understanding the role of women-only leadership development in addressing gender equity.

Keywords: women leadership development programme; higher education; confidence; identity development; self-efficacy; transformational learning; communication.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the focus on women's leadership and their under-representation at senior levels across sectors, including higher education institutions (HEIs) (Herbst 2020; Herbst & Roux 2021; Meza-Mejia, Villarreal-García & Ortega-Barba 2023; Peterson 2019). Despite efforts to promote inclusion, diversity, equity at management levels (Bhatti & Ali 2021) and substantial investments in developing women leaders, gender inequality persists in executive and senior leadership roles (Babic & Hansez 2021; Round et al. 2024). In South African public universities, a notable gender gap remains, with women occupying only 15% of vice-chancellor roles, the primary decision-making positions (Businesswomen's Association of South Africa 2017). Although women constitute most of the staff in HEIs, their presence on executive levels remains limited (Mdlenleni, Mandyoli & Frantz 2021). Persistent metaphors depicting the challenges faced by women in academia, such as sticky floors, dead-end pipelines, leaky pipes, glass ceilings and glass cliffs, continue to raise the alarm (Carli & Eagly 2016; Meza-Mejia et al. 2023).

Structural and personal barriers to success include institutionalised gender bias in recruitment and promotion, a masculine organisational culture, inflexible working hours, work-family issues and inadequate professional support (Hornak, Murphy & Johnson 2016; Meza-Mejia et al. 2023; Vant Foort-Diepeveen, Argyrou & Lambooy 2021). Women's self-confidence, or the lack thereof, is frequently cited as a key factor contributing to the gender gap in senior management roles (Bear et al. 2017; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023; Herbst 2020; Kay & Shipman 2014; Luzio 2019; Manfredi 2017). Consequently, many women leaders adapt to their perceived roles within a male-dominated culture by self-silencing and curbing their aspirations. They often experience being ignored because of limited communication, downplay their achievements, exercise caution in expressing authority and wait for acknowledgement before speaking in meetings (Debebe et al. 2016).

Women's belief in their ability to influence others and the value of their opinions are closely tied to their self-confidence, self-efficacy and confidence in their knowledge and skills (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska & Bimber 2021). A lack of confidence and women not speaking up, achieving goals and

advancing their careers further contribute to the gender pay gap (Sterling et al. 2020). Addressing these issues can help reduce gender inequality at senior management levels (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023; Kay & Shipman 2014).

The key question is: *How can women leaders be developed to gain the confidence needed for confident communication and leadership and how can the impact of their development be assessed?* The research aimed to investigate the impact of a Women's Leader Development Program (WLDP) on the self-confidence of women academics in a South African HEI. Recognising the influence of gender dynamics in leadership, particularly in higher education (HE), underscores the importance of targeted interventions that support Transformative Learning (TL) and ensure equal opportunities for women (Debede et al. 2016; Mdlenleni et al. 2021).

This article focusses on building self-confidence in communication among female academics to attain leadership-level self-efficacy. By exploring women's experiences, perceptions and processes for building self-confidence in communication and leadership identity, this study contributes to women-centred research in leadership development. It particularly underscores how women-only programmes can boost confidence in communication.[1]

Literature review

Structural gendered leadership challenges

Equitable female participation in leadership is vital for transformational change in HE (Kiguwa 2019; Sadiq et al. 2019). However, persistent gender inequalities indicate entrenched systemic biases within universities, where women often face exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination (Kiguwa 2019; Meza-Mejia et al. 2023; Sadiq et al. 2019). Studies have indicated that women, more than men, confront unique challenges and systemic biases, especially in traditionally male-dominated environments (Galsanjigmed et al. 2023; Meza-Mejia et al. 2023; Round et al. 2014). These structures hinder women's career progression and pressure them to conform to masculine leadership norms, potentially stifling their authentic leadership expression (Galsanjigmed et al. 2023; McNae & Vali 2015). Stereotypes such as the 'think manager, think male' bias position men as inherently more suited to leadership roles, while women are inherently only suited for supportive roles (Brescoll 2016). Women in senior positions face a 'double bind', where they are criticised for being too assertive or not assertive enough (Round et al. 2024). They must conform to gender expectations such as warmth and collaboration or face backlash for exhibiting traditionally masculine behaviours. This creates a challenging scenario where meeting one set of expectations can lead to criticism for not meeting the other (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023).

Consequently, female academics often experience their careers differently from their male counterparts, encountering microinequities that pressure them into silence or cause them to be actively silenced (Meza-Mejia et al. 2023). Gender biases and internalised stereotypes can erode women's leadership self-efficacy, confidence and leadership identity, impacting their and ambition and resilience. These compounded stresses and doubts weaken their leadership effectiveness and aspirations for senior positions (Round et al. 2024), resulting in a cycle of low confidence and self-efficacy, which can make career advancement more challenging for women than for men.

Individual gendered factors

Self-confidence or self-efficacy

Followers often view a leader's confidence as crucial, signifying decisiveness and clear communication (Murphy & Johnson 2016). Self-confidence, a general belief in one's abilities, significantly influences thought patterns, emotions, motivation and behaviour (Bandura 1986). Self-efficacy, a more specific form of self-confidence, is essential for leadership effectiveness (Murphy & Johnson 2016). It is the belief in one's ability to successfully execute a task to achieve a desired outcome regarded as situationally specific self-confidence. If individuals doubt their capability to perform certain actions, they avoid attempting them (Bandura 1997).

Research on self-efficacy consistently highlights gender disparities, with women often reporting lower self-efficacy in traditionally male-dominated fields such as leadership, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and HE leadership. These disparities impact women's engagement with challenging tasks and overall performance (Buchen & Keegan 2020; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023). Gender stereotypes contribute significantly to low self-efficacy, leading women to underestimate their abilities despite having qualifications and performance comparable to their male counterparts (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023; Hoyt & Blascovich 2010). For women, the belief in their ability to influence others and the value of their opinions is closely tied to internal efficacy and confidence in their knowledge and skill (Lilleker et al. 2021).

Martin and Philips (2017) argued that confidence signals competence, driving the achievement of status and power. Research indicates that high self-efficacy enhances women's verbal assertiveness, communication authority and resilience against systemic biases (Hoyt & Blascovich 2010; Ng & Lucianetti 2016). Developing a *leadership identity* or seeing oneself as capable is intrinsically linked to *self-efficacy*. High self-efficacy strengthens leadership identity, enabling women to communicate with clarity, conviction and authenticity (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb 2013).

Fostering self-efficacy in women leaders helps bridge the gap between self-identity and leadership identity, establishing a foundation for effective communication and increased visibility in organisations (Baldwin et al. 2021; Galsanjigmed

1.An earlier version of this article was published as a preprint on the SAGE platform. Herbst, Roux, Naidoo, 2023, https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.23798844.v1.

& Sekiguchi 2023). Supportive environments, mentorship and leadership development programmes positively influence women's self-efficacy by offering opportunities for skill mastery and reinforcing leadership identity (Baldwin et al. 2021). These findings suggest that targeted interventions can bolster women's self-efficacy and promote equitable leadership representation.

Gendered communication and leadership

Women often limit their communication by being overly cautious in expressing authority and waiting to speak in meetings (Diehl et al. 2020). Shapira (2019) noted that in organisations, leadership is judged more by the ability to speak up in meetings than by actual performance. Men's confident communication style in male-dominated environments tends to carry more weight and receive more attention than their female counterparts (Hornak et al. 2016). Women frequently fail to support their opinions with evidence, articulate a strong perspective and communicate without second-guessing themselves (Luzio 2019).

Heath, Flynn and Holt (2014) systematically analysed over 7000 surveys from female executives in Fortune 500 companies. They found that women often face challenges such as being unable to join conversations, being interrupted, ignored or even silenced, making it difficult for their voices to be acknowledged and valued in the workplace. Two decades ago, Tannen (1994) cautioned that men's conversational dominance could silence women and hinder their progress in leadership roles, advising women to minimise apologising in their communication, as it could signal self-doubt. Unfortunately, this issue persists in modern organisations (Meza-Mejia et al. 2023).

Reigstad (2020) viewed apologies as expressing understanding and balance in the conversation. Other studies have shown that female leaders often use a socially-oriented communication style, unlike the assertive, results-driven approaches more common among men (Chakraborty & Serra 2021; Timko 2017). However, a preference for socially oriented communication can marginalise women in male-dominated environments where direct, self-assured communication is often equated with leadership readiness (Sloan & Krone 2000).

Studies indicate that communication challenges stem from women's adaptive strategies to navigate their environments rather than inherent differences (Chakraborty & Serra 2021). This highlights the importance of initiatives such as WLDPs, which empower women to overcome barriers and communicate with confidence. Women leaders must own their voices and communicate confidently to succeed (Grant & Taylor 2014), impacting their authority (Heath et al. 2014) and breaking stereotypes about women's leadership (Gerdeman 2019). Therefore, initiatives such as WLDPs are crucial in empowering women to communicate confidently and overcome barriers.

Self-advocacy

Luzio (2019) emphasised the importance of self-advocacy – confidently communicating one's value to an organisation. Linking this insight to leadership practice, the need for high-achieving women leaders to act assertively and confidently on their own behalf is prevalent (Ruderman & Ohlott 2005). When women encounter gender-related barriers, they may experience a 'confidence gap', where their belief in their competence diminishes despite high expertise and education levels (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi 2023; Kay & Shipman 2014). Supportive environments, mentorship and leadership development programmes positively influence women's self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-advocacy by providing opportunities for skill mastery and reinforcing leadership identity (Baldwin et al. 2021; Hoyt 2005). This suggests that targeted interventions can enhance women's self-efficacy and promote equitable leadership representation.

Practical Intervention: Women's Leadership Development Programmes

Historically, numerous leadership development programmes have been initiated but did not benefit men and women equally. Many of these programmes inadvertently reinforced traditional gender roles, negatively impacting women (Dover, Manwani & Munn 2018). Women-only programmes are still controversial, with critics such as De Vries (2010) arguing that these programmes address an organisation's gender culture and inadvertently frame gender inequality as a women's issue. However, the relevance of women-only leadership programmes stems from the need to address the double bind problem in women's leadership development. Research indicates that gender pressures in mixed-gender settings can compromise psychological safety for women, limiting their ability to explore the dimensions of their leadership experiences (Debede et al. 2016).

Although mixed-gender programmes play a valuable role in women's leadership development by integrating women into organisational networks, research advises that they should be supplemented with women-only initiatives to achieve meaningful individual thought and action changes (Chen & Houser 2019). Women's leadership programmes offer two key benefits: they provide shared gendered experiences and utilise gender-sensitive teaching methods that acknowledge women's relational learning styles. These factors contribute to a safe environment for women learners, increasing the likelihood of transformational learning (Chen & Houser 2019; Debebe et al. 2016).

Transformational learning theory and leadership development

For this study, women leaders' self-confidence is grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (1997), which defines self-efficacy as task-specific self-confidence, exercising leadership and communicating with confidence. The SCT posits that personal agency is driven by people's beliefs in their ability to control their behaviour and respond to external situations. This agency involves 'the power to

originate action' (Bandura 2001:3) and relates to the 'metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions as the most distinctly human core property of agency' (Bandura 2006:165).

Mezirow (1978) was the first to use the term 'TL' to define the process of shifting a person's thoughts, feelings and views about any given concept. Mezirow's theory captures the different and frequently emotional journeys of transformative learning, which require both internal and external forces. He identified four primary theoretical elements: experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse and acting. As an adult learning theory, transformative learning is based on fostering change and challenges learners to 'critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them' (eds. Mezirow & Taylor 2009:xi).

Transformational learning operates at individual and organisational levels, requiring significant departure from established norms and practices. While individual transformation lays the groundwork for organisational change, each follows unique mechanisms and pathways. As shifts in personal beliefs and actions accumulate, they can collectively drive broader systemic change within male-dominated organisational cultures, potentially creating inclusive environments that value diverse leadership styles (Senge 2006). This interdependency underscores that fostering individual growth and adaptability is essential for meaningful change (Ely et al. 2011).

The theory is particularly relevant for women leaders who face unique gender-specific challenges, including feedback shaped by stereotypes and societal expectations (Ely et al. 2011; Debebe et al. 2016; Ibarra et al. 2013). The process, anchored in experiences that can lead to noticeable change, makes it a valuable measure for assessing the impact of the WLDP (Schnepfleitner & Ferreira 2021).

Transformational learning within WLDPs encourages participants to question their frames of reference and overcome limiting beliefs, fostering a leadership identity that aligns with their authentic selves. These programmes enhance self-efficacy and resilience, empowering women to adopt a purpose-driven and confident leadership style distinct from traditional male-oriented models (Brue & Brue 2018). They build confidence and communication skills, enabling women to convey their ideas confidently and lead with assurance (Ely et al. 2011).

Transactional learning is a gradual process of developing new habits and behaviour patterns, comprising three stages identified by Mezirow (2000) and a fourth stage added by Debede (2011), as shown in Figure 1. These stages include:

- *Encountering a Disorienting Dilemma*: A critical, often disconfirming event disrupts habitual thinking, prompting increased self-awareness and uncovers unconscious ingrained behaviours related to leadership.
- *Meaning-Making:* Participants seek new knowledge and perspectives through conversations, observation or texts to resolve the dilemma. This process changes perspectives and behaviour, preparing for change.
- *Achieving Transformational Insight*: A coherent understanding of the dilemma emerges, leading to a redefined sense of purpose. Transformative insights are irreversible, challenging old mental patterns and instilling confidence to act differently.
- *Integrating Insight to Practice*: This phase bridges the gap between newfound knowledge and real-world application, integrating transformative insights into changed behaviours and actions over time and defining new workplace behaviour patterns.

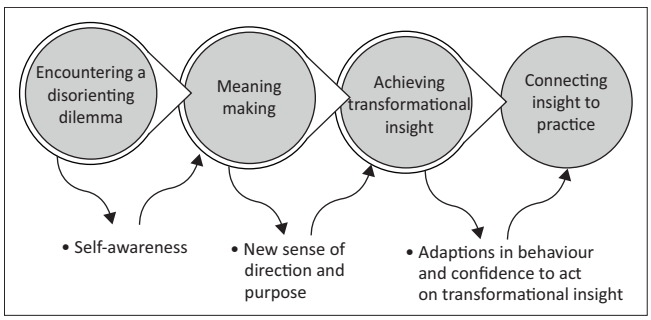
Research methods and design

The main research objective of this study was to explore the impact of a WLDP on the self-confidence of women academics in a HEI in South Africa. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The quantitative approach sought to determine whether completing a WLDP would significantly improve women's ability to communicate confidently. The subsequent qualitative component explored the experiences of women leaders in adopting self-confident communication behaviours.

A woman's' leadership development program design

The WLDP aimed to prepare emerging women leaders and middle managers for middle and senior leadership positions. Its design was informed by the university's annual Academic Leadership Impact Survey (ALIS), which indicated that women leaders consistently rated their leadership effectiveness lower than their raters. This suggests lower self-efficacy among women leaders despite being perceived as equally effective as their male counterparts (Herbst 2020).

Ely et al.'s (2011) framework supported leader identity development, gender bias awareness and leadership purpose, complemented by Wan's (2019) guidelines to address internal gender biases through research-based content, self-assessments, reflection, journaling and virtual peer coaching. The year-long programme centred on three



Source: Adapted from Debebe, G., 2011, 'Creating a safe environment for women's leadership transformation', *Journal of Management Education* 35(5), 679–712. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562910397501

Note: Key moments of deep change and discontinuity with past patterns.

FIGURE 1: The process of leadership transformation.

themes: self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-mastery, positioning leadership as a reflective practice to enhance self-knowledge and skills in core leadership areas.

In the final WLDP module, 'Endings and New Beginnings', participants engaged with meaningful artefacts – group and individual significant items in the training environment. This module allowed participants to creatively summarise their learning journey through a plate-painting activity, providing a space for expressive reflection and synthesis of their experiences.

This article details the programme evaluation, where participants rated their communication confidence at the start of the programme and again after completing the final module. In addition, they answered reflective questions to assess the programme's impact on their development.

Research sample

The target population included 97 women enrolled in a year-long WLDP at a South African HEI in 2020 (50) and 2021 (47). A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used with 70 women who were available and willing to participate in the pre- and post-assessment of their confidence via the Communication with Confidence survey (PwC 2014). The pre-assessment was conducted before the programme commenced, and the post-assessment was administered after completing the final development module. To protect participant anonymity, no demographic data were collected or reported. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained via email.

Research design

This study used a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine and understand the problem thoroughly. Employing both approaches provided a comprehensive view while mitigating their inherent weaknesses (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The sequential explanatory design gathered qualitative data to address gaps identified during the initial quantitative data collection and analysis (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2016:171). This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the programme's impact on participants' leadership identity development and communication confidence. The quantitative component aimed to determine whether completing a WLDP enhanced women's self-confidence in communication. The subsequent qualitative component explored women leaders' perceptions of confidently adopting new communication behaviours. Data collection, measurement and analysis methods included a quantitative online survey and qualitative personal reflection interviews.

Data collection and analysis

Quantitative survey

Quantitative data were gathered through a structured questionnaire adapted from PwC's (2014) *Communicating with Confidence* survey. The survey was administered twice: once before the programme commenced and again after participants completed the year-long WLDP. It was designed to measure changes in communication confidence over time. The questionnaire comprised two sections. The first section evaluated three core constructs related to communication confidence:

- *Point of View*: Assessing participants' confidence in conveying clear, high-quality content.
- *Presence*: Evaluating confidence in presentation style, including information delivery and audience engagement.
- *Preparation*: Focussing on confidence in preparation and the ability to customise content to meet the audience's needs.

The second section assessed the programme's overall impact using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (no impact) to 7 (significant impact).

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 28), applying descriptive statistics and paired samples *t*-tests to assess changes in participants' self-rated communication confidence before and after the programme. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.903 demonstrated high internal reliability of the constructs (Saunders et al. 2016). The validity of the data was supported by employing the established PwC (2014) survey instrument, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

Qualitative interviews and personal reflections

Qualitative data were collected through interviews with all study participants, focussing on their reflections regarding newly acquired communication behaviours during the programme. They were asked to write and reflect on their self-awareness, understanding and the transformation of their perceptions about leadership, aligning with the TL framework's focus on critical reflection and shifts in perspective.

A qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the participants' reflections following an interpretative systematic process involving theme identification and interpretation. This study adhered to the three phases of data analysis outlined by Assarroudi et al. (2018):

- *Preparation*: Data were collected online through open questions provided to participants via Google Forms. Responses were typed and transferred to ATLAS.ti for further analysis. The researchers, having the necessary expertise, prepared the data by organising and familiarising themselves with the responses to ensure a thorough qualitative analysis.
- *Organising*: Preliminary coding was conducted, followed by a debriefing session where all the researchers discussed initial meanings, similarities and differences observed in the responses from a sample of five participants. Based on these discussions, a categorisation scheme was developed for all responses. Manifest content (the direct text) and latent content (researchers' interpretations) were considered to ensure a comprehensive analysis aligned

with the study's aims. This process led to identifying main themes and exploring possible connections between these main themes and broader generic categories.

- *Reporting*: Findings were systematically reported, with a clear association between the raw data and identified themes. Selected quotations from the participants were included to illustrate the meaning behind their experiences. The analysis of the qualitative component generated categories that aligned with the phases of the TL process.

The trustworthiness of qualitative research was enhanced via credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al. 2017). Credibility was strengthened by clearly articulating the research design, methodology and data collection techniques and conducting a comprehensive literature review for comparison purposes. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the study's context and settings, allowing others to assess its applicability to different situations. Dependability was reinforced by involving researchers from diverse backgrounds who independently verified the findings. Confirmability was maintained by adopting an objective stance, minimising bias and incorporating direct quotations to substantiate interpretations, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Methodological limitations

Non-probability convenience sampling limited the data to 70 participants who completed both assessments, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings. Participants rated their own communication confidence rather than being assessed by others and responded to reflective questions evaluating the programme's impact on these areas. A limitation of this approach is that it does not constitute a 360-degree assessment process, which would require input from participants' direct reports and their managers to evaluate their communication confidence comprehensively.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty of Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. FCRE2022/FR/09/019-MS.).

Results and analysis

This article focusses on the programme evaluation, where participants rated their communication confidence before and after the programme using a quantitative online survey. In addition, they answered reflective questions to assess the programme's impact on specific areas as part of the qualitative component.

Quantitative results

The quantitative survey results are presented in the following sections, in which participants self-rated their communication confidence at the programme's start and again after completing the final module. The measures include confidence in the content conveyed, presentation style and preparation.

Confidence in content conveyed

A paired-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare participants' ability to communicate confidently before and after the programme for each of the three constructs. Table 1 shows a significant difference between the pre- and post-mean scores ($p < 0.01$) for all the items regarding confidence in the content conveyed. The largest difference was for the item 'How comfortable are you with expressing your ideas and opinions in a group discussion?' The smallest difference was for the item 'How comfortable are you presenting to a group of people?'

Confidence in presentation style

Table 2 shows a significant difference between the pre- and post-programme scores ($p < 0.01$) for all six items related to the women's confidence in their presentation style. The largest was observed in the item 'How consistent are you in being mindful of avoiding disclaimers when you speak?' The smallest change appeared in 'How consistent are you in being mindful of the verbal signals you send?'

Confidence in preparation

As indicated in Table 3, the results show a significant difference between the pre- and post-programme scores ($p < 0.01$) across all the items related to confidence in preparation and customisation. The item 'How often do you write down your goals and objectives before a discussion?' showed the biggest change. The item 'How often do you prepare your thoughts in advance of a discussion?' showed the smallest change

Overall impact of the programme on the dimensions

Table 4 reveals a significant difference in the pre- and post-programme mean scores ($p < 0.01$) for communicating confidently, indicating that the programme's substantial impact across all three constructs was measured. The greatest impact was observed in confidence in the content conveyed, followed by confidence in their presentation and style. Confidence in preparation and customisation indicated the smallest impact.

Overall evaluation of the impact of the programme

Table 5 provides an overall evaluation of the programme's impact on the participant's ability to communicate confidently, as well as their self-awareness and self-management. On a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = no impact; 7 = significant impact), participants rated the programme's impact as high (mean score = 6.31). For the impact on *self-awareness and self-management*, participants also reported a high impact (mean score = 6.40).

TABLE 1: Paired *t*-test for each item of the dimension or construct: Point of view.

Items	Pair	Mean	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
How comfortable are you with expressing your ideas and opinions in a group discussion?	Pre Post	3.49 4.41	0.775 0.577	-9.882	69	0.00*
How comfortable are you presenting to a group of people?	Pre Post	3.77 4.51	0.871 0.531	-6.209	69	0.00*
How comfortable are you with asking questions in a group?	Pre Post	3.57 4.36	0.910 0.615	-7.739	69	0.00*
How comfortable are you admitting you do not know something?	Pre Post	3.69 4.56	0.894 0.581	-9.147	69	0.00*
How comfortable are you disagreeing with someone in a way that does not cause undue conflict?	Pre Post	3.69 4.56	0.894 0.581	-9.147	69	0.00*

SD, standard deviation; *df*, degrees of freedom.

*, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2: Paired *t*-test for each item of the dimension or construct: Presence.

Items	Pair	Mean	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
How comfortable are you at walking into a room of people you have just met?	Pre Post	3.40 4.33	0.750 0.631	-9.253	69	0.00*
How consistent are you in being mindful of the verbal signals (e.g. tone of voice, choice of words, etc.) you send?	Pre Post	3.60 4.54	1.027 0.630	-7.960	69	0.00*
How consistent are you in being mindful of the non-verbal signals (e.g. posture, facial expressions, body language, etc.) you send?	Pre Post	3.31 4.20	0.733 0.628	-8.786	69	0.00*
How consistent are you in being mindful at avoiding disclaimers when you speak? (e.g. 'I'm not sure, but …'; 'Maybe …;')	Pre Post	3.01 4.00	0.940 0.681	-9.411	69	0.00*
How consistent are you in regulating your emotions (remaining calm and composed) during touch conversations?	Pre Post	3.01 3.97	0.909 0.701	-8.670	69	0.00*

SD, standard deviation; *df*, degrees of freedom.

*, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 3: Paired *t*-test for each item of the dimension or construct: Prepare.

Items	Pair	Mean	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
How often do you prepare your thoughts in advance of a discussion?	Pre Post	3.49 4.07	0.880 0.688	-6.209	69	0.00*
How often do you practice how you will articulate your thoughts?	Pre Post	3.30 3.96	0.787 0.751	-6.474	69	0.00*
How often do think through the impression you want to make?	Pre Post	3.39 4.09	0.889 0.676	-7.119	69	0.00*
How often do you write down your goals and objectives before a discussion?	Pre Post	3.13 3.96	1.062 0.842	-7.317	69	0.00*
How often do seek feedback from a trusted friend or colleague before important conversations?	Pre Post	3.27 3.86	1.102 0.889	-4.701	69	0.00*

*, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 4: Paired *t*-test for each dimension of the communicating with confidence survey.

Items	Pair	Mean	SD	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
Point of view: What you say	Pre Post	3.59 4.41	0.640 0.411	-13.07	69	0.00*
Presence: How you say it	Pre Post	3.27 4.21	0.641 0.478	-12.669	69	0.00*
Prepare: How your audience hears it	Pre Post	3.31 3.99	0.758 0.558	-8.588	69	0.00*

SD, standard deviation; *df*, degrees of freedom.

*, $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 5: Overall evaluation of the impact of the programme.

Items	*N*	Mean	Standard deviation
How would you rate the overall impact of the programme on your *ability to communicate with confidence?*	70	6.31	0.692
How would you rate the overall impact of the programme on your *self-awareness and self-management*	70	6.40	0.689

Qualitative results

The findings from the study provide empirical evidence for a relatively new and underexplored theory suggesting that women's leadership development is most effectively facilitated within a gender-specific community of practice that provides psychological safety, support and understanding. The qualitative data confirmed that the participants experienced transformational learning involving 'deep change and discontinuity with past patterns' (Debebe et al. 2016:232). The following discussion highlights how the participants experienced TL across phases, building confidence to communicate effectively.

Phase 1: Experiencing a Leadership Dilemma

Participants recognised a disconnect between their ingrained leadership behaviours and their evolving self-concept, significantly enhancing their self-awareness. Developing participant's self-awareness was a critical step in the TL process as their pre-existing perceptions of themselves, what it means to be a leader and their effective leadership qualities were challenged. They examined deeply ingrained assumptions about leadership that shaped their identity, and many participants realised that these behaviours no longer aligned with their development. One participant expressed that:

> 'The program increased my awareness of how I present myself and how I come across. And even though I still make many mistakes I am aware of them and try to improve.' (Participant WL34, Female)

Reflection led to a heightened self-awareness of their motivations, values, skills and strengths, and initiated a new sense of identity. Activities such as peer feedback, group work, role plays, journaling and engaging with learning materials, including case studies, books and self-assessments, enabled participants to explore and articulate personal leadership dilemmas. A participant reflected on her transformative process:

> 'Any year of my life this would be a perfect re-awakening of self. I have learned so much that I can lead effectively.' (Participant WL31, Female)

Phase 2: Meaning-making

The programme provided new knowledge and experiences that strengthened the women's self-confidence. This was evident in the reflections interpreted by the authors and observed in the women's actions during the workshop. Communication confidence increased by mastering communication techniques and building self-confidence to express ideas. A participant shared:

> 'The impact is immense! I'm courageous, I'm confident in showing up in the world and having my voice heard and becoming the power force that I'm created to become.' (Participant WL33, Female)

Similarly, another participant noted:

> 'The program has shown that my opinion and voice count. Respect and listening are the key to communication, and how I show up brings success.' (Participant WL40, Female)

Sharing information and experiences during the WLDP and new friendships among participants continued beyond the programme, fostering a growing sense of belonging and feeling valued as part of a 'collective sisterhood'. This connection helped address some leadership dilemmas unique to women leaders.

The women leaders expressed empathy and support for one another and created a collective experience that was not only on an intellectual level but engaged mind, body and spirit:

> 'The right people have always shown up as lighthouses along my adventures in life. … these WIL women have shown up at the right time. They have become woven into the beginnings of my new, great unfolding.' (Participant WL3, Female)

Another participant affirmed the potential of collective action for change:

> 'I think the program has affirmed how women operate well in a shared community and that any organisation can benefit from that thinking way of being.' (Participant WL43, Female)

One participant concluded that:

> 'I have learned the value of accountability and support from a solid sisterhood.' (Participant WL42, Female)

Phase 3: Achieving Transformational Insight

Changing leadership identity requires TL, which challenges individuals to rethink their understanding of themselves, their environment and the relationship between them. This process fosters an altered self-perception, where individuals see themselves as 'agents of change, rather than as uncritical reproducers of socially endorsed behaviour patterns' (Gawlicz 2022:74).

For some participants, the programme challenged assumptions grounded in internal factors, such as self-perception and belief. For others, these presumptions were influenced by external factors, such as how they viewed their surrounding environment. Several participants noted interactions between internal and external forces, which they needed to analyse and confront. By recognising the limitations of these habitual thought and behaviour patterns and understanding how these hindered their effectiveness, they crossed a significant threshold in their development. This process initiated the formation of a new identity that was still evolving and marked a departure from past self-conceptions. One participant observed:

> 'I see myself changing how I handled issues since I started attending the program. In short, the new leader in me is gradually coming out.' (Participant WL69, Female)

This transformation reflects a deep shift in self-perception and approach. A participant echoed this newfound perspective:

> 'It has changed my personal and professional life; I do things differently.' (Participant WL51, Female)

They could no longer view themselves in the same light, reflecting transformational insight that reshaped their identity.

Phase 4: Integrating insight into practice

Insights gained by the women empowered them to adapt their behaviour and act on their new understandings. The influence of the learning processes persisted beyond completing the WLDP, with many participants expressing a commitment to continue applying these insights. As a participant expressed:

> 'I now actively reflect on my actions, speak up when needed and strive to set an example every day.' (Participant WL70, Female)

For these women leaders, greater agency meant establishing personal and professional goals and increased self-efficacy – the conviction that they possess the necessary skills and resources to meet the demands of their tasks and work environment. The confidence and a strong sense of self-efficacy were reinforced through the continuous support and skill-building activities offered through the WLDP. As WL21 described, 'I can now write down my short- and long-term goals, which are helping me to progress effectively in becoming a woman of purpose'. Similarly, WL18 reflected that 'The program was very empowering. I am much bolder and more confident in my personal and professional life to plan and take charge'.

In the final WLDP module, 'Endings and New Beginnings', participants received meaningful artefacts with personal and group significance. They engaged in a plate-painting activity to summarise their learning journal. By decorating plates, they visually expressed their growth and kept them as reminders of their roles as change agents. The plates served as motivational tools, reminding them of their key goals to achieve their full potential. They also symbolised women's multiple responsibilities – caregiving and work – highlighting the importance of setting boundaries without fear.

Discussion

The study examined the impact of a WLDP on the self-confidence of women academics in a HEI in South Africa. The quantitative research assessed women's self-reported communication confidence change after completing a year-long WLDP. The subsequent qualitative inquiry explored women's perceptions of adopting confident communication behaviours. Findings emphasised the importance of TL in WLDPs fostering significant personal change (Debebe et al. 2016). Key contributions to TL literature include addressing personal barriers, particularly self-confidence in communication. Results showed a marked increase in perceived confidence across various constructs.

The biggest improvement was in *content conveyed*, where they had to indicate how comfortable they were with expressing their ideas and opinions in a group discussion. Confidence in presenting to a group of people showed the least improvement, likely reflecting participants' pre-existing comfort in their lecturing roles. It is important to note that smaller improvements do not necessarily indicate that the intervention was ineffective but suggest less room for improvement.

The participants' confidence in presentation style showed the largest improvement, where they had to indicate their consistency in being mindful of avoiding disclaimers when they speak. In contrast, their consistency in being mindful of the verbal signals they send illustrated the least improvement, supporting Reigstad's (2020) findings that women may avoid assertive communication because of concerns about negative perceptions.

Significant improvements were observed in their preparation confidence across all items, with the greatest change being in how often they write down their goals and objectives before discussions. However, the least was seen in how often they prepare their thoughts before a discussion, supporting Heath et al.'s (2014) findings that women tend not to prepare to express a strong opinion.

The qualitative data revealed the women leaders' perceptions about adopting new behavioural patterns to communicate confidently structured across the four TL phases of Mezirow (2000) and Debebe (2011). Participants reported increased *self-awareness* when encountering a leadership disorienting dilemma, a key element of TL, as noted by Madsen and Andrade (2018). Recognising their unconscious biases and understanding their impact on leadership identity empowered them to navigate others' biases more effectively. Ibarra et al. (2013) suggested that persistent gender bias frequently hampers the leadership learning process (p. 61), underscoring that addressing unconscious bias within women should be a core focus of WLDPs.

Meaning-making extended beyond individual reflection amplified by shared experiences that fostered a sense of a collective sisterhood. This shared journey allowed women leaders to resolve dilemmas collectively, reinforcing the value of WLDPs and creating a psychologically safe space where women can openly engage, discuss unique concerns and address bias issues (Hopkins et al. 2008; Kassotakis 2017). The safety and support within WLDP enable participants to lower their defences, share experiences and receive mutual support, helping them to address leadership challenges (Debebe et al. 2016). Women's Leader Development Programs foster a community of women and create a unique environment for learning within a predominantly female peer group, building a strong network of peer support that often extends beyond the programme (Ely et al. 2011).

Participants experienced transformational insights, constructing a new leadership identity that significantly influenced leadership, cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects. The findings align with Peterson's (2019) assertion that the programme's sense-making relates to women's self-identities as leaders and identity construction as senior leaders in academia. This newly solidified leadership identity is essential for integrating their new communication skills into the workplace. It supports Debebe et al.'s (2016) view that women-only groups focussed on leadership development yield a greater impact.

Integrating these insights into leadership practice revealed that despite some participants identifying self-doubt or lack of self-confidence as barriers, the research findings provided evidence of increased self-efficacy, confidence and overall validation of their voices as leaders. Increased self-efficacy and confidence were evident, underscoring the importance of self-awareness and identity construction for effective leadership (Ruderman & Ohlott 2005).

Implications and recommendations for practice

Women Leadership Development Programs incorporating TL help women leaders overcome internal perceptions and institutional barriers, fostering self-confidence rooted in their leadership identity and communication skills. Often perceived as hostile, university management cultures can make women feel like outsiders. Women's Leader Development Programs create a supportive environment for women to establish networks, receive mutual support and foster engagement.

While mixed-gender programmes benefit broader integration, they should be complemented with women-only programmes to promote significant change. These programmes should include gender-sensitive teaching and learning practices to enhance confidence, agency, skill development and self-awareness. Women Leadership Development Programs serve as a foundation for personal transformation by addressing unconscious biases that limit leadership potential. Addressing these biases is crucial for building confidence in communication and leadership.

The researchers emphasise that WLDPs must incorporate TL to help women leaders overcome unconscious and institutional barriers and cultivate self-confidence rooted in

their leadership identity. It provides a robust framework for designing leadership training programmes. Trainers can create opportunities for women leaders to articulate their dilemmas, collaborate on solutions and gain transformative insights. Practitioners should implement strategies to apply workshop insights directly into the workplace, ensuring sustained development. TL plays a valuable role in developing leadership identity, leading to significant changes in thinking patterns, approaches and behaviours, ultimately enhancing women's leadership effectiveness.

Research limitations and future research

Women's leadership development programmes can teach negotiation skills, but structural barriers will persist without addressing exclusionary policies and practices. Future research should explore men's leadership development programmes to bring about organisational and institutional change, resolve structural barriers and address the confidence gap, which is crucial for eradicating gender inequality at senior management levels.

A comprehensive strategy focussing on both individual and institutional transformation can significantly advance the gender equality agenda. Future studies should evaluate the impact of WLDPs on broader institutional transformation efforts and consider women's leadership experiences through various social identity lenses, including ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation and class, adopting an intersectionality perspective.

Research into men's roles in supporting women's leadership could reveal how to integrate men into women-only programmes while maintaining psychological safety. Mixed-gender leadership development programmes can foster transformation for both genders and drive necessary institutional changes for gender equity.

Conclusion

This study provided new insights for designing WLDPs using TL. It emphasised the importance of grounding WLDPs in current research, encompassing gender, leadership, adult learning and organisational change theories. The study underscored transactional learning's value in WLDP design. Findings indicated that a well-developed WLDP significantly boosts the self-confidence of women academics in an HEI in South Africa, ultimately enhancing the influence of women leaders in universities and organisations.

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Authors' contributions

T.H.H.H., A.T.R. and V.N. all contributed to the writing, review and editing of the final manuscript. T.H.H.H. was responsible for the conceptualisation, project administration, data collection and writing of the original draft. A.T.R. compiled the qualitative method and conducted data analysis. V.N. handled the quantitative method and data analysis.

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Data availability

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