

Guest editorial: Women leaders at the intersection

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Introduction

This Special Issue, *Women Leaders at the Intersection*, examines how leadership is shaped by the intersections of gender, race, class, migration status, nationality, religion and other dimensions of identity. Drawing on [Crenshaw's \(1989\)](#) conceptualisation of intersectionality, the collection explores how multiple systems of power structure leadership opportunities, recognition and belonging. Although research on women and leadership has expanded considerably, leadership continues to be shaped by heroic white leader norms ([Liu and Baker, 2016](#); [Rosette et al., 2016](#)) and much of the literature continues to privilege gender as a singular category of analysis, obscuring how leadership experiences differ across intersecting social locations ([Sim and Bierema, 2025](#)). This limitation is particularly significant given growing evidence that women from racially minoritised groups continue to experience disproportionate barriers to leadership progression, recognition and retention ([European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023](#); [FTSE Women Leaders, 2026](#); [Grant Thornton, 2024](#); [LeanIn.Org Ma, 2025](#); [UN Women, 2026](#)).

This Special Issue builds on the journal's earlier Special Issue, *Exploring the Intersectionality of Gender and Identity* ([Corlett and Mavin, 2014](#)), which established intersectionality as an important framework for understanding identity and organisational experience. While intersectionality has become increasingly influential within management and organisation studies, concerns remain regarding its institutionalisation, depoliticisation and incorporation into managerial diversity discourses ([Bilge, 2013](#); [Benschop et al., 2015](#); [Janssens and Zanoni, 2014](#); [Lugar et al., 2020](#)). Consequently, there remains a need for research that maintains intersectionality's critical focus on power, inequality and structural change ([Ford, 2006](#); [Corlett and Mavin, 2014](#)).

Responding to this challenge, the Special Issue shifts attention from women's underrepresentation in leadership to the conditions under which leadership is enacted, recognised and sustained. The papers examine how leadership legitimacy is granted, challenged and withdrawn and how organisational systems reproduce inequalities even where formal inclusion has been achieved. In doing so, the collection advances debates in gender, leadership and intersectionality scholarship by demonstrating how leadership authority and belonging are negotiated through intersecting systems of power.

Gender, intersectionality and leadership scholarship

Although *Gender in Management: An International Journal* has long acknowledged intersectional identity issues within its scope, explicit engagement with intersectionality emerged gradually. Following [Crenshaw's \(1989\)](#) foundational work, one of the earliest references appeared in a book review ([Coleman, 2000](#)). More sustained engagement followed with [Bendl et al. \(2008\)](#), who connected intersectionality to diversity management and queer theory, drawing on [Hardmeier and Vinz \(2007\)](#). Nevertheless, intersectionality

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remained relatively peripheral prior to the publication of the Special Issue *Exploring the Intersectionality of Gender and Identity* (Corlett and Mavin, 2014).

That Special Issue helped establish intersectionality as a framework for understanding identity at work by emphasising identity as dynamic, negotiated and shaped by organisational norms and power relations (Corlett and Mavin, 2014). It foregrounded lived experience, embodiment and organisational inequality, while exploring intersections of gender, race, sexuality, occupation and seniority and reflecting on the challenges of “doing” intersectional research (Atewologun, 2014; Kark, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Woodhams and Lupton, 2014). Since 2014, intersectionality has moved from the margins of management and organisation studies towards a more established analytical framework. While Corlett and Mavin (2014), drawing on Davis (2008), described its emergence as a scholarly “buzzword”, intersectionality is now central to debates on inequality, identity and organisational power. However, despite this growing acceptance, leadership has received comparatively limited attention (Derry, 2023). Recent studies have examined how race and gender intersect in leadership contexts and documented the experiences of racially minoritised women leaders (Moorosi *et al.*, 2018; Rollock, 2018; Rollock, 2019; Johnson and Fournillier, 2023; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023; Ruggs *et al.*, 2023; Showunmi, 2020; Showunmi, 2023; Wane, 2023). Collectively, they demonstrate how leadership cultures continue to be shaped by norms of whiteness, masculinity and middle-class privilege. A small but growing body of work has also begun to theorise “intersectionality leadership”, emphasising anti-racist and anti-sexist approaches attentive to multiple forms of marginalisation (Lugar *et al.*, 2020; Miles Nash and L. Peters, 2020; Peters and Miles Nash, 2021). However, this literature remains limited in scope and empirical reach.

It is within these debates that the present Special Issue is positioned. Treating intersectionality as a core analytical lens rather than a supplementary variable (Sim and Bierema, 2025), the collection shifts attention from access and representation to the lived realities of leadership. Rather than asking only why women remain underrepresented, the papers examine how leadership legitimacy, authority and belonging are negotiated and sustained within unequal organisational contexts. In doing so, the papers extend intersectional scholarship beyond identity categories to the processes of racialisation, gendering and power through which leadership inequalities are produced and contested.

Introducing the papers in this Special Issue

Despite growing interest in intersectionality, its application within leadership studies remains limited (Derry, 2023). This Special Issue advances the field by examining leadership through an intersectional lens, showing how legitimacy, authority and belonging are shaped by intersecting systems of power. Three interconnected themes emerge from the collection:

(1) Leadership legitimacy as conditional and contested.

A central theme across the collection is that formal inclusion in leadership roles does not necessarily translate into secure authority or organisational recognition. Rather, leadership legitimacy emerges as conditional, precarious and subject to continual evaluation. The papers show that women leaders often remain accountable to standards of scrutiny not equally applied to dominant groups, particularly in organisational and political contexts structured by whiteness, patriarchy, nationalism and class privilege. This theme is powerfully illustrated by Mbatha *et al.* (2026), whose study of South African Black women executives demonstrates how authority is governed through processes of permanent evaluation. Their concept of *shielding labour* captures the emotional, cognitive and political work required to anticipate and neutralise racialised and gendered assumptions

that threaten perceptions of competence and legitimacy. Similar dynamics emerge in [Kalitová's \(2026\)](#) analysis of the Czech "Circle a Woman" campaign, where increased visibility for women politicians generated backlash narratives questioning their credibility and suitability for leadership. Across both studies, leadership is shown to be less a stable achievement than an ongoing accomplishment requiring continual defence and negotiation.

(2) Organisational systems and the reproduction of inequality.

Rather than locating inequalities solely in individual prejudice or underrepresentation, the papers reveal how exclusion is embedded within organisational cultures, institutional practices and everyday interactions. [Khassawneh \(2026\)](#) provides large-scale quantitative evidence that gendered racial micro-aggressions undermine leadership sustainability among racially minoritised women. Exposure to such experiences increases intentions to withdraw from leadership roles, both directly and through *inclusion frustration*, while patriarchal organisational cultures amplify these effects. Similarly, [Doehler et al. \(2026\)](#) show how equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives may inadvertently reproduce existing hierarchies when whiteness and class privilege remain unaddressed, shaping who can remain, thrive and be recognised within leadership positions. Several papers further demonstrate how leadership norms themselves are socially constructed through intersecting systems of privilege and disadvantage. [Arslan et al. \(2026\)](#), for example, show that expressions of authority and hubris among Turkish female executives cannot be understood through gender alone. Leadership legitimacy is shaped by intersections of family affiliation, socio-economic background, education, international exposure and industry context, producing distinct strategies through which authority is communicated and recognised.

(3) Leadership as relational labour, resistance and praxis.

A third theme concerns the relational and often invisible labour required to lead from marginalised positions. Beyond formal authority, leadership emerges as a process involving mentoring, advocacy, community-building, resistance and survival within organisations that continue to privilege dominant identities. [Johnson and Johnson \(2026\)](#) demonstrate how Black women educational leaders navigate non-linear pathways into leadership while simultaneously undertaking mentoring and social justice work within contexts marked by unequal opportunities and persistent bias. Similarly, [Linaker \(2026\)](#) explores the experiences of middle managers within UK universities, showing how leadership identities are shaped through the intersections of immigration status, academic position, gender, ethnicity, culture and language. The study reveals *dilemmatic identities* that oscillate between resistance to and compliance with institutional and patriarchal discourses, including gender norms, intellectual hierarchies and cultural stereotyping. Participants' leadership identities are further destabilised by organisational neglect, intensified workloads and role ambiguity, highlighting the ongoing identity work required to sustain leadership within higher education. Likewise, [Shakir's \(2026\)](#) critical autoethnographic account foregrounds the emotional, political and epistemic labour associated with leading race equity work within UK higher education. Through concepts including the *racial navigator*, *Misogynislam* and the *Relational, Intersectional Leadership Model*, leadership is theorised as a practice enacted from the margins, involving both resistance to and navigation of exclusionary institutional structures.

Contribution of this Special Issue and future research directions

Papers in this Special Issue demonstrate that attaining leadership does not eliminate inequality; rather, inequalities continue to shape how leadership is enacted, recognised and

sustained. Leadership emerges as a socially regulated process in which authority, legitimacy and belonging are differentially granted and contested through the intersections of gender, race, class, nationality, migration status, religion and other dimensions of identity. Collectively, the Special Issue advances gender, intersectionality and leadership scholarship by moving beyond women's access to leadership to the intersectional dynamics through which leadership is experienced, negotiated and sustained.

Three key original contributions emerge. First, the Special Issue reframes leadership legitimacy as an intersectional and contingent process, showing how women leaders from marginalised groups must continually negotiate credibility within organisations shaped by racialised, gendered and classed norms. Second, it extends intersectionality scholarship beyond identity and representation to examine how leadership power is reproduced through organisational cultures, leadership norms, evaluative systems and diversity practices. Third, it reveals the often-invisible labour of leadership, including shielding, mentoring, advocacy, identity negotiation, role navigation and resistance, demonstrating that such work is central to sustaining authority within unequal organisational contexts.

Future research should build on this agenda. First, greater attention is needed to understand how leadership legitimacy is constructed, challenged and withdrawn over time, particularly during periods of organisational change and crisis. Second, researchers should examine more closely the organisational mechanisms through which inequalities are reproduced, including recruitment, promotion, evaluation and leadership development practices. Third, intersectional leadership research would benefit from greater methodological innovation, including longitudinal, comparative, participatory and decolonial approaches capable of capturing the dynamic relationship between lived experience, organisational processes and structural power.

Finally, we extend our sincere thanks to all authors who submitted papers to this Special Issue; the more than 100 submissions received reflect the vitality, relevance and growing importance of this area of research. We are deeply grateful to the contributors selected for the Special Issue, whose diverse and thought-provoking contributions have shaped this collection and set an ambitious agenda for future scholarship.

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