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Disrupted infrastructures: a feminist view of women in operations management

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore how social infrastructures shape the leadership trajectories of women in Poland's logistics industry. It applies a feminist lens to reveal how organisational culture, emotional labour, mentorship, training and feedback operate as infrastructures that either enable or constrain women's leadership, despite formal gender-equality measures.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Feminist Standpoint Research, this study draws on in-depth interviews with women occupying or supporting leadership roles in a logistics centre in Poland. Grounded theory techniques identify key themes within women's narratives, centring their lived experiences as legitimate sources of organisational knowledge.

Findings – Findings reveal that gendered power relations persist through masculine organisational cultures, expectations of emotional self-regulation and inconsistent support systems. Women's leadership trajectories are strengthened by empathetic mentorship, women-focused training and constructive feedback, yet constrained by exclusionary cultures and the unequal recognition of emotional labour.

Originality/value – This study advances an "infrastructural" feminist framework for understanding gender inequality in organisations. By conceptualising infrastructures as relational systems rather than isolated policies, it contributes to feminist organisation theory and offers insights for reconfiguring support for women leaders.

Keywords Logistics management, Gender equality, Gender and management, Women in leadership, Feminist organisation theory, Social infrastructures

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The evolution of women's rights and career opportunities has been shaped by global feminist movements (Adeniyi *et al.*, 2024), shifting social norms and significant legislative reforms. While second-wave feminism aimed to dismantle formal barriers to women's employment in Western countries like the UK (Ford *et al.*, 2021), Polish women's experience unfolded under a socialist system that ostensibly promoted gender equality but often fell short in practice, compelling women to make strategic choices within difficult circumstances (Molyneux, 1995). From 1974 onward, new labour codes and subsequent amendments

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sought to bolster women's protection in the workplace, expand maternity and parental leave and incorporate anti-discrimination directives aligned with European Union standards. Despite these advances, the question remains whether gender mainstreaming aimed at promoting gender equality (Fagan *et al.*, 2005) has genuinely established the foundations necessary for women to thrive and lead, especially in industries that remain male-dominated. This question is particularly salient in light of Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasises not only women's participation but also the transformation of structural conditions that sustain inequality. Recent policy interventions, such as Directive (EU) 2023/970 on pay transparency, further highlight the limits of formal equality mechanisms when organisational cultures and support infrastructures remain unevenly developed.

One sector exemplifying this complexity is logistics which, despite women comprising nearly half the workforce in Poland, remains predominantly male-led, with women occupying no more than 20% of senior leadership positions (Brzozowska *et al.*, 2024). This disbalance echoes broader concerns about glass ceilings, unconscious biases and systemic barriers impeding women's professional growth in logistics (Yang *et al.*, 2024), issues often dismissed by male colleagues who perceive equal opportunities across genders (Keller and Ozment, 2009). Yet women continue facing significant career obstacles, including limited mentorship opportunities (Alzaaqi *et al.*, 2025), inadequate workplace flexibility for familial responsibilities (Gander and Sharafizad, 2025) and sexual harassment (Poulaki *et al.*, 2023). Such a scenario, shaping the domination and oppression of gendered lives (O'Neill, 2022) and insufficient legislative action, substantially disadvantages women even in superficially gender-balanced fields (Ford *et al.*, 2021).

A critical examination into the persistence of gender inequality (Ford *et al.*, 2021), extending beyond formal policies to highlight how social infrastructures both dismantle and reinforce power dynamics (Enneking *et al.*, 2025), is therefore required. This article considers the material and immaterial (Corchia and Borghini, 2025) social infrastructures influencing organisational dynamics and female leaders' identities. The following section interrogates barriers to female leaders' development and explores how social infrastructures influence their career trajectories. The article then outlines the research approach and presents the study's findings before offering conclusions.

2. Literature review

Women remain underrepresented in logistics leadership (Reynolds, 2024), and gender-focused scholarship in this field is still nascent (Akbari *et al.*, 2024). Mainstream studies primarily highlight two barriers: the glass ceiling, which impedes women's advancement (Haslam and Ryan, 2008), and the glass cliff, placing women in precarious leadership roles when organisations face very difficult situations (Ryan and Haslam, 2005). Yet, the multifaceted challenges women face require a different, critical approach, recognising intensified gendered dynamics such as double-voiced discourse (Baxter, 2011), unconscious bias (Zinn *et al.*, 2018) and extended working hours typical in logistics which disproportionately affect women, given their additional familial responsibilities (Yang *et al.*, 2024).

Although Polish labour laws offer maternity protections, some argue that employers nonetheless prefer men for leadership roles to avoid caregiving disruptions (Dzwonkowska-Godula, 2008). However, when women finally attain leadership roles, they often face overlooked paradoxical double-bind demands, such as having to display clear ambition, but not in an overly explicit manner (Sools *et al.*, 2007). Thus, scholarly debate must shift from women's impact on organisational performance towards gendered attitudes (Hoobler *et al.*, 2018) examining how organisational support enables women's leadership over time.

Mainstream leadership literature typically frames support in individualistic terms by investigating the strengths of coaching programmes (Petrone *et al.*, 2022) or the importance of mentoring and networking (Larasatie *et al.*, 2024). While valuable, this approach obscures meso-level structures that determine support availability and effectiveness. Recent scholarship advocates an *infrastructural turn* within social sciences, expanding the notion of infrastructure to encompass processes shaping everyday organisational practices (Stokes and Coss-Corzo, 2023), moving from isolated policy analysis to underlying networks coordinating labour and knowledge flows. Larkin (2013) explains that "infrastructures bring about change, and through change they enact progress", potentially advancing women's leadership. By applying the *infrastructural turn* within organisations, practices such as mentoring schemes, feedback rituals and talent evaluations shift from isolated human resources (HR) initiatives to relational architectures that allocate resources, status and psychological safety. Employing a Feminist Standpoint Research (FSR) approach foregrounds women's experiences (Patterson and Mavin, 2024), revealing hidden organisational dynamics and breakdowns. As advocated by Corchia and Borghini (2025), this study adopts an expanded reading of infrastructures, viewing them as neither a buzzword nor all-determining force but as an analytic refinement within feminist and organisational theory. This lens emphasises the material and relational arrangements that enable or constrain female leaders' agency.

Seen in this way, five interlocking infrastructures become pivotal to women's leadership trajectories, with *infrastructure of organisational culture* foremost. Despite recognition that women's diverse perspectives spur organisational development (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021), male-dominated cultures covertly discriminate, operating as a *glass cage* that silently curtails women's advancement (Mate *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, *infrastructure of emotional labour*, referring to curated displays of sanctioned affect while masking authentic feelings (Mäkinen, 2021). Women disproportionately shoulder this hidden burden by attending to others and self-regulating more than men (Vial and Cowgill, 2022), affirming feminist claims that invisible emotional labour is central yet seldom acknowledged in women's work (Mäkinen, 2021). Going further, the *infrastructure of mentorship* provides women with opportunities facilitating vertical moves in organisations, making them crucial for professional development (Ramachandaran *et al.*, 2025). In male-dominated sectors, same-gender mentors enhance social belonging, motivation and confidence in relatively alienating environments (Larasatie *et al.*, 2024), whereas cross-gender pairings often recast women as deferential protégées *under all-knowing and powerful men*, thereby reinscribing patriarchal norms (Ehrich, 2008). The scarcity of senior women leaders consequently denies the emerging ones mentors attuned to the dual pressures of career and caregiving, limiting essential peer support (Larasatie *et al.*, 2024). Next, the *infrastructure of training*, underpinning women's career advancement (Clarke, 2011). Effective training programmes embed unconscious-bias literacy (Madsen and Andrade, 2018), allowing to acknowledge various identities and cultivate women-only spaces that nurture potential and self-efficacy. Although such initiatives cannot dismantle systemic inequities, they equip participants to navigate them, thereby expanding individual agency (Clarke, 2011). Finally, *the infrastructure of feedback* remains central to the discussion of effective performance management (Lechermeier and Fassnacht, 2018) and, by extension, fosters organisational and individual growth, particularly for women, who often struggle more than men to recognise their strengths (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998) and therefore benefit from bespoke, identity-affirming guidance. Logistics operations offer a critical site for exploring these infrastructures due to standardised, high-pressure environments that amplify the necessity of robust support systems.

Seeking to advance debates on how social infrastructures mitigate or exacerbate gender inequality in organisations, this article reports a study of the career experiences of female leaders in the logistics industry. Although women constitute nearly half of the logistics workforce in Poland, they remain markedly underrepresented in leadership positions, mirroring patterns documented in international logistics research (Brzozowska *et al.*, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, Poland has emerged as a strategically important logistics location within the European Union (EU), shaped by its geographical position, EU membership and sustained investment in transport and distribution infrastructure (Bentyn, 2016). The presence of foreign-owned distribution centres and transnational operational models has further intensified organisational change within the sector (Bentyn, 2016). These globalised organisational arrangements intersect with enduring gender norms and caregiving expectations in the Polish labour market (Dzwonkowska-Godula, 2008). Accordingly, this study integrates five infrastructures into a single analytic schema, focusing on a Polish fulfilment centre and employing feminist standpoint interviews that foreground lived tactics and tensions. In doing so, it advances the *infrastructural turn* within organisation studies and offers insights for practitioners seeking to redesign support systems in logistics and beyond.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

To examine how social infrastructures shape the leadership identities of female managers in the Polish logistics sector, this study adopts the FSR approach, centring women's voices and recognising their experiences as embedded in broader power relations (Patterson and Mavin, 2024). Given the relative scarcity of explicit feminist scholarship that challenges established ways of knowing, this article addresses epistemic oppression by foregrounding a feminist lens (Bell *et al.*, 2020). The study consists of seven cases of women occupying or supporting leadership roles in western Poland, recruited through convenience sampling via one author's professional connections at the research site. Participants qualified if they held leadership positions, or supported leadership roles (e.g. human resources), within a large logistics organisation. While data collection was situated within a single organisational site, participants had accumulated professional experience across multiple fulfilment centres and operational contexts within the same organisation prior to their current roles. This supports analytical replication by capturing leadership experiences shaped by varied operational settings within a large logistics corporation, whose scale and internal differentiation mirror multi-organisational environments (Al-Ani *et al.*, 2011). In line with qualitative research principles, the study prioritises depth of insight and thematic saturation over numerical breadth.

Table 1 summarises participant demographics. Fieldwork took place in summer 2024 and consisted of semi-structured interviews. Although guided by a pre-formulated interview schedule, interviews were conducted as informal conversations to reduce performativity and elicit participants' lived experiences, values and perceptions more authentically (Swain and King, 2022). The interview guide is available from the authors upon request. All interviews were conducted in Polish, lasted up to 90 min, were digitally recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Transcripts were subsequently translated into English and edited for clarity while preserving contextual nuance. To ensure translation accuracy, the bilingual author systematically cross-checked translations against the original recordings (Brennan, 2022). Open-ended questions prompted reflections on how participants navigated organisational social infrastructures, often leading to broader discussions of gendered power dynamics. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and position titles were slightly modified while retaining their hierarchical meaning.

Table 1. Participant position titles, key responsibilities and organisational tenure

Participant (pseudonym)	Position title	Key responsibilities	Organisational tenure (years)
Stella	Operations Manager	Oversees a single department and direct reports	2.5
Scarlett	Senior Operations Manager	Supervises multiple managers and departments	3
Sarah	Operations Manager	Oversees a single department and direct reports	3.5
Samantha	Operations Manager	Oversees a single department and direct reports	8
Serena	Senior Operations Manager	Supervises multiple managers and departments	10
Emily	HR Business Partner	Provides HR support to operations managers	3
Emma	HR Business Partner	Provides HR support to operations managers	7

Source(s): Authors' own work

3.2 Data analysis

For data analysis, grounded theory techniques were used to identify themes related to emotional regulation, identity formation and other narrative elements in the interviews (Figueroa and Baines, 2024). The first phase involved multiple readings of the transcripts to ensure analytical rigour and enable open coding that remained close to participants' terms. This process generated over 50 initial codes, reflecting the early proliferation typical of inductive qualitative analysis (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). As the analysis progressed, these codes were iteratively compared, refined and merged based on conceptual similarity, resulting in a smaller set of consolidated themes. Feminist conceptualisations of knowledge production recognise that no researcher exists unembedded in the social world, rendering the notion of an objective observer incompatible with feminist research (Lokot, 2021). The authors are therefore acknowledged as situated actors in the research process, particularly in light of one author's leadership experience in the logistics sector. This positionality informed the interpretation of the data and supported an analytic agenda attentive to both shared patterns and internal diversity in women's leadership experiences (Patterson and Mavin, 2024; Patterson *et al.*, 2012). The analysis presented in this article focuses on five organisational social infrastructures that impact women's leadership experiences and render visible often-hidden forms of gendered work. A detailed overview of the analytic process and thematic development is provided in Supplementary_Material_Appendix_A. By foregrounding these infrastructures, the article highlights persistent barriers shaping women's leadership trajectories and contributes to feminist scholarship that challenges misinterpretations of feminism as disadvantageous to men (Enguix Grau, 2025). Rather, feminism is approached as a liberation project aimed at dismantling domination in all its forms (Jaysawal and Saha, 2023).

4. Results

4.1 Infrastructure of organisational culture

Applying the FSR approach provides insight into the organisational culture of the Polish logistics industry through the lived experiences of women, a minority within this male-dominated sector (Yang *et al.*, 2024). Sarah reflects on her experience as the only female

leader in business meetings, describing how gendered communication norms shaped the dynamics:

> Men tend to prefer concise communication, unlike the more elaborate discussions you might have with women. […] The male-dominated environment didn't seem to encourage expressing opinions. I felt it was understood that everyone should handle issues within their own shifts and not involve others. While this wasn't explicitly stated, it was the impression I got. It suited me in some ways because no one interfered with my work, and I didn't feel the need to voice my opinions since I didn't want to create conflict or raise anything in a group setting.

Sarah's account reveals not only implicit exclusion from decision-making spaces but also the internalised fear of drawing attention to herself. While she considered advocating for a more collaborative leadership model, she ultimately remained silent, illustrating how hegemonic masculinity reinforces women's isolation in leadership roles (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). It is unsurprising that female leaders may seek to avoid conflict when their legitimacy is consistently questioned (Lyness and Grotto, 2018). Scarlett recounts how, despite extensive preparation for a leadership promotion, her credibility was immediately undermined by a male colleague:

> You know, everyone is saying you only got the position because you're a woman.

Although this remark came from a colleague who had unsuccessfully competed for the same role, and thus carried a tone of jealousy, it nevertheless reflects broader biases that perceive women as unqualified for leadership (Lyness and Grotto, 2018). Aware of these dynamics, Scarlett prepared herself:

> I had gone over potential scenarios with my mentor and anticipated something along those lines might come up. So, I prepared mentally and had responses ready.

Scarlett's experience highlights how female leaders must strategically anticipate and counteract gendered scrutiny. She complains that "the company is partly to blame because everything revolves around metrics", referencing gender quotas as a factor that, while intended to address historical inequalities, often reinforces essentialist views of women in leadership. When women's advancement is framed as a numerical target rather than being merit-based, challenging existing social norms, resentment can emerge (Guthridge *et al.*, 2022). Emma offers an example of how gender quotas may, in practice, generate tokenism alongside perceptions of disadvantage among men:

> There were strong male candidates […], but the decision was to wait for a female candidate instead.

Tokenism can provoke hostility, reinforcing male employees' perceptions that female leaders are appointed due to gender rather than competence (Chang and Milkman, 2020). However, gendered workplace challenges are not solely shaped by men. Samantha's experience reveals internal competition among female leaders, contradicting the expectation of automatic solidarity:

> They seemed to team up against me. There were several situations where they clearly made things harder for me, putting obstacles in my way. Instead of supporting me in my role, my buddy didn't offer much help […].

In many corporate settings, newly appointed employees are assigned a buddy who provides personalised support and answers questions during training (Chapman, 2009). However, Samantha's designated female buddy engaged in horizontal hostility, possibly perceiving her as a rival rather than an ally. This highlights how patriarchal workplace structures condition

female leaders to compete for scarce leadership opportunities, reinforcing divisions among women and risking negative perceptions (Kark *et al.*, 2024). Beyond organisational culture, the logistics industry presents structural barriers that disproportionately affect women. Scarlett describes the demanding working conditions:

> The job itself can be challenging. Working four 12-hour shifts, often overnight. A woman who wants to be a mother might not choose this. If you have two children and your spouse works full-time, this schedule isn't practical. Additionally, there are biological factors. Women need more sleep, and hormonal cycles can make this type of work more physically taxing.

These challenges raise critical questions about whether equality initiatives, such as gender quotas, translate into genuine inclusivity. Scarlett's observations highlight structural barriers, including caregiving responsibilities and health implications, that necessitate systemic reforms. Without addressing these foundational inequalities, organisations risk perpetuating male-centric norms rather than fostering truly inclusive workplaces (Smith *et al.*, 2021).

4.2 Infrastructure of emotional labour

A recurring theme in the interviews with female leaders is the emotional toll of leadership (Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021) and the challenge of delineating boundaries between professional and personal life (Brue, 2019). Scarlett underscores this in her account of learning to compartmentalise workplace stress:

> Recently, someone asked me what I'm most proud of as a leader. I've been in this [senior leadership] role for eight months and I said that I no longer bring work home. Stress no longer affects me to the point where I can't function after work. I've learned to manage it, and I'm very proud of that.

Scarlett's reflection raises a critical question: How intense must workplace pressures be for an experienced leader to consider emotional detachment a major achievement? Yet, her account signals a positive shift from internalising workplace stress to actively managing it. She further reflects on her need for growth in navigating organisational politics:

> I also need to improve in navigating office politics. I often speak my mind and later regret it, realising I shouldn't have said certain things. I'm honest, and while that's not a bad trait, it can sometimes work against me. It's not that I harm anyone. It's more that I trip myself up because I struggle to understand why we can't have straightforward conversations.

Scarlett's experience underscores the gendered penalties of direct communication for women, particularly white women, in professional settings (Livingston *et al.*, 2012). While authenticity is often celebrated in male leaders, women are expected to temper their speech to maintain workplace harmony, leading to internal identity asymmetry (Meister *et al.*, 2017). Sarah's account further illustrates the evolution of leadership identity through self-reflection:

> You have to separate work from personal feelings and emotions. Of course, you can't do that 100% – we're all human, and emotions don't just disappear. However, the more self-awareness you have, the more distance you can gain from situations. The better you understand that a mistake isn't a reflection of who you are, but simply a mistake, the easier it is to move forward. Similarly, if someone gets upset and says something unpleasant, it's not necessarily about you. It might just be the situation or their state of mind. Understanding this makes working in such an environment much easier.

Sarah's detachment from perfectionism and self-blame reflects a growing resistance to gendered expectations that position women as responsible for emotional and relational

labour within organisations (Vial and Cowgill, 2022). However, her self-awareness was not immediate; rather, it developed over time, as she initially internalised responsibility for organisational challenges:

> I think I could have approached the situation differently, perhaps more maturely, rather than applying such rigid pressure. I'm not sure how I could have handled it better, as it was a very challenging situation. But it was certainly difficult for me, and it unsettled me that I didn't know how to build trust with someone I couldn't rely on. […] Perhaps that's partly my fault. I could have approached it differently or worked with HR […]. That was my plan for the future, but we only worked together for three months.

Sarah's inclination to take responsibility for not "fixing" an unmotivated employee reflects the gendered expectation that women must bridge organisational gaps through relational work (Hurst *et al.*, 2017). This form of emotional labour, in which women are conditioned to assume accountability for relational breakdowns even when structural barriers exist, reinforces patriarchal workplace norms. Despite recognising that external factors contributed to the strained relationship, Sarah still internalised blame, mirroring a broader pattern among female leaders. To navigate these internal conflicts, Serena turned to therapy as a leadership development tool:

> For many years, I worked with people who had therapeutic experience. My mentor, whom I've worked with for years, has a strong background in therapy. Also, for the past two years, I've been in personal therapy, which has been incredibly helpful in understanding my own needs and behaviours […] and it's helped me immensely on a personal level. Not just to understand my strengths but also to organise my thoughts and better comprehend others.

Serena's experience illustrates a shift in leadership identity, moving from imposter syndrome towards self-actualisation. By engaging in therapy, she gains emotional and psychological tools to navigate hierarchical structures, reflecting a broader trend where female leaders seek resilience strategies within systems that remain predominantly shaped by masculine norms.

4.3 Infrastructure of mentorship

For women in leadership, mentorship is a reciprocal process, as they provide guidance to subordinates while also requiring institutional support from influential figures within the organisation (Salas-Lopez *et al.*, 2011). One such mechanism is the assignment of a buddy upon promotion, as Emily explains:

> Every role comes with new routines, and they always have a mentor - another manager in the same position to guide them. If the pairing isn't a good fit, it can cause problems. For instance, if the mentor doesn't enjoy teaching or isn't patient, things can quickly go off track for the new manager.

Although formal mentorship initiatives exist, the success or failure of such programmes hinges on matching the right people (Hale, 2000). If the mentor is unwilling to invest time or lacks empathy, the new leader may feel abandoned. Sarah's story exemplifies what happens when mentorship is assigned on paper but fails in practice:

> At the beginning of my interim role, my manager mentioned that one of the other managers would act as my buddy. However, this manager worked a completely different schedule from me, so there wasn't much opportunity to build a relationship. Beyond that, I don't think he was particularly interested in helping. He came to my shift twice, asked me a few questions about operational metrics […]. I explained my approach and how I handled things, and he seemed satisfied, saying it was fine. After that, he didn't get involved further. He told me he was available if I needed anything, but it felt more like, "I'm here, but don't bother me." It wasn't a warm invitation to engage.

While the buddy nominally made himself "available", Sarah sensed a lack of genuine investment. The result was superficial guidance limited to performance metrics, leaving her with no real ally for addressing leadership challenges. Moreover, Sarah's direct supervisor, although open to listening, eventually placed the burden back on her shoulders:

> I lacked a mentor to guide me. He tried to understand me. He always made time for our one-on-one meetings and listened to me, even when he was visibly stressed. Sometimes I felt like he wanted to escape the room, but he stayed and tried to understand. However, at one point, he told me, "[…] you need to manage yourself and figure things out on your own." I wasn't ready at that point to be so independent. I still needed a mentor.

As a newly appointed interim senior leader, Sarah required not only technical guidance but also emotional and relational support to navigate organisational politics and team dynamics. Effective mentorship could have provided benefits such as reduced stress and anxiety, improved self-esteem, increased professional skills and awareness of different leadership approaches (Dziczkowski, 2013). Instead, she received technical oversight and a directive to become self-sufficient before she felt fully ready. In the interview, Sarah admitted that she did not succeed in the role in the long run and was not permanently promoted to senior leadership. The contrast between Sarah's negative experience and that of Serena and Scarlett underscores the impact of engaged mentorship. Serena attributes her leadership development to a senior manager who provided hands-on guidance:

> What helped me a lot back then was having a very experienced senior manager as my supervisor. He spent a lot of time on my shift and showed me how to handle difficult situations, such as […] when critical machinery suddenly broke down. He was an incredible role model for me.

Moreover, Serena benefitted from mentorship that extended beyond technical training to leadership development:

> What helped me most was finding the right mentor. My HR manager at the time became a significant influence, someone I deeply respected for her decisions, courage, and behaviour. Through regular mentoring sessions, she helped me refine my communication style and learn how to support my team while giving them more space.

Having both male and female role models provided Serena with complementary insights: operational problem-solving on one hand and empathetic, team-centred leadership on the other. This dual approach is crucial, as women leaders navigate organisational, social and emotional demands concurrently. Scarlett also leverages multiple mentors, seeking emotional intelligence from a female colleague and strategic reassurance from a male counterpart:

> I seek different things from each of them because they bring different strengths. From him, I get a fresh perspective and help with rationalising things - like letting go of minor worries. He has a lot of experience and reassures me that things will work out. From her, I focus on managing my emotions.

This approach aligns with the constellation model of mentoring, where mentees benefit from multiple mentors with complementary strengths (Vandermaas-Peeler and Moore, 2023). If Sarah had access to a similar network, she might have been better equipped to succeed in her senior leadership role. This also raises the question of whether organisations should focus on developing leaders who possess both technical expertise and relational skills to ensure more effective mentorship. Female leaders, having navigated the challenges of insufficient mentorship, often become proactive mentors themselves. Serena emphasises the importance of tailoring her guidance to the needs of her mentees:

> If someone requires mentoring, I provide mentoring. If they need to discuss simple, practical matters, like organisational issues or communication methods, I adapt to that too. I aim not to impose anything, but rather to respond to their needs, offering different alternatives and being highly attentive and empathetic, especially during moments of crisis.

Similarly, Sarah takes pride in developing others:

> The thing I'm most proud of is the development of one of my [subordinate] managers.

These narratives demonstrate how women in leadership replicate the support they wished they had received, reinforcing a culture of relational leadership. This aligns with research by Kellett *et al.* (2006), which links emotional intelligence with effective leadership. By prioritising mentorship, women leaders are not only fostering future talent but also challenging traditional models of leadership that prioritise authority over support, paving the way for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to leadership development.

4.4 Infrastructure of training

Female leaders actively engage in peer-driven learning, training and role-playing exercises to address gaps in corporate leadership training programmes. As Sarah recounts her experience joining the organisation:

> I was assigned a so-called buddy, someone who introduced me to the work environment, processes, and the aspects of managing people. I also received a corporate onboarding training package that covered these topics.

While the participants' organisation provides formal training, women leaders assume proactive roles in developing less experienced colleagues, often extending beyond conventional training structures. For example, Sarah describes how she used role-playing exercises to train a subordinate manager:

> We conducted role-playing exercises. I would play the role of a challenging employee, a difficult team leader, or simulate a tough conversation, and we practised handling these scenarios during our one-on-one meetings. Over time, she became an excellent manager […]. She became deeply involved with her team and even participated in all company-organised events.

Scarlett similarly emphasises the collaborative nature of her learning process, describing joint problem-solving with a subordinate manager:

> We often role-play scenarios together. Initially, we would act things out live, but now I usually come to her with a prepared plan for how I'd handle a situation. We discuss the options, what might happen, and how I could respond, and then we practise.

These examples illustrate that women not only undergo training but actively guide others. This reliance on mentorship, coaching and peer learning aligns with the feminist ethic of care, which serves as a source of strength for all members of an organisation (Prieto *et al.*, 2016). Unlike competitive, masculinised leadership models (Wang and Gao, 2024), this collaborative approach challenges rigid power structures and reinforces leadership as a shared, relational process.

Women-specific leadership programmes have emerged to address the historical exclusion of women from leadership positions (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024), playing a crucial role in fostering confidence and career advancement. Emma underscores the value of such initiatives:

> Nowadays, it feels like things are improving, particularly with the implementation of programmes aimed at women's development […] and leadership training. These initiatives help show women that they have opportunities to grow and aren't less capable. It's about building confidence, really.

Similarly, Emily highlights a structured pipeline designed to develop female talent:

> We have a special programme to develop women from [entry levels] all the way to senior leadership. Any woman interested can participate in specific training.

These initiatives act as corrective measures to address systemic barriers (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024), providing targeted resources for women to break into traditionally male-dominated leadership roles. The FSR approach underscores that women's leadership development is shaped by exclusion from traditional power networks, making women-centric initiatives not only beneficial but essential. Despite the clear need for women-specific training, such initiatives often face backlash from male colleagues. Emily recalls a common complaint:

> Last year, when we introduced a training programme specifically for women, there was immediate pushback: "Why isn't there one for men?"

However, Emily adds that no men have initiated similar programmes, despite the availability of support:

> Unfortunately, if permission for such initiatives exists, and we even say we're willing to support [men] or help develop men's programmes, no one takes the lead. No one has picked it up.

This reluctance suggests that men perceive leadership training as a given, rather than a privilege, reflecting an embedded assumption that professional development is assumed for men but is seen as a special opportunity for women. This dynamic is reflected in concepts such as the glass cliff, the labyrinth and inequality regimes (Abalkhail, 2017). The absence of male-led training initiatives further highlights the lack of exclusion men face from leadership opportunities, making the need for structured interventions less visible to them.

4.5 Infrastructure of feedback

Feedback is recognised as a foundational component of leadership development, essential for identifying strengths and areas for growth (Amagoh, 2009). Serena underscores the importance of targeted, real-time feedback in her own development, favouring experiential learning over theoretical knowledge:

> I also relied heavily on feedback to improve. I worked closely with an experienced HR Business Partner on my shift. I told them, "I'm going to do my thing, but I need you to observe me and let me know if I'm doing well or creating any barriers". This feedback approach helped me start learning how to be a manager. Eventually, I felt more comfortable and found my footing as a manager. I didn't read any books - I learned purely through experience and examples.

Serena's proactive engagement reflects a self-directed model of leadership growth. Rather than awaiting formal evaluations, she solicited feedback to refine her style *in situ*. This aligns with feminist research highlighting how hegemonic masculinity and asymmetrical power relations often limit women's access to informal knowledge and mentorship (Hirudayaraj and Shields, 2019), thereby prompting them to seek alternative solutions for personal development. Conversely, Stella recounts a case where a female supervisor's reluctance to seek feedback from senior colleagues impeded her progress:

> She relied too much on people in lower positions, those she perhaps felt more comfortable with. This caused her to stagnate because she didn't get proper feedback on how to improve. When she did receive feedback, she took it very emotionally.

This account illustrates how inadequate or emotionally fraught feedback can stall leadership development. Gender intersects with hierarchy here: the reluctance to seek upward feedback

may stem from fear of judgement or a backlash effect, especially in male-dominated environments where female leaders are more closely scrutinised (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). Yet without robust, constructive feedback, women may remain isolated from developmental opportunities. How feedback is delivered is equally significant. Samantha recounts receiving unprofessional, aggressive criticism from a male supervisor:

> It was a man. From my perspective, and others' as well, some of his behaviour was inappropriate. Constructive feedback is fine, but the way he delivered it was not. He would literally yell, which felt entirely unprofessional for someone in his position. For example, I once made a small mistake in a spreadsheet column, and he would yell at me for it. He was extremely temperamental. While it wasn't acceptable behaviour, I can't deny that it also taught me a few things.

Samantha's ambivalence, acknowledging the utility of the feedback despite the delivery, suggests internalised norms that associate aggression with effective leadership (Hoyt, 2010), a bias deeply rooted in masculine-coded authority. Yet, she contrasts this experience with another male supervisor who adopted a more emotionally intelligent approach:

> Even when he had to provide tough feedback, he delivered it in a diplomatic way, without yelling. His feedback was constructive, making you reflect on what went wrong and how to improve.

These encounters illustrate that the quality of feedback is not determined by gender alone. Rather, it is shaped by power-laden behavioural norms, for instance an authoritarian style often adopted by men who feel entitled to express criticism aggressively. However, as Samantha's second example reveals, male managers are also capable of offering respectful, solution-oriented feedback. Feminist scholarship highlights that female leaders are often required to navigate a spectrum of feedback styles, extracting valuable insights while contending with hierarchical dynamics that tend to normalise aggression. Within patriarchal frameworks, male aggression is frequently valorised, whereas similar behaviours in women are pathologised (Campbell, 1999). Despite her varied experiences, Samantha concludes with a desire to engage meaningfully with feedback:

> If something isn't going well, I'd expect constructive feedback. Similarly, if I think something isn't working, I should feel comfortable giving feedback to my manager.

Scarlett also agrees with the value of feedback and expresses frustration at the general absence of feedback in the workplace:

> Surprisingly, there's a lack of feedback in general in our building. I sometimes feel like I have to fight for it because no one provides either positive or constructive feedback. There's no culture of sharing that kind of input. I don't know why people hold back.

This absence of feedback is particularly detrimental in male-dominated settings, where women often depend on validation for psychological safety and professional clarity (Hurst *et al.*, 2016). In such environments, women may bear the additional cognitive load of interpreting silence, investing emotional labour in decoding indirect cues. Emma provides a broader organisational lens:

> Feedback is often too cautious. We're afraid to tell people directly what they're doing wrong, so we try to soften it. Something like, "Well, maybe you could improve this a bit", rather than saying, "This was done incorrectly". We avoid getting to the point.

Emma further points out a polarised response to feedback: employees who over-internalise feedback, becoming overly self-critical, or those who reject it outright:

> When people do receive feedback, they either take it very hard and overthink, "Oh no, I did something wrong" or they go to the other extreme. They become overly confident, refusing to

accept that they could be wrong, thinking, "I know what I'm doing, and I'm better than this feedback suggests". It really depends on the individual's character.

For women in leadership, already vulnerable to perceptions of being overly emotional or defensive, this dynamic creates further pressure to regulate their reactions. Such scrutiny may lead to anxiety, self-censorship or even long-term psychological effects, including stress and depression (Beddow, 2018). In environments where open feedback is culturally discouraged, women must often work harder to cultivate or decode constructive criticism, navigating a feedback landscape shaped by power, gender and institutional silence.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This research illuminates the complex interaction of social infrastructures in shaping the leadership trajectories of women in Poland's logistics industry. Consistent with feminist standpoint theory, women's narratives demonstrate how power dynamics and organisational cultures implicitly and explicitly constrain or enable their professional identity development and leadership opportunities. The organisational culture within logistics consistently exhibits implicit gender biases, manifesting as expectations of communication styles, exclusion from critical decision-making processes and undermining of women's professional legitimacy (Lyness and Grotto, 2018). Women's experiences of being marginalised in group settings reinforce their reluctance to openly participate in leadership dialogues (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023), thereby reinforcing a patriarchal organisational culture. The study also reveals problematic implications of gender quotas, intended to promote gender balance yet frequently resulting in tokenism and further marginalisation of female leaders (Chang and Milkman, 2020). Such quotas can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes that women are selected for leadership roles based on gender rather than merit, fuelling resentment and potentially exacerbating workplace hostility. A notable finding is the significant emotional labour women leaders undertake to manage professional expectations alongside personal identity. This emotional work, often unrecognised formally (Mäkinen, 2021), necessitates strategies of compartmentalisation, resilience and self-awareness development. Such emotional labour highlights the disproportionate burden placed upon women leaders, who frequently internalise accountability for relational and organisational breakdowns (Vial and Cowgill, 2022), suggesting an urgent need for structural changes in the organisational culture. Mentorship emerges as a critical social infrastructure influencing leadership development (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). The contrast in outcomes between women with effective mentorship networks and those without underscores the necessity of structured mentorship programmes that are empathetic, engaged and strategically aligned to women's professional trajectories. The narratives illustrate that effective mentorship significantly reduces feelings of isolation and inadequacy while facilitating professional growth (Salas-Lopez *et al.*, 2011), thus highlighting the imperative of organisations to prioritise and institutionalise robust mentorship programmes. Training infrastructures, particularly women-specific leadership development initiatives, appear essential to overcoming systemic exclusion. These programmes address historical gender inequities (Chuang, 2019) and enhance women's leadership competencies (Ismail and Halim, 2023) and self-confidence (Harris and Leberman, 2012). However, the backlash against women-specific programmes highlights deeper organisational gender biases and the normative privileging of men's career development (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024), revealing that genuine inclusivity demands an organisational culture that proactively dismantles gender stereotypes and biases. The infrastructure of feedback also critically influences women's leadership experiences. When feedback processes in the logistics sector are inadequately structured, such as by allowing ambiguous incidents, women may be unlikely to speak up for

fear of reputational damage or backlash via limited career opportunities and lower performance ratings (Doering *et al.*, 2023). To foster truly inclusive communication, and therefore a truly inclusive workplace, organisations must employ robust feedback mechanisms (Prusti and Pradhan, 2024) characterised by honesty, respect and support, thereby reducing gender-based vulnerabilities and enhancing women's professional growth.

In conclusion, this study underscores the persistent (Smith *et al.*, 2021) and systemic (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024) nature of gender inequalities within Poland's logistics sector, despite formal equality measures. Effective intervention requires addressing deeper cultural and infrastructural issues (Smith and Sinkford, 2022), notably through enhanced mentorship programmes, targeted leadership training and clear, respectful feedback mechanisms. Moreover, organisations must critically engage with gender quotas to prevent tokenism by organising supportive social infrastructures (Nakajima *et al.*, 2025). This requires moving beyond headcounts as the sole measure of progress and ensuring that women not only occupy senior leadership positions but also have equal access to influence, power and substantive decision-making authority (Gander and Sharafizad, 2025). For women to thrive in leadership roles, systemic reform of organisational cultures is essential (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024), including the explicit recognition and support of emotional labour, the dismantling of competitive and patriarchal workplace dynamics and the promotion of collaborative and empathetic leadership models. Future research should continue to explore these social infrastructures longitudinally and across multiple organisations, deepening the understanding of how organisational policies and cultural shifts interact with women's leadership development. In addition, future studies should investigate the influence of foreign elements within organisational cultures on local branches, as potential cultural clashes may exacerbate challenges for women in leadership positions. Investigating how these external cultural dynamics intersect with local norms could provide deeper insights into the multifaceted barriers women face in leadership roles, further informing strategies for fostering inclusive and supportive organisational environments. Such research is critical in transforming feminist insights into concrete organisational practices that empower and sustain women's leadership identities and contributions in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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