

(Extended Abstract)

## WOMEN LEADERS IN THE BANKING SECTOR: BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

While women's participation in banking has increased significantly, their presence in top leadership roles remains disproportionately low, even when they possess qualifications that match or exceed those of their male counterparts. Gender inequality in leadership is a well-studied issue across different organisations and is particularly evident in hierarchical, performance-driven environments like banking.

Existing research has identified structural, cultural, and symbolic barriers to women's career advancement, including gendered leadership norms, informal influence networks, and biased assessment procedures. However, much of this literature remains either mainly quantitative or lacks specific contextual detail, providing a limited understanding of how women personally interpret, navigate, and respond to these challenges within particular institutional settings. Moreover, the Portuguese banking sector is still underexplored in the international gender and leadership literature, despite its unique organisational traditions and governance frameworks.

This study aims to explore the barriers women face when pursuing leadership roles in banking, as well as the organisational practices and personal strategies that can encourage gender equality. It revolves around three main questions:

- (1) What organisational and societal factors do women perceive as barriers to reaching managerial and senior leadership positions?
- (2) How do women in banking perceive the institutional practices' impact on equal opportunities for career development?
- (3) What strategies do women leaders employ to overcome these challenges?

The theoretical framework draws on important contributions from gender and leadership literature, including role congruity theory, the concept of gendered organisations, and studies on informal networks and social capital. These perspectives show how historically masculinised leadership models and organisational structures reinforce gender inequalities through evaluation processes, unequal access to opportunities, and informal power dynamics.

Methodologically, a qualitative phenomenological approach is adopted to capture the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of women occupying leadership positions in the Portuguese banking sector. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen women leaders from different banking organisations in Portugal. The interview guide is structured around professional trajectories, organisational barriers, institutional culture, informal networks, equality policies, and individual coping or advancement strategies. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed through inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This design allows for the identification of patterns across experiences while preserving contextual depth.

Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity will be strictly observed, ensuring the protection of participants throughout the research process.

The study is expected to offer three primary contributions.

First, at a theoretical level, it advances the literature by integrating structural and relational perspectives on gender inequality, demonstrating how gendered organisational logics and network-based power dynamics jointly shape leadership trajectories in banking. Rather than treating barriers and strategies as separate phenomena, the study conceptualises them as co-constitutive processes within gendered institutional environments.

Second, on a contextual level, it provides empirical evidence from the Portuguese banking sector, a setting that remains underrepresented in international research. By placing findings within a specific institutional and cultural context, the study enhances comparative understanding of gender and leadership.

Third, on a practical level, the findings are expected to guide more structurally grounded equality policies, advancing beyond formal diversity measures towards interventions that tackle informal power structures, sponsorship practices, and organisational culture.

By highlighting women's lived experiences while situating them within strong theoretical frameworks, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of how gender inequality in leadership is reproduced within modern banking institutions.