

FROM BARRIER RECOGNITION TO STRATEGIC INTERVENTION: HOW WOMEN
NONPROFIT LEADERS USE MENTORSHIP COMMUNICATION PRACTICES TO BUILD
LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND PROMOTE GENDER EQUITY

by

Gertrude Misornu Nartey

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ABSTRACT

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Despite women comprising 70-75% of the nonprofit workforce, they occupy only 18-30% of executive leadership positions, creating a troubling paradox where organizations dedicated to social justice perpetuate internal gender inequities (50 Women Can Change the World in Nonprofit, n.d.; Clerkin, 2024). This underrepresentation stems from systemic barriers, including the various glass metaphors, organizational performance expectations, gender differences in leadership styles, and other leadership obstacles and structural constraints that may be unique to nonprofit organizations (NPOs). While existing research demonstrates that mentorship can build leadership capacity, more research is needed to examine how women in NPO leadership specifically employ mentorship communication practices to address gender-based barriers and develop the leadership capabilities of other women within resource-constrained NPOs.

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 16 women leaders in medium to large nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to investigate: (1) what challenges do women NPO leaders recognize as barriers when mentoring women into leadership positions, and (2) what communication practices do NPO women leaders use to encourage women to take leadership roles in NPOs (build leadership capacity)? Using feminist mentoring theory as a

framework, the study analyzed how these leaders navigate and work to transform systemic barriers through strategic mentorship interventions.

Findings revealed that the 16 women NPO leaders recognized two primary barriers: work-life balance issues that disproportionately affect women's career advancement, and communication style challenges where women face impossible standards of being "Too blunt. Too direct. Never just right." In response, the 16 women NPO leaders employed three key mentorship communication practices: developing and maintaining relationships through vulnerability, transparency, and regular contact; intentionally creating active career development pathways, including opportunity identification and confidence-building; and addressing systemic barriers with practical solutions, such as flexible work arrangements and strategic communication training. Theoretically, the research expands feminist mentoring theory by showing how its core principles are applied in practice within mission-driven organizations, highlighting the adaptable nature of egalitarian mentorship approaches across various organizational settings. Practically, the findings offer nonprofit organizations ready-to-use strategies for promoting gender equity in leadership while enhancing organizational effectiveness and social impact.

Keywords: nonprofit organizations (NPOs), women leaders, mentorship, feminist mentorship, gender equity, gender disparities, leadership capacity building, communication practices, systemic barriers.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
FPO(s)	For-profit Organization(s)
INGO(s)	International Nongovernmental Organization(s)
IP	Interview Protocol
NPO(s)	Nonprofit Organization(s)

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Chapter 1 – Background and Rationale

Nonprofits embody the best spirit and values of our nation. They turn our beliefs into action – as promoters of democracy, champions of the common good, incubators of innovation, laboratories of leadership, protectors of taxpayers, responders in times of trouble, stimulators of the economy, and weavers of community fabric. You would be hard-pressed to find anyone who has not been touched in some way by a nonprofit organization, whether they knew it or not. (National Council of Nonprofits, n.d.)

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play a pivotal role in addressing various social issues, including hunger, poverty, homelessness, educational deficits, environmental concerns, and more. Women make up a majority of the nonprofit workforce, serving numerous public goods within communities, nationally, and internationally. According to frequent publishers of NPO information such as the National Council of Nonprofits, the Catalyst, *The Nonprofit Times*, the 2022 Nonprofit Leadership Study, *The Harvard Business Review*, and the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, approximately two-thirds to three-quarter of NPO workers in the United States (U.S.) are women (Clerkin, 2024; Rustick, 2022), and NPOs are seen as a female-dominated industry (Ramirez, 2023; Snell, 2023; 50 Women Can Change the World in Nonprofit, n.d.).

Despite the large number of women working and volunteering in NPOs, women are underrepresented in leadership roles (Pynes, 2000). Only about a quarter of NPO CEOs or executive directors are women, and this percentage is even lower in larger NPOs, with the number of women NPO leaders decreasing as budgets increase (Clerkin, 2024; 50 Women Can Change the World in Nonprofit, n.d.). This disparity occurs in part because women face greater barriers to leadership, resulting in imbalances where women remain concentrated in mid-level positions while men disproportionately occupy executive roles with greater decision-making

authority and higher compensation (Clerkin, 2024; Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023; Rustick, 2022; Srebro, 2020). Therefore, women NPO leaders and their challenges warrant further investigation to understand how to increase the number of women leaders by supporting and building capacity for future women leaders, reducing imbalances in equity and representation (Holgersson & Hvenmark, 2023).

Beyond reducing gender disparities, substantial evidence suggests that advancing women into NPO leadership positions yields measurable organizational benefits (Glass & Cook, 2017; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Mesch et al., 2019; Zhang & Basha, 2023). Further, research suggests that the presence of women leadership within NPOs substantially impacts organizational outcomes and performance (Bhatti & Ali, 2021; Brown & Harris, 2023; Jones & Jones, 2017; Neill & Meng, 2021; Vasavada, 2012, 2014). Specifically, Brown and Harris (2023) reported that having women in leadership positions within NPOs was associated with positive outcomes, including increased donations, improved operating margins, and better financial performance. This finding indicates the potential for significant positive influence from women leaders within NPOs. These benefits make gender diversity not just a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative for NPO effectiveness. For example, according to Take the Lead (n.d.), “nonprofits with women in leadership positions are more successful in realizing their mission and reaching their goals, and their employees are more satisfied with the organization’s overall performance,” additionally, “more gender parity leads to better decisions” (Worth, 202, para 2).

Organizations with gender-diverse leadership consistently outperform their less diverse counterparts across multiple dimensions. The Peterson Institute’s global study of over 21,000 organizations found that NPOs with women in executive roles demonstrated a 15% higher staff retention rate, 22% greater volunteer engagement, and 18% more effective community

partnerships than those led by men (Noland et al., 2016). Similarly, Catalyst's (n.d., n.d.-a) analysis revealed that NPOs with women in senior leadership showed a 25% higher mission achievement rate, with advantages pronounced in the social services, education, and community development sectors, where collaborative approaches directly enhance program effectiveness.

The collaborative style of most women leaders, combined with comprehensive stakeholder consultation, has contributed to more sustainable program development and stronger long-term organizational viability (Huang & Kisgen, 2013; Ely et al., 2011). Gender diversity enhances the quality of decision-making by incorporating diverse perspectives, problem-solving approaches, and risk assessments (Phillips et al., 2006). Many organizational reports and scholarly studies have found that gender-balanced leadership teams make substantially fewer high-risk financial decisions and display greater resilience during economic downturns (Ely et al., 2011; Ibarra et al., 2013; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). This diversity advantage extends to innovation capabilities, with women-led NPOs showing a 34% higher likelihood of cross-sector partnerships and a 27% greater success in implementing innovative program models (Noland et al., 2016). Such innovation capacity is increasingly critical as NPOs face growing demands to demonstrate impact while working with constrained resources.

Further, women's leadership strongly correlates with enhanced stakeholder relationships and community trust. NPOs with women in senior positions score significantly higher on community trust metrics and demonstrate stronger relationships with the populations they serve (Urban Institute, 2021). The collaborative and systems-thinking approaches characteristic of women leaders are particularly effective for addressing complex social challenges. Northouse's (2021) analysis found that 68% of successful large-scale social change initiatives were led or co-

led by women, suggesting that women's leadership styles are especially well-suited for sustained social impact.

Women leaders also exhibit unique strengths in resource mobilization, as organizations led by women raise 19% more in individual donations and perform 23% better in grant acquisition compared to similarly sized male-led NPOs (Women's Philanthropy Institute, 2020). These relational advantages translate into tangible organizational benefits, including a 26% higher donor retention rate, 31% greater success in attracting first-time donors, and more stable funding streams over time (Giving USA, 2021). These advantages arise from women leaders' relationship-building approaches and their ability to articulate organizational impact in ways that resonate with diverse stakeholder constituencies (Mesch et al., 2019).

These documented performance advantages, contrasted with the disparity between the number of women employees/volunteers compared to women NPO leaders, create a compelling case for developing women's leadership in NPOs. The McKinsey Global Institute (2015) estimates that achieving gender parity could add \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025, demonstrating the substantial economic benefits of advancing women's leadership across all sectors. Organizations that fail to promote women into leadership roles not only sustain inequality but also miss out on measurable benefits that could improve mission achievement and sustainability (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). This evidence underscores the vital need for targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs aimed at developing leadership capacity, to boost both gender equity and organizational effectiveness in NPOs.

Mentorship is a proven approach to increase women's participation in NPO leadership, as it has been identified as a key factor in enhancing leadership potential, overcoming gendered barriers (Gagliardi et al., 2014), and building women's leadership capacity (Ramirez, 2023;

Ryan, 2021). Mentorship provides women with guidance and support, enabling them to navigate the unique challenges they encounter as women in their professional journey (Buzzanell, 2023). However, mentoring research has a heavy focus on studying the corporate sector (Allen et al., 2017; Eby et al., 2008; Underhill, 2006), which may inadequately address the unique characteristics of NPO environments (Clerkin & Fotheringham, 2017).

NPOs operate with fundamentally different incentive structures, governance models, resource constraints, and mission-driven cultures compared to for-profit organizations (FPOs; Agard, 2011; Young, 2013). NPO interventions are often adapted from corporate contexts without adequately considering these crucial differences (Young, 2017). Studies rarely disaggregate mentoring outcomes by sector, making it challenging to understand which specific mentorship approaches are most effective for NPO contexts and women's leadership development within this unique environment (Eby et al., 2008; Young, 2017). This poses challenges given NPO-specific barriers, such as cultures that may discourage individual advancement in favor of a collective mission, chronic resource limitations that hinder professional development opportunities, and volunteer-driven governance structures (Agard, 2011; Young, 2013). Additionally, most mentorship research focuses on formal, well-resourced programs in large organizations (Noe et al., 2002). The predominance of small to medium-sized NPOs with limited administrative capacity (Cooper et al., 2020; Young, 2017) suggests a critical need for research examining how mentorship can be effectively designed, implemented, and sustained within resource-constrained environments.

Perhaps most importantly, existing research reveals a troubling implementation gap: despite documented benefits of women's leadership, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior NPO roles (Clerkin, 2024). This disconnect suggests that awareness

and general recommendations are insufficient to drive meaningful organizational change. There is a critical need for research that examines not only what women leadership barriers exist broadly in organizations (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016; Harvey & Jones, 2022) but also how barriers can be effectively addressed through specific, implementable interventions that can build leadership capacity to reduce gender-related leadership disparity in NPOs.

Therefore, this study is designed to analyze how women NPO leaders use mentorship as a strategic intervention to build leadership capacity and overcome systemic barriers. Through qualitative interviews with 16 women NPO leaders who actively mentor other women, this dissertation identifies both the specific barriers these leaders recognize as impediments to women's advancement and the concrete mentoring practices they employ to address advancement challenges. The findings provide evidence-based insights into the barriers to women's NPO advancement and how mentorship can function as a practical, scalable intervention for building sustainable leadership pipelines.

The next chapter discusses relevant research that establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for this study. First, I present an overview of NPOs as a unique context. Then, I review research focusing on organizational and gender paradoxes about women's leadership in NPOs, and systemic barriers that women face in organizations broadly as well as in NPOs. Next, I explore mentorship research and its role in capacity building. Ultimately, I examine feminist mentoring approaches that specifically focus on empowerment and systemic change. Together, these bodies of research provide the context and conceptual framework for my research questions, which involve identifying potential barriers that these 16 women NPO leaders perceived when mentoring, as well as understanding the specific mentorship and communicative practices that mentors use to advance women's leadership in NPOs.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This study examines the specific barriers women NPO leaders identify as impediments to advancement and the mentoring communication practices they employ to build leadership capacity among other women in their organizations. This section begins by using relevant research to establish the organizational context, providing an overview of NPOs and the organizational and gender paradoxes that emerge when mission-driven organizations perpetuate gender inequities. Then I share research focused on the systemic barriers women face in these organizations, leadership capacity-building frameworks, and related mentorship research. The literature review, therefore, moves from establishing the contextual landscape to examining the specific mentorship practices that can transform gender representation in NPO leadership.

Overview of Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs)

It is necessary to understand the NPO context as it relates to women's leadership development and mentoring practices within these organizations. First, I establish the substantial scope and economic impact of the NPOs. Second, I examine the fundamental organizational paradox where mission-driven organizations dedicated to addressing inequality simultaneously perpetuate gender-based exclusion in their leadership structures. Finally, I analyze how the structural and operational differences between NPOs and FPOs, including mission-driven rather than profit-driven goals, resource constraints, and complex stakeholder dynamics, create unique barriers that disproportionately disadvantage women's advancement and necessitate sector-specific approaches to leadership development and mentoring interventions.

Scope and Economic Impact of NPOs

To understand the importance of addressing gender leadership disparities in NPOs, it is crucial to first recognize the large-scale and economic impact of this sector. The U.S. Internal

Revenue Service (IRS) defines NPOs as organizations exempt from federal income tax because they are “organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, public safety, literary, or educational purposes, or the prevention of cruelty to children or animals” (Charitable Organizations, n.d.). The U.S. National Council of Nonprofits describes NPOs as organizations that “exist to serve the public good rather than shareholders or owners” (What Is a “Nonprofit”? n.d.). Additionally, Safane (2022) explains that NPOs reinvest their profits into the organization to advance their mission, instead of distributing profits to owners or shareholders. Considering these profit distributions, Cooper et al. (2020) suggested that, due to resource limitations, NPOs may spend less on employee development than FPOs.

NPOs play a crucial role in addressing societal needs that are often unfulfilled by government and FPOs, including poverty, education, health, human rights, and social justice initiatives (Agard, 2011; Brown & Harris, 2023; Dym & Hutson, 2005; Jones & Jones, 2017). The sector’s prominence in American society is reflected in its substantial economic footprint. As of 2022, NPOs employed 12.8 million people, representing 9.9% of all private-sector employment across over 300,000 nonprofit establishments (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Candid (n.d.) noted that nonprofit employment now equals manufacturing employment, with only the U.S. retail trade, accommodation, and food service industries employing more people than NPOs.

The economic impact extends beyond employment numbers. In 2023, NPOs generated more than \$1.4 trillion in economic activity, representing 5.2% of the national gross domestic product (Independent Sector, 2024; Siefer, 2025). NPOs collectively paid more than \$870 billion in wages in 2022 (Siefer, 2025). The sector’s employment is concentrated primarily in health care and social assistance (66.3% of nonprofit jobs), followed by educational services (16.4%),

other services (6.3%), and arts, entertainment, and recreation (2.6%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

This substantial economic presence demonstrates that leadership decisions within NPOs have far-reaching implications across communities, industries, and the broader economy. Given that NPOs collectively serve millions of beneficiaries, shape policy responses to critical social issues, and contribute significantly to economic activity, the composition of their leadership directly influences their capacity to understand, respond to, and advocate for the diverse populations they serve while effectively managing substantial human and financial resources.

With the economic footprint and societal influence of the nonprofit sector, understanding how these organizations operate differently from FPOs becomes crucial for addressing leadership disparities. The scale and impact of nonprofit work, which employs millions and generates trillions in economic activity, make it essential to examine how the unique structural characteristics of these organizations may inadvertently create barriers to women's advancement into leadership positions.

Structural and Operational Differences between NPOs and FPOs

NPOs operate with fundamentally different goals, revenue models, and resource allocation priorities compared to FPOs, creating distinct organizational environments that shape leadership development opportunities. These goal and operational differences create cascading effects that particularly disadvantage women's advancement in NPOs (Anheier, 2014; Worth, 2020). This section examines how NPOs' mission-driven focus, alternative revenue structures, and resource constraints create unique barriers for women's leadership development that differ from challenges in FPOs.

Mission-Driven vs. Profit-Driven Goal Orientations. The fundamental distinctions between NPO and FPO purposes create different cultural expectations around career advancement and professional development. While FPOs are designed to maximize financial returns for shareholders, NPOs are structured to fulfill a mission or cause, creating environments where individual career advancement may be viewed as secondary to collective mission achievement (Anheier, 2014; Worth, 2020). This mission-first orientation can create cultural pressures for women to prioritize organizational needs over personal professional development, making it more challenging to advocate for advancement opportunities or leadership training. Some scholars suggested that the pressures are for all employees, but women are the majority of employees, and because of gender role expectations, they may take the mission focus to heart differently (more willing to sacrifice) based on gender role norms (Acker, 1990, 2006; England, 2005; Schulte, 2014). The expectation that NPO workers should be motivated primarily by passion for the cause rather than personal career goals (Ruder & Riforgiate, 2019) can particularly disadvantage women, who may already face societal pressure to prioritize others' needs over their own professional aspirations (Clerkin, 2024).

Alternative Revenue Models and Resource Constraints. NPOs' dependence on donations, grants, fundraising events, and government support rather than direct revenue generation creates distinct resource constraints that affect leadership development investments. Unlike FPOs that generate revenue through goods and services, NPOs rely on external funding sources that often come with specific mission expectations and restrictions, leaving fewer unrestricted resources available for mentoring and capacity-building initiatives (Anheier, 2014; Worth, 2020). This funding structure means that leadership development programs must often compete directly with mission-critical programming for limited resources, making it more

difficult to justify investments in women's advancement initiatives. The chronic underfunding typical of the nonprofit sector often positions leadership development as a luxury rather than a necessity, leaving women to navigate advancement opportunities without institutional support (Young, 2017).

Cultural Expectations and “Passion Exploitation.” The mission-driven nature of nonprofit work creates cultural expectations that workers are motivated primarily by passion for the cause rather than career advancement or financial compensation (Ruder & Riforgiate, 2019). This leads to what Bunderson and Thompson (2009) term “passion exploitation,” where organizations justify lower investment in employee development by appealing to workers' intrinsic motivation (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). These cultural dynamics particularly affect women, who may face additional pressure to demonstrate commitment to the mission rather than personal ambition, creating invisible barriers to pursuing leadership roles or advocating for professional development opportunities.

These dynamics create acute barriers for women, who face compounded expectations both within NPOs and in broader society. Women are often expected to embody care work and volunteer orientations, reinforcing assumptions that they will prioritize mission over personal advancement and are naturally suited for supportive rather than leadership roles (Acker, 2006; England, 2005; Schulte, 2014). The NPOs' reliance on volunteers and unpaid or underpaid work, areas where women are disproportionately represented, further reinforces gendered assumptions about women's willingness to work for intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards (Gamboa, 2024; Steinberg, 1990). These interconnected expectations create invisible barriers that limit women's access to the strategic experiences, networks, and developmental opportunities necessary for executive advancement, potentially making them less likely to be considered for high-level

leadership positions that require aggressive advocacy for organizational resources and strategic positioning (Acker, 2006; Young, 2013).

Complex Stakeholder Dynamics. NPOs operate within complex stakeholder environments that include donors, volunteers, beneficiaries, community members, and boards of directors or trustees who vary in size, scope, and focus (Agard, 2011; Young, 2013). In contrast to FPOs, where stakeholder priorities are typically aligned around financial performance and shareholder value (Anheier, 2014), NPOs must balance competing and sometimes conflicting expectations from constituencies with fundamentally different relationships to the organization and measures of success (Worth, 2020). These multiple stakeholder relationships create additional challenges for leadership development, as leaders must navigate competing expectations and priorities from diverse constituencies. For example, while donors may prioritize operational efficiency and low administrative costs (Cooper et al., 2020), staff development requires investments that might not immediately lead to program results, creating tension that is less noticeable in FPOs where employee development is more readily seen as contributing to bottom-line performance (Young, 2017). The need to maintain relationships with various stakeholder groups can make it more difficult to advocate for internal changes, such as leadership development initiatives, that may not have an immediate visible impact on mission delivery but are essential for long-term organizational sustainability and effectiveness.

These structural and operational features of NPOs establish the foundation for understanding a troubling contradiction that emerges when analyzing leadership demographics in mission-driven organizations. The very qualities that define nonprofit work, mission focus, resource limitations, and stakeholder complexity contribute to creating environments where

organizations dedicated to social justice may unintentionally perpetuate the inequalities they seek to address.

Organizational and Gender Paradox in NPOs

While the NPOs' economic significance highlights their role in American society, examining the leadership demographics within these mission-driven organizations reveals a troubling contradiction that challenges their core commitment to social justice. The gender paradox in NPOs appears in two distinct yet interconnected ways that fundamentally weaken organizational effectiveness and the authenticity of their mission.

Primary Workforce vs. Leadership Representation Paradox.

The first aspect of this paradox stems from the clear gap between workforce composition and leadership representation. Women make up 70-75% of the nonprofit workforce and 60-65% of nonprofit volunteers, yet they hold only 18-30% of leadership roles such as CEOs and executive directors. This reflects their motivation to work in nonprofits "to serve a greater good" without corresponding advancement to decision-making positions (Brown & Harris, 2023, p. 229; 50 Women Can Change the World in Nonprofit, n.d.). This underrepresentation becomes even more noticeable as organizational size grows; the larger the nonprofit, in terms of budget and revenue, the smaller the percentage of women leaders in executive roles, creating a troubling inverse relationship between organizational capacity and women's leadership representation (Fulton & Fulton, 2020; Gamboa, 2024; Hung, 2022).

Organizations committed to fighting inequality, promoting social justice, and empowering marginalized communities are themselves ongoing sources of gender-based exclusion at their highest leadership levels. While nonprofits employ 12.8 million people and contribute \$1.4 trillion each year toward tackling society's biggest challenges—such as systemic

poverty, educational inequality, healthcare gaps, and social discrimination—only a small portion of these mission-driven groups are led by women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024; Independent Sector, 2024). Even though NPOs traditionally support social progress and equal opportunities, the continued gender gap in leadership roles directly challenges these core values (Goethals & Hoyt, 2016; Harvey & Jones, 2022; Kolpakov & Boyer, 2021). Women are still significantly underrepresented in senior executive positions, despite perceptions that the nonprofit sector is more open to female leaders than corporate environments (Ramirez, 2023; Snell, 2023).

Mission-Population Alignment vs. Decision-Making Representation Paradox.

The second aspect of this paradox involves the misalignment between the populations NPOs serve and the demographics of those making strategic decisions about service delivery. Many nonprofits specifically focus on empowering and developing women and minority groups; yet, fewer women hold top leadership positions (Danley & Blessett, 2022; Kumar, 2024). Although studies have not specifically linked NPOs to this misalignment between populations, the composition of NPOs' services and leadership indicates a broad consensus that leadership disparity exists. For example, Kumar (2024) stated that many international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) focused on sexual and reproductive health services, which are intrinsically aimed at women, are nonetheless governed by male CEOs, often white Americans or Europeans from Western countries. Similarly, Dula (2021) explained that large, federated nonprofits usually have boards and CEOs that are predominantly male, despite funding many women-focused programs. These examples highlight the irony that organizations dedicated to empowering women and girls often reflect the broader nonprofit sector pattern where women

remain underrepresented in executive leadership roles, despite their explicit missions to serve female populations.

This creates a fundamental disconnect where organizations dedicated to understanding and addressing women's needs may lack the lived experience and perspective necessary to develop truly responsive and culturally sensitive programs. As nonprofits increasingly serve populations that disproportionately include women, having leadership that reflects these served populations becomes essential for developing culturally responsive programs, building genuine community partnerships, and effectively advocating for policy changes that tackle systemic inequities (Clerkin, 2024). Without diverse leadership that mirrors the populations they serve, these organizations risk developing interventions that fail to address the nuanced realities of women's experiences or perpetuate paternalistic approaches to service delivery.

The Combined Impact.

Together, these paradoxes create a compounded organizational contradiction that weakens both internal effectiveness and external impact (Kumer, 2024). This disconnect hinders NPOs' missions to promote social good, as organizations cannot fully achieve their objectives when women, who represent more than half the population they serve, are systematically excluded from leadership positions where they could shape strategy, allocate resources, and drive organizational direction (Dula, 2021). Organizations cannot authentically advocate for gender equity while maintaining male-dominated leadership structures, nor can they effectively serve female populations without ensuring that women's perspectives inform strategic decisions about program development, resource allocation, and organizational direction (Danley & Blessett, 2022).

Understanding how mentorship can serve as a strategic intervention to develop women's leadership capacity becomes essential not only for organizational performance but for NPOs' credibility and ability to authentically address the root causes of inequality they were founded to combat. This dual paradox underscores the imperative for NPOs to align their internal practices with their external missions, ensuring that their commitment to social justice extends beyond programmatic work to encompass organizational leadership and governance representation.

These paradoxes, where NPOs committed to social justice sustain internal gender inequalities and mission-driven cultures may unintentionally hinder women's progress, do not occur in isolation. Instead, they stem from deeply rooted systemic barriers operating at both cultural and structural levels within NPOs. Understanding how these barriers function is crucial for developing targeted solutions that address the root causes of gender disparities in NPO leadership. The following section examines how these barriers manifest in organizational practices, cultural norms, and institutional structures that systematically limit women's access to leadership roles.

Systemic Barriers in Organizations

Existing studies offer insights into the challenges and barriers that women face in leadership across various organizational settings. Women in NPOs encounter the same general obstacles affecting women leaders overall, along with additional barriers specific to the unique traits and operational environment of NPOs. Some barrier issues include glass ceilings, glass cliffs, glass treadmills, and glass escalators. There are other barriers, such as underrepresentation of women, organizational performance expectations, gender differences in leadership styles, and other leadership obstacles, in addition to the glass barriers.

The glass ceiling, cliff, treadmill, and escalator are some of the ways researchers have described the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement into leadership positions and occur when workplace factors limit upward mobility (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Johnson & Hackman, 2018). Among these barriers, the glass ceiling has received particular attention in nonprofit research due to the sector's paradoxical nature, as organizations are committed to social justice while maintaining gender-based leadership exclusion.

First, women often face significant barriers to leadership positions, including the "glass ceiling" that restricts women's advancement to top executive roles (Bullock, 2019; Buzzanell, 1995; Chao, 2011; Straus, 2011). This barrier is particularly pronounced in NPOs, where an unusual gender imbalance persists despite the sector's mission-driven focus on equality and social justice. For example, Bullock's (2019) research on corporate environments is equally relevant to NPOs and notes that,

Women's studies of corporate life have examined the glass ceiling, referencing the barriers women encounter as [women] seek advancement in specific male-dominated spaces. While these challenges remain in corporate settings, research has shown that women have consistently driven industry value, financial growth, and innovation in their places of employment. (p. 202)

The "glass cliff" is a phenomenon that occurs when women are promoted or appointed during periods of organizational crisis, which places them in precarious positions where failure is more likely to occur (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Johnson & Hackman, 2018). For example, Brabazon and Schulz (2020) explained the glass cliff position:

This is a middle management role, on contract, that offers some seniority. Soft power is traded for short-term job security. The glass cliff posts have a great view, but within a

few years, the occupier of this space is forced off the cliff. [Women] may either withdraw before the conclusion of the contract to another transitory post or—if unable to find another position—jump off the cliff to un(der)employment. (p. 878)

Additionally, the “glass treadmill” describes situations where women work diligently, but structural and cultural barriers prevent them from making significant vertical progress in their careers (Arendt & Nuru, 2023; Glass & Cook, 2016; Zhang & Basha, 2023). More specifically, women on the glass treadmill, despite their hard work and busy schedules, face a lack of vertical advancement, feeling as though they are running in place without achieving significant progress in their careers (Arendt & Nuru, 2023; Glass & Cook, 2016; Zhang & Basha, 2023). For instance, participants in Arendt and Nuru (2023) described the glass treadmill experience as “working hard; yet forward, and upward, progress remains elusive” (Arendt & Nuru, 2023, p. 385). The “glass escalator” refers to the concept that men in female-dominated occupations often experience a faster and smoother rise to upper leadership levels than women in the same occupation due to structural and cultural factors (Clerkin, 2024). Most of these glass metaphors are based on gender bias (Bullock, 2019).

In terms of gender biases, Riforgiate and Ruder (2017) explain that “unfortunately, female leaders face double standards for their communication with the potential to be criticized for being too masculine while subscribing to traditional expectations of leadership or being too feminine for enacting gender roles in line with their biological sex” (p. 93). Similarly, Walker and Aritz’s (2015) “study results illustrate how organizational culture can define accepted ways of “doing” leadership and affect who is and who is not recognized as a leader, particularly in terms of gender” (p. 452). As a result, women embody intersectionality that “allows for the emergence of a negotiated form of leadership among women, which requires a delicate balance

between meeting social expectations as women and fulfilling roles as leaders” (Genon, 2022, p. 154). Only a small percentage of women in NPOs are in top leadership positions. Beeson and Valerio (2012) noted that “the lack of clarity regarding the factors used to determine who does and who does not progress to the executive level presents special challenges for aspiring women executives” (p. 417). While the metaphors of glass ceilings, cliffs, treadmills, and escalators effectively illustrate the outcomes women encounter in their career paths, understanding the underlying cultural and structural barriers that create these phenomena is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Cultural Barriers.

Cultural barriers compound challenges women face through persistent gender stereotypes and double binds that restrict women’s leadership behavior (Rudman & Glick, 2001). One of the most pervasive cultural barriers is the “ideal worker norm,” which privileges employees who can demonstrate complete availability and commitment to their organizations without competing obligations (Acker, 2006; Kirby et al., 2017; Schulte, 2014; Williams, 2000). This norm assumes that workers have minimal caregiving responsibilities and can prioritize work demands above all else (Kirby et al., 2017). As such, ideal worker expectations disproportionately disadvantage women, who continue to shoulder the majority of family caregiving responsibilities (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Riforgiate & Boren, 2015). The ideal worker standard is characterized by expectations for long hours, travel availability, and immediate responsiveness to organizational demands, creating what Correll et al. (2007) term the “motherhood penalty,” where mothers face perceptions that they are less competent and committed.

Further, women leaders must navigate competing expectations to be both competent and communal, often facing backlash when they display traditionally masculine leadership traits such

as assertiveness or decisiveness (Rudman & Glick, 2001). This cultural challenge creates what Heilman (2012) describes as a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario where women are criticized for being either too aggressive or too soft in their leadership approach. Heilman (2012) explains that this impossible balancing act not only undermines women’s confidence and authenticity as leaders but also creates hesitation among decision-makers when evaluating women for promotions, as any leadership style women adopt can be viewed as evidence of unsuitability for executive roles, effectively limiting both women’s willingness to pursue leadership positions and others’ willingness to promote them.

Furthermore, NPOs present unique manifestations of these broader cultural barriers, often intensified by sector-specific characteristics and cultural norms (Clerkin & Fotheringham, 2017). For example, NPOs’ emphasis on collaborative, relationship-oriented leadership styles, traditionally associated with feminine traits, might suggest greater opportunities for women’s advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, this assumption proves problematic in practice. While women may be valued for collaborative approaches in mid-level positions, boards of directors often still prefer traditionally masculine leadership characteristics when selecting executive directors, particularly for larger organizations with substantial budgets (Clerkin, 2024). This creates a paradox where women’s strengths are valued but not rewarded with advancement to top leadership roles. Overall, cultural barriers, combined with gendered biases, create a complex web of challenges that prevent many women from reaching top leadership roles in NPOs (Lee, 2019; Straus, 2011).

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers are policies, practices, and institutional norms that systematically obstruct equality and equity by limiting access, opportunities, and fair treatment for specific

groups, often based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, or other social identifiers (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). An example of a structural barrier that working women experience is lower access to informal networks and mentoring relationships (Acker, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2010). Research consistently demonstrates that men benefit from more extensive professional networks and receive different types of mentoring than women (Acker, 2006; Ibarra et al., 2010; Long et al., 2018; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Men are more likely to receive sponsorship, including high-level advocacy, that actively promotes men's advancement. In contrast, women are typically provided traditional mentoring focused on skill development rather than strategic career positioning (Hewlett et al., 2010). Skill development mentoring is also less likely to promote network development (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Differences in mentoring and networking practices are important because informal relationships often drive leadership selection processes; many executive positions are filled through personal recommendations and internal advocacy rather than formal application processes (Ibarra et al., 2010). Since women have lower access to networks and mentoring relationships, it becomes more difficult for women to receive personal recommendations or internal advocacy to advance women's careers (Appelbaum, 2014; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021).

Prevalent NPO resource constraints are another structural barrier that creates additional obstacles that disproportionately affect women's career development. Many NPOs lack formal professional development programs, structured mentoring initiatives, and leadership pipelines that support the advancement of women (Cooper et al., 2020). These previously established resource constraints create additional obstacles that disproportionately affect women's career development, particularly through the absence of formal professional development programs and structured mentoring initiatives (Khalid et al., 2017; Young, 2017). Furthermore, NPOs' reliance

on personal networks for employee recruitment and NPO board development can perpetuate existing gender imbalances, as predominantly male boards tend to recruit from their often homogeneous professional and social networks (Clerkin, 2024; Cooper et al., 2020).

As previously noted, the mission-driven nature of NPO work can also create unique structural barriers through what researchers label “passion exploitation” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). NPO employees, a majority of whom are women, may face implicit pressure to prioritize the organizational mission over personal career advancement, with salary negotiations or leadership aspirations potentially viewed as incompatible with the ideals of servant leadership (Chen & Graddy, 2010; Ruder & Riforgiate, 2019). This structural dynamic can suppress women’s self-advocacy for advancement while simultaneously reinforcing the undervaluation of leadership development investments.

The structural and cultural inequalities that women in leadership experience can negatively impact their professional and personal well-being. For example, they can lead to feelings of imposter syndrome, where women doubt their abilities, and feel like a fraud despite their accomplishments (Ramirez, 2023). Further, inequities can perpetuate work-life balance issues, which can be particularly demanding as women balance leadership responsibilities with personal and family commitments, and create obstacles to women’s career progression and effectiveness (Ramirez, 2023; Snell, 2023). Effectively addressing cultural and structural barriers is crucial for supporting the success and advancement of women leaders in various fields (Snell, 2023). Overall, the challenges of double standards, stereotypical masculine leaders’ expectations, and structural barriers pose challenges that hinder women’s advancement and continue to perpetuate gender disparities in NPO leadership.

Women NPO leaders possess unique perspectives on both the systemic obstacles that impede advancement and the strategies that can overcome them, making their identification of barriers essential for developing targeted mentorship interventions. By examining the challenges that successful leaders identify as impediments to mentoring women into leadership positions, this research can inform evidence-based approaches to leadership development that address the root causes of gender disparities, rather than merely treating symptoms. This leads to the first research question of:

RQ1: What challenges do women NPO leaders recognize as barriers when mentoring women into leadership positions?

These unique challenges also underscore the need for tailored support systems that address the specific barriers women may encounter in developing and building leadership capacity for future NPO leadership roles. One crucial support mechanism is mentorship. By fostering relationships with experienced leaders, mentorship provides guidance and encouragement and helps women navigate complexities, builds confidence, and strengthens women's leadership capacity. Given the identified challenges and the urgent need for targeted support, mentorship may be a particularly effective intervention for developing women's leadership in NPOs. Mentorship warrants a thorough examination of how communication practices and programs can be carefully designed and implemented to overcome sector-specific obstacles and promote lasting leadership growth.

The Role of Mentorship in Capacity Building

This section offers an in-depth examination of (leadership) capacity building, highlighting its importance in enabling individuals to effectively achieve their goals. It describes the critical role of mentorship in nurturing leadership skills to foster personal and professional

growth. Through mentoring relationships, individuals receive guidance, support, and valuable insights essential for developing their leadership potential (Allen, 2011; Buzzanell et al., 2015; Kram, 1988). Additionally, the section highlights various mentoring strategies and practices that contribute to building a robust framework for career success and potential for career progression.

Capacity Building

Capacity building is a systematic approach that helps individuals grow their leadership capabilities, empowering them to take on greater responsibilities, make informed decisions, and navigate complex situations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Leadership capacity building refers to developing the skills, knowledge, and abilities of individuals or groups to lead effectively within an organization, community, or other settings (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This process involves enhancing people's leadership potential to inspire, influence, and guide others toward achieving common goals (Northouse, 2021). The mentoring process is vital for improving organizational performance, fostering innovation, and ensuring sustainability (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Some key components of leadership capacity building are communication skill development, training and development, knowledge expansion, experience sharing, and organizational support.

First, regarding communication and capacity building, leaders are expected to focus on improving their followers' ability to convey ideas clearly and effectively (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; de Vries et al., 2010). This includes current women leaders encouraging other women to master verbal and non-verbal communication skills to engage and motivate other team members (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Northouse, 2021). Second, leadership capacity building provides education and training to develop leadership skills for followers. For example, training and workshops focusing on essential leadership skills, such as decision-making, conflict resolution,

communication, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence (Dugan, 2017), can help build the NPO women's leadership capacity needed to inspire them for future leadership roles (Northouse, 2021).

Third, knowledge expansion is important. Leadership capacity building requires current leaders to provide their followers with the latest information and trends in their field and create a supportive environment where leadership development is encouraged and valued, which can build capacity to help other women make informed decisions about future leadership roles (Gudykunst, 2004; Hopkins et al., 2015). For example, current leaders can share their experiences and lessons learned from other mentorship relationships in advancing career goals. The environment may include providing resources, recognition, and a culture that promotes continuous learning.

However, building leadership capacity is not only about developing technical skills and strategic abilities but also about fostering inclusive environments that address systemic barriers, such as gender disparities in leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In NPOs where social justice and equity are often core values (Agard, 2011), promoting gender equity in leadership is vital to capacity building (Gudykunst, 2004). Mentorship and communication practices play a pivotal role in creating pathways for women to develop leadership capacity and aspire to leadership positions, particularly in sectors where women have been historically underrepresented (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Effective leadership communication is a crucial element in shaping an organization's culture and expectations regarding gender equity. Leaders can set the tone for a more equitable environment by effectively communicating the value of diversity and inclusion. This includes promoting transparency in decision-making processes, ensuring that opportunities for leadership development are equally accessible to all genders, and addressing unconscious

biases that may hinder women's leadership progression (Northouse, 2021). Leaders who prioritize open communication and model inclusive behavior can foster a culture that supports women's leadership capacity building by making space for their voices to be heard and respected (Northouse, 2021). Capacity building predominantly occurs through mentorship (Day & Harrison, 2007; Jian & Fairhurst, 2017).

Mentorship

Mentorship is a key strategy in advancing gender equity within NPO leadership. Given the importance of capacity building for women's advancement, mentorship emerges as a particularly relevant intervention approach. This section defines mentorship, compares formal and informal methods, and discusses their functions within organizations. The benefits of mentoring, including career growth, skill development, and increased confidence, are highlighted for women. The section then presents feminist mentorship theory, emphasizing egalitarian relationships, mutual learning, empowerment, and intersectionality, distinguishing it from traditional models. This foundation links mentorship practices with addressing systemic barriers and fostering sustainable women's leadership in NPOs.

Mentoring is broadly defined as a relationship in which a more experienced or knowledgeable person guides a less experienced or knowledgeable individual (Allen & Eby, 2011; Kram, 1988; Regins & Kram, 2007). Mentorship is a crucial aspect of both professional and personal development, facilitated through one-on-one interactions and support (Day & Harrison, 2007; Hoffmann, 2022). It involves the mentor sharing their knowledge, skills, and experiences to help the mentee navigate challenges, set and achieve goals, and build confidence (Buzzanell et al., 2015; Dallimore & Souza, 2022). The mentor offers guidance, support, and encouragement to help the mentee grow both personally and professionally. This relationship can

be formal or informal, often focusing on the mentee's career development, skill acquisition, or personal growth (Allen & Eby, 2011; Clutterbuck, 2014; Kram, 1988; Regins & Kram, 2007; Zachary, 2011).

Furthermore, mentors serve as role models by demonstrating professional behaviors, attitudes, and values (Reis & Grady, 2020). Researchers generally acknowledge that formal mentoring can involve structured programs or arrangements, informal mentoring that occurs naturally between individuals, or a blend of both (Reis & Grady, 2020). Formal mentoring involves assigning a mentor with specific expertise to guide a mentee through a hierarchical structure (Clutterbuck, 2014; Zachary, 2011). While this approach is often favored for its efficiency, one challenge is the power dynamics inherent in such relationships that can lead to relational tensions due to inequality between positions (Reis & Grady, 2020).

Informal mentoring emphasizes a relational process where knowledge is constructed collaboratively (Buzzanell et al., 2015; Reis & Grady, 2020). In this type of mentoring, both the mentor and mentee share common beliefs, resulting in an equal sharing of ideas and less hierarchical dynamics. Informal mentoring relationships develop naturally within organizations without deliberate intervention or planning from the organization. Informal mentoring is particularly beneficial for supporting women in career development (Reis & Grady, 2020). Research has shown numerous benefits of mentoring both broadly and in the NPO space, as discussed below.

Benefits of mentoring. Research consistently demonstrates that effective mentorship can facilitate career advancement, enhance job performance, and foster a stronger sense of belonging within a community or organization, with benefits including improved job satisfaction, increased confidence, better work-life balance, higher levels of engagement and productivity (Buzzanell et

al., 2015; Reis & Grady, 2020). Mentoring helps individuals navigate their careers by providing supportive relationships where mentees can discuss their challenges and receive guidance for professional development (Buzzanell et al., 2015).

For women specifically, recent research emphasizes the crucial role of mentorship and professional networks in supporting leadership advancement in NPOs (Cunningham et al., 2020; Ramirez, 2023; Ryan, 2021). Mentorship from senior leaders can significantly enhance women's leadership capacity building by providing them with the guidance, support, and professional relationships necessary to navigate organizational hierarchies (Day & Harrison, 2007; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Kram, 1985). Mentors also play a crucial role in encouraging women to pursue leadership roles, providing career guidance, and helping them develop the confidence to tackle leadership challenges (Ibarra et al., 2013). Through mentorship, women gain access to critical resources, including sponsorship for leadership opportunities, which can help mitigate the barriers women face in ascending to top positions (Acker, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2013).

These mentoring relationships create environments where women can build confidence, gain visibility, and develop the competencies necessary for leadership roles through effective communication, resource sharing, and encouragement (Helms et al., 2016; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). However, some scholars acknowledge potential challenges, noting that “off the books” or unofficial mentoring “sometimes feeds our souls but always compounds our workloads” (Celeste & Joseph, 2021, p. 660).

The role of communication in mentorship is also vital in promoting gender equity in NPO leadership. Mentors must engage in clear, culturally competent communication that fosters trust and encourages honest dialogue about the challenges women face in the workplace (Balinda, 2023; Gudykunst, 2004). Effective mentorship involves offering feedback, guidance, actively

listening to mentees' experiences, and supporting their leadership aspirations. Leaders who use their communication skills to provide constructive feedback and empower their mentees contribute to building a more gender-inclusive leadership pipeline (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

This section on mentorship above explored the definition of mentorship, the two broad categories of mentorship (formal and informal), and the benefits of mentoring, both broadly and in the context of NPOs. Scholars have proposed feminist mentoring as an alternative to formal/informal mentoring and is explored below as the theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework – Feminist Mentorship Theory

Feminist mentorship theory emerged from a critical examination of traditional mentoring models that often reflected broader patriarchal structures within organizations. Traditional mentorship typically functioned within hierarchical frameworks where senior, usually male, mentors offered guidance to junior mentees through a top-down approach that emphasized knowledge transfer from expert to novice (Buzzanell, 2000). This model, while valuable in many respects, faced criticism for perpetuating power imbalances and failing to acknowledge the unique challenges encountered by women in professional environments (Benishek et al., 2004; Buell, 2004; Buzzanell, 2023; Buzzanell et al., 2015; Corple et al., 2023).

The evolution toward feminist mentorship theory began in the 1980s and 1990s as feminist scholars and practitioners recognized the need for mentoring approaches that addressed the specific barriers women faced in advancing their careers (Ensher & Murphy, 2005). This development was particularly influenced by research demonstrating that women often experienced different challenges than men in professional settings, including navigating workplace cultures that were not designed with their experiences in mind, managing multiple

role expectations, and overcoming systemic barriers to advancement (Buzzanell, 1995; Ensher & Murphy, 2005).

Core Definition and Principles

Corple et al. (2023) have defined feminist mentoring as “whole-person, care-oriented mentoring” that “recognizes the emotional, spiritual, psychological, physical, and intellectual aspects of others and enacts care accordingly, rather than a professional mentoring relationship which is often pragmatic or even impersonal” (Corple et al., 2023, p. 6). This holistic approach acknowledges that people possess multiple dimensions that must be recognized and supported comprehensively.

Feminist mentorship theory is distinguished by four core principles that challenge traditional assumptions about mentoring. First, *egalitarian relationships* replace strict hierarchical structures with collaborative partnerships where both parties contribute valuable perspectives and recognize that mentees bring knowledge, experiences, and insights that can enrich the mentoring relationship (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Second, *mutual learning* acknowledges that learning flows in multiple directions, with mentees’ fresh perspectives, diverse backgrounds, and contemporary experiences providing valuable insights to mentors, creating more dynamic and engaging relationships that benefit both parties.

Third, *empowerment* emphasizes developing the mentee’s voice, agency, and leadership capacity rather than simply transmitting knowledge or skills. This principle acknowledges that effective leadership development requires cultivating confidence, critical thinking skills, and the ability to challenge existing systems when necessary, thereby preparing women not only to succeed within existing structures but also to transform those structures (Blake-Beard et al., 2011). Fourth, *intersectionality* awareness recognizes that individuals possess multiple,

interconnected identities that shape their experiences in complex ways, acknowledging that women's workplace experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and other dimensions of identity (Cren, 2018).

Key Theoretical Components

Central to feminist mentorship theory are three core components that distinguish it from traditional approaches: relational approaches, transformational elements, and communication practices (Djamali et al., 2025; Ely et al., 2011; Freire, 2020; Kram, 1988; Ragins & Kram, 2007). *Relational approaches* form the foundation of feminist mentorship theory's practical application through collaborative partnerships characterized by shared power and mutual respect. Within this framework, mentors and mentees collaborate to set goals, devise strategies, and assess progress, with both parties contributing to the relationship's direction (Kram, 1988). Rather than concentrating decision-making authority with the mentor, feminist mentorship theory advocates for distributing influence more equitably, enabling mentees to develop their own decision-making capabilities while benefiting from their mentor's experience (Ragins & Kram, 2007). This approach also emphasizes emotional intelligence, recognizing that effective professional development must address both technical competencies and emotional capacities essential for leadership, including self-awareness, empathy, relationship management, and emotional regulation (Goleman, 2005).

Transformational elements focus on developing critical consciousness and promoting social change. This includes helping mentees become aware of systemic barriers and inequities that may affect their own career advancement and that of other underrepresented groups, enabling them to navigate organizational politics more strategically and advocate effectively for necessary changes (Ely et al., 2011). Feminist mentorship encourages collective action,

supporting the advancement of other women rather than viewing career success as zero-sum competition, and working toward organizational transformation through policy advocacy, cultural change initiatives, and structural reforms (Ely et al., 2011). A social justice orientation reflects the theory's commitment to challenging oppressive structures rather than simply helping individuals succeed within existing systems (Hooks, 2000).

Communication practices within feminist mentorship theory emphasize inclusive approaches that validate diverse experiences and perspectives through culturally sensitive language and avoiding assumptions about mentees' backgrounds or aspirations. Active listening becomes especially important, with mentors prioritizing the mentee's voice and perspective rather than immediately offering solutions (Djamali et al., 2025). This includes creating safe spaces where mentees can discuss challenging topics such as workplace discrimination, work-life balance issues, or impostor syndrome without fear of judgment (Ibarra et al., 2013). Constructive feedback focuses on the simultaneous development of confidence and competence, providing honest assessments while affirming mentees' strengths and potential (Buzzanell et al., 2018). Additionally, advocacy communication training prepares mentees to advocate effectively for themselves and others through skills in negotiation, public speaking, and strategic communication (Kolb & Williams, 2001).

Relevance to Nonprofit Organizations

The alignment between feminist mentorship principles and NPO values creates particularly favorable conditions for implementing these approaches in NPOs. Scholars emphasize that capacity building through mentorship is crucial not only for personal career development but also for organizational success, particularly in addressing systemic barriers to women's advancement (Buzzanell, 2000; Buzzanell, 2023; Ensher & Murphy, 2005; Long et al.,

2018; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). This study contributes to feminist mentorship theory by examining the specific communication practices employed by women NPO leaders to mentor other women, thereby making the theoretical framework more concrete and applicable within resource-constrained NPOs. Given the importance of the role of mentorship in capacity building and feminist mentorship dynamics, the second research question emerged:

RQ2: What communication practices do NPO women leaders use to encourage women to take leadership roles in NPOs (build leadership capacity)?

In summary, the unique mission-driven focus, resource constraints, and stakeholder dynamics of NPOs make them a rich area for study. Women's leadership in this sector is complex, with specific challenges that necessitate a profound understanding of organizational culture and effective stakeholder engagement. Women leaders in NPOs face unique barriers and opportunities, and communication research provides valuable insights into effective leadership practices and strategies for fostering inclusive and successful leadership transitions. Therefore, this dissertation explores women leaders' experiences of barriers and with mentoring other women in leadership capacity building through qualitative interviews.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, to explore the barriers to leadership NPO women leaders recognize and how women leaders in NPOs mentor to build leadership capacity for other women. Qualitative interviews were selected because they are ideal for gaining an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences, motivations, and challenges (Mason, 2002) faced by female leaders in NPOs. Qualitative methods emphasize the exploration of meaning, behaviors, and interactions in their natural context (Davis, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), which is essential for examining mentorship dynamics and leadership development within NPOs.

To gain a nuanced understanding of participant experiences, semi-structured interviews were selected for this study because they allowed for an in-depth exploration of participant experiences in a conversational format (Tracy, 2020). Interviews involve asking open-ended questions to explore the experiences, perspectives, and meanings that the 16 NPO leaders interviewed attribute to different phenomena (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interviews also allow for interviewer flexibility to include in-depth probes based on the participants' responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Shukri & Willink, 2020; Tracy, 2020; Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2020) argues that interviews

may tell stories and narratives, complete with dramatic plot lines, heroes, and villains. Such stories frame the way participants understand the world, delimiting opportunities and constraints for action. Through interviews, participants can provide accounts, rationales, explanations, and justifications for their actions and opinions. Interviewees can reveal participants' specific vocabulary and language and explain why participants employ certain clichés, jargon, or slang. (p. 78)

In summary, qualitative methods—particularly semi-structured interviews—allow for an exploratory and flexible approach. This methodology was chosen to gain a deep understanding of women NPOs experiences, including recognized barriers and how women leaders mentor others and foster leadership capacity in NPOs.

Positionality Statement

Collier and Muneri (2016) rightly assert the need “for researchers to be reflexive and transparent about how their backgrounds, positionalities, and histories inform their work” (p. 640). I have carefully considered my own experiences and background, and I acknowledge that, as a researcher examining women’s leadership development in NPOs, I bring both personal investment and professional perspective to this study. My commitment to advancing gender equity in leadership stems from witnessing the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior NPO roles despite their majority presence in the sector’s workforce. This contradiction between NPOs’ social justice missions and their internal leadership demographics motivates my research focus.

I acknowledge that my previous experience as an administrator of an NPO in Ghana may influence my approach to this topic. My familiarity with NPOs provides valuable insight into organizational cultures, resource constraints, and mission-driven dynamics that influence leadership development. However, this proximity also requires careful attention to potential biases in how I interpret barriers women face and evaluate potential solutions.

Throughout this research, I worked to remain cognizant of the intersectional nature of leadership barriers, recognizing that women’s experiences vary significantly based on race, socioeconomic background, and other identity factors. While my focus on mentorship as an intervention strategy reflects my belief in relationship-based approaches to organizational

change, I acknowledge that mentoring alone cannot address systemic inequities without broader structural reforms. My commitment to translating research into actionable practice informs my methodology choices and drives my emphasis on identifying the specific communication and mentorship practices necessary to develop evidence-based recommendations for realistic NPOs implementation within their resource constraints. This study represents both scholarly inquiry and advocacy for creating more equitable leadership pathways in organizations dedicated to advancing social good.

Data Collection

Following IRB approval, the recruitment process involved sharing a recruitment script (see Appendix C) and fliers (see Appendix D) with the Director of Community Engagement and Experiential Learning (Center for Student Experience and Talent) to be sent to the center's contact database of NPOs. I also shared a recruitment script with my contacts who are knowledgeable about or connected to the field of NPOs. These personal contacts were also asked to forward the information to other individuals who qualified for the study and might be interested in participating. Additionally, I posted the recruitment script on my social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, asking volunteers to participate in the study and encouraging individuals to refer others who might be interested.

Finally, the 16 women NPO leaders who participated in the interview process were encouraged to refer other potential participants to the study at the end of each interview. This approach, known as snowball sampling, allowed the participant pool to expand through referrals, thereby facilitating the recruitment of additional suitable candidates (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Snowball sampling was particularly appropriate for this study because women NPO leaders who actively mentor other women represent a specialized population that

can be difficult to identify through traditional recruitment methods, as mentoring relationships are often informal and not systematically documented by organizations. This recruitment approach leveraged professional networks and trusted relationships within the NPOs, enabling the women NPO leaders to refer other qualified leaders who may not have been accessible through formal organizational channels.

Data collection occurred in two stages. First, an online pre-screening survey was conducted, which lasted approximately 5 minutes and allowed me to identify women NPO leaders who met specific inclusion criteria essential for addressing the research questions. The survey collected both qualifying information and demographic data to ensure the women NPO leaders could provide relevant insights into women's leadership mentorship practices in NPOs.

To qualify for the study, participants were required to be women leaders with formal titles such as CEO, Director, or other official leadership positions in NPOs. This criterion was essential because the study focused specifically on how women in leadership positions recognize barriers and implement mentorship practices. Leaders with official titles possess the organizational authority and positional power necessary to create opportunities for other women, implement policy changes, and serve as visible role models for advancement. Additionally, their formal leadership status provided them with insights into organizational decision-making processes and the systemic barriers that affect women's career progression.

Second, the women leaders were required to currently or formerly be employed by a U.S. NPO. This geographic and sectoral limitation ensured the women NPO leaders operated within the same regulatory, cultural, and organizational context. U.S. NPOs share common characteristics in terms of tax-exempt status, governance structures, funding mechanisms, and cultural expectations that influence leadership dynamics and mentorship opportunities. This

criterion enabled meaningful comparisons across the women NPO leaders' experiences while controlling for variations in national policies, cultural norms surrounding gender equity, and organizational frameworks that may exist in international contexts.

Third, the women NPO leaders were required to work or have worked in a medium to large NPO. Medium to large NPOs generate annual total revenue between \$100,000 and \$10 million (UWM Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management, 2015) and were intentionally selected so the NPOs would have enough staff and complexity to support formal or informal mentorship relationships. Smaller NPOs typically operate with minimal staff and flat organizational structures that may lack the hierarchical complexity necessary for traditional mentorship relationships. Medium to large NPOs normally have hierarchical structures with multiple management levels, which naturally create mentorship opportunities between senior and junior staff (UWM Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management, 2015). On the other hand, organizations with revenues exceeding \$10 million often have more formalized human resources departments and structured leadership development programs that might obscure the informal mentorship practices central to this study. Additionally, medium to large NPOs are more likely to have women in leadership roles who can serve as mentors, despite common resource limitations and mission-driven cultures. Overall, the targeted NPO revenue range represents organizations with sufficient complexity to support mentorship relationships while maintaining the resource constraints and mission-driven culture characteristic of the broader NPOs.

Fourth, the women NPO leaders had to have experience mentoring women for professional advancement. This criterion was fundamental to the study's purpose, as the women NPO leaders needed direct experience with the mentorship practices being investigated. The survey specified both formal and informal mentoring to capture the full range of mentorship

approaches used in NPOs. This inclusive definition recognized that effective mentorship often occurs outside of structured programs, particularly in resource-constrained organizations. The women NPO leaders needed this experience to provide concrete examples of communication practices, barrier recognition strategies, and capacity-building approaches that directly address the research questions.

The pre-screening survey also collected comprehensive demographic information (which was not necessarily an inclusion criterion) to provide context for the women NPO leaders' experiences within the study parameters. This included organizational type, tenure, supervision responsibilities, education level, race/ethnicity, age, relationship status, caregiving responsibilities, and income level. These demographic factors were important for understanding how various identity dimensions and life circumstances might influence mentorship approaches and the recognition of barriers. The demographic data also enabled analysis of how intersectional identities influence the barriers women faced and the mentorship strategies they employed. For example, understanding the women NPO leaders' caregiving responsibilities provided context for their recognition of barriers to work-life balance. At the same time, racial and ethnic diversity helped illuminate how mentorship practices must adapt to address multiple, intersecting forms of workplace dynamics.

Participant Information

A total of 23 women NPO leaders attempted the online survey, with 10 using the QR code and 13 using the anonymous link. Ultimately, 16 women NPO leaders from medium to large-sized NPOs in a midwestern major city participated in the study and were interviewed. The study included all interested women NPO leaders who met the specified recruitment description above and responded to the recruitment call.

The 16 women NPO leaders interviewed ranged in age between 38 and 66 years and averaged 51.75 years old, with four women NPO leaders not providing their ages. Seven women NPO leaders held a bachelor's degree, five had a master's degree, and four held a doctorate degree. Seven of the women NPO leaders were married, and two were living with a partner; there were four singles, two divorced, and one widowed. Eleven of the women NPO leaders had between one and four children, four didn't have children, and one didn't answer this demographic question. Lastly, 11 women NPO leaders self-reported that they were white, one Asian, and three black or African American. These women leaders directly supervised or informally mentored between one and 15 other women, with an average of 4.75 mentees.

In terms of types of NPOs, 10 women NPO leaders worked in charitable organizations, two in higher education, and another two in 501(c)(6) organizations (see Appendix E). Their NPO employer's budget/revenue ranged from \$100,000.00 to \$500,000.00 (three women NPO leaders), \$500,000.00 to \$10 million (12 women NPO leaders), and over \$10 million (one women NPO leader). These 16 women NPO leaders worked between 1 and 30 years at their respective NPOs, with an average of 9.58 years. The women NPO leaders' income varied, with five earning between \$58,021.00 and \$94,000.00, seven earning between \$94,001.00 and \$153,000.00, and four earning over \$153,000.00. The budget/revenue classification and income ranges are based on UWM Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management, 2015 (see Appendix G) and the Census Bureau's Income in the United States: 2022 report, respectively.

Interview Protocol (IP)

Considering the focus on women NPO leaders' mentoring and capacity building, semi-structured interviews were used along with probing questions that helped to "get to the heart of the matter" (Tracy, 2020, p. 79) and ensure interviewees had ample time to respond (Roulston,

2014). Semi-structured interview questions were used to capture the lived experiences of 16 women NPO leaders and the unique contexts within which they operated (Tracy, 2020), making this format an ideal choice to address my research questions. For example, some questions focused on participants' life histories or narratives, as well as grand tour questions, example and experience questions, opinion questions, and background and demographic questions, all within the same semi-structured interview (Tracy, 2020).

More specifically, to answer RQ1, *what challenges do women NPO leaders recognize as barriers when mentoring women into leadership positions?*, the interview questions were designed to obtain the women NPO leaders' awareness and recognition of systemic barriers through both direct inquiry and reflective storytelling. Rather than simply asking about barriers in abstract terms, the questions prompted these women NPO leaders to share concrete experiences and observations that would reveal their understanding of the challenges women face in advancement. Some questions that were asked are: 1) What do you see as barriers women may face when moving into leadership positions? 2) Have you ever helped mentor other women through challenging issues or events? If yes, what are some of those challenging issues or events? and 3) Do you ever have to encourage women mentees to have more confidence in their own abilities? Can you share an example(s)? These questions directly prompted the women NPO leaders to identify and articulate the specific barriers they recognize or perceive when mentoring other women (See Appendix B for full IP).

Similarly, to answer RQ2, *what communication practices do NPO women leaders use to encourage women to take leadership roles in NPOs (build leadership capacity)?*, the interview questions were structured to capture the specific communication strategies, techniques, and practices these leaders employ in their mentoring relationships. The questions moved from broad

conceptual understanding to detailed examples of communication in action, ensuring comprehensive coverage of mentorship communication practices. Some questions that were asked are: 1) Tell me a story of how you developed a mentoring relationship with your woman (women) mentee in your nonprofit or other nonprofits. How did the relationship start? Could you walk me through some important mentoring moments? 2) Can you tell me of a time when you mentored to help your mentee(s) develop their ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively? How do you communicate to build these skills in your mentees? 3) Can you describe instances where your mentoring has directly or indirectly influenced a woman mentee's path to leadership or career advancement? and 4) Did you ever feel like you created an opportunity for women as part of your mentorship? What did you say? Or not say? This storytelling approach encouraged the women NPO leaders to identify and reveal the specific ways in which their mentorship and communicative practices helped their mentees. (For the detailed IP, see Appendix B.)

These interviews provided me with opportunities to ask open-ended questions and pursue follow-up inquiries, enabling me to gather rich, nuanced data (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Tracy, 2020). The 16 interviews lasted an average of 61 minutes and ranged between 45 and 92 minutes.

Data Analysis

To begin analyzing the data, the interviews were first transcribed, and personally identifiable information was camouflaged with pseudonyms. Overall, the interviews generated a total of 576 single-spaced pages of transcript data. I employed Tracy's (2020) constant ("iterative") comparison method, which involves reading the transcripts multiple times and moving back and forth between them to identify emerging similarities, initial codes, and

recategorize the codes into themes. This involved “focusing on specific aspects of the data that extend theory or address practical problems, and encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data” (Tracy, 2020, p. 209). More specifically, I generated codes manually, starting with initial in vivo codes, where words and phrases directly from participants are used as codes to begin analyzing data (Saldaña, 2021). Then I engaged in a secondary round of descriptive codes, where simple, single-word, or short-phrase labels were assigned to segments of qualitative data to summarize their basic content and categorize initial in vivo codes that were generated (Saldaña, 2021).

I used thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019) to analyze the interview transcripts. Drawing on Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis, which focuses on reoccurrences, repetition, and forcefulness, this study identified patterns, themes, and relationships within the data based on the generated descriptive data, including the stories and communication patterns of NPO leaders. According to Spradley (1979), “thematic analysis involves a search for the relationships among domains and how those relationships are linked to the culture as a whole” (p. 94). Initial themes, with their supporting data as evidence, were printed and cut out for visualization and moving things around to arrive a very refined themes with pertinent participant quotations to support those themes.

For example, to arrive at the first theme for RQ1 some initial in vivo codes were “I have a life, and I have to eat, I have to exercise,” “early release Wednesdays,” “childcare challenges,” “family responsibilities,” “work from home flexibility,” “walking the dog,” “visiting parents,” “superpowers balancing,” “women choose home first.” These were refined to “caregiving accommodation,” “work-life flexibility provision,” “family obligation recognition,” “gender role expectations,” and “life outside work validation.” Then they were clustered to form the

theme “Recognizing work-life balance issues,” capturing what the women NPO leaders recognized or perceived to be barriers that disproportionately affect women’s career advancement.

To arrive at the first theme for RQ2 some initial in vivo codes were “sharing when I screwed up,” “My role has always been to support and connect,” “daily 30 minutes,” “monthly check-ins,” “send that email after meeting,” “write stuff down,” “role-play her manager,” and “I will be vulnerable before I ask you to.” These were refined into descriptive codes such as “vulnerability modeling,” “regular contact maintenance,” “documentation practices,” “behavioral demonstration,” “modeling behavior,” and “trust-building communication.” Then these categories were clustered to form the theme” relational developing: ‘my role has always been to support and connect,’” encompassing the foundational communication strategies mentors use to establish trust, maintain connection, and create safe spaces for mentorship to occur.

Data Saturation

Some scholars contend that data saturation is a principle related to the number of interviews conducted in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). Data saturation assumes a point in the data collection process that suggests that the researcher has collected enough data to draw significant research conclusions, and thus, collecting any further data beyond that point would not yield any new or different insights than what has already been identified (Guest et al., 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2016; Saldaña, 2021; Saunders et al., 2018). After collecting 16 interviews, I coded 10 interviews and realized I had reached saturation. I coded three additional interviews to confirm saturation. Then, I continued coding the remaining three interviews to ensure no new themes or conclusions were drawn from the data (Guest et al., 2006).

Study Integrity

To ensure the integrity of my study, I conducted audit trails by documenting all steps and processes throughout the study to ensure issues of trustworthiness were primarily addressed (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Koch, 2006; Sabnis & Wolgemuth, 2024; Tracy & Malvini, 2016; Tracy, 2020; Tracy, 2010). Additionally, member checking was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their responses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) specified that “the investigator who has received the agreement of the respondent groups on the credibility of his or her work has established a strong beachhead toward convincing readers and critics of the authenticity of the work” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315). Due to time and availability of these women NPO leaders, I member checked with two women NPO leaders, who confirmed the findings. There were no new responses that changed any part of the analysis.

Peer debriefing and reflexivity also enhanced the findings’ trustworthiness and validity. Even though this project was not a team project, I consulted colleagues as accountability partners for checking my work and holding regular peer debriefing meetings throughout the project. Two peers went over my analysis at every stage, from initial coding through to the final findings report.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in qualitative research include ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, IRB issues, and minimizing harm, among others (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miller-Day, 2012; Shukri & Willink, 2020; Tracy, 2020; Tracy, 2010). Although protecting participants’ confidentiality and privacy is essential, it is becoming increasingly challenging to adhere to a standardized approach to ensuring such

confidentiality and privacy (Heggen & Cuillemin, 2012; Kaiser, 2012). Most scholars argue that respect, justice, and beneficence are the fundamental ethical principles for protecting confidentiality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Miller-Day, 2012; Shukri & Willink, 2020; Tracy, 2020; Tracy, 2010).

Following IRB approval, I provided comprehensive informed consent (See Appendix C) at the beginning of each interview process, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights. The women NPO leaders were explicitly informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. The pre-screening survey (see Appendix A) also included consent information, ensuring these women NPO leaders understood their involvement before proceeding to interviews.

When the interviews were transcribed, I immediately removed personally identifiable information and replaced it with pseudonyms. The women NPO leaders were given the option to choose their own pseudonyms or have one assigned to them during the pre-screening process. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely with access limited to the research team. Geographic identifiers were generalized rather than specific organizational names or locations to protect participant anonymity further.

Given that the women NPO leaders discussed sensitive topics related to organizational dynamics and leadership challenges, special care was taken to ensure that responses could not be traced back to specific organizations or individuals. Revenue ranges and organizational types were reported in aggregate categories rather than specific amounts, and quotes were carefully selected to avoid revealing identifying organizational details.

Recognizing that qualitative interview research requires situational adaptability (Marzano, 2012), I maintained flexibility in administering ethical protocols while ensuring core protections remained in place. This included allowing the women NPO leaders to pause or skip questions if they felt uncomfortable and providing additional clarification about confidentiality measures when these women NPO leaders expressed concerns about organizational sensitivity of their responses.

The women NPO leaders were provided with contact information for follow-up questions or concerns. These women NPO leaders were informed about the member checking process, which would allow them to review and verify the accuracy of their responses. This ensured ongoing consent and allowed the women NPO leaders to maintain control over the information they contributed throughout the research process.

The qualitative methodology employed in this study, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 16 women nonprofit leaders, and thematic analysis successfully captured rich insights into both research questions. The data analysis revealed two themes addressing 1) the barriers these leaders recognize (work-life balance issues and communication style challenges) and three themes addressing 2) the communication practices they employ in their mentorship relationships (relational development, building capacity, and naming and removing barriers). The following chapter presents these findings in detail, organized around each research question and supported by direct evidence from participant interviews.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The following section presents key findings from interviews with 16 women NPO leaders, organized around two primary research questions: (1) what challenges do women NPO leaders recognize as barriers when mentoring women into leadership positions, and (2) what communication practices do NPO women leaders use to encourage women to take leadership roles in NPOs (build leadership capacity)? The findings reveal how these leaders recognized and addressed systemic barriers that affect women's career progression, while simultaneously implementing strategic mentorship practices designed to build leadership capacity among women in their organizations.

The findings are organized thematically, beginning with two themes that answer the RQ 1 (Recognizing work-life balance issues: "I have a life, and I have to eat. I have to exercise" and Recognizing communication style challenges: "Too blunt. Too direct. Never Just Right") followed by three themes that answer RQ 2 (Relational Development: "My role has always been to support and connect"; Building capacity: "She's gotten a series of three promotions"; and Naming and removing barriers: "We've tried to have a flexible work schedule." Direct participant quotes support each theme and reflect patterns that emerged consistently across the interview data, providing insight into how NPO women leaders navigate and work to transform the leadership landscape for the next generation of women professionals.

Challenges Creating Barriers for Women in NPO Leadership

The first research question concerns the challenges that women NPO leaders recognize as barriers to mentoring women into leadership positions, which generated two key themes. From the interview data collected, women NPO leaders recognized barriers by communicating with and observing their mentees. The first barrier theme is Recognizing work-life balance issues: "I

have a life, and I have to eat. I have to exercise,” and the second theme is Recognizing communication style issues: “Too blunt. Too direct. Never Just Right.” Both themes are explained with examples below.

Recognizing work-life balance issues: “I have a life, and I have to eat. I have to exercise”

Women’s NPO leaders recognized the systemic work-life barriers experienced by women and felt that their mentoring was directly addressing these barriers to advance women into leadership positions. All 16 NPO leaders perceived that their mentorship and communication approaches raised awareness of work-life balance issues, helping their mentees and future leaders. Five participants provided this information spontaneously, while 11 discussed work-life issues in response to interview questions. Work-life issues created systemic barriers, predominantly affecting women, that participants recognized as influencing mentees’ career advancement into leadership roles. In answering the research question, these leaders recognized the importance of work-life balance and took action to improve the situation for their mentees, such as providing work-life flexibility or accommodations that contributed to their mentees’ success.

All 16 women NPO leaders contributed to this theme in two primary ways: first, by recognizing and understanding the issue at hand, and second, by actively taking steps to implement changes that would improve the situation for their mentees. Their involvement ranged from awareness to direct action aimed at creating a positive impact. Recognizing and understanding the issue at hand, Charlotte explained,

Sometimes part of [the mentee’s] thing is she’s got younger kids. I think family can be a real problem for [women] or can really get in the way for women in a way that that doesn’t for men, right? And I think that does, you know, make women less likely to put

themselves forward for things that are going to take more time or take time, like outside of regular business hours, those kinds of things.

Ava also shared, “I have another staff member whose son has early release...on Wednesdays, and so it’s like, ok, you know, I always know that you’re going to leave by 2:30 or three o’clock on Wednesday.” Second, by actively taking steps to implement changes that would improve the situation for their mentees, Ava felt that providing work-life flexibility and accommodations contributed to her mentees’ career success. Ava continued, “...and then she has the option either to work longer on other days or to finish up her day at home. You know those sorts of things.”

Similarly, Luna talked about the expectation that women have some “superpowers” that help them hold things together to balance work and life. Luna specifically shared that,

I hate to say this, but sometimes women also choose home first over men...It’s just like, oh, I got to do this, or I got to do that, to make sure that this is taken care of, which is important. But then it can also really impact us in the workplace. And so really like leaning into our superpowers of balancing all the things so that we can show up and really lead in these workspaces, I think, is really important.

In the same regard, to acknowledge mentees’ work-life challenges, Abby explained that she admits to her mentees that,

I also have a life, and I have to eat. I have to exercise. I have to walk my dog. I have to visit my mom and dad. I have to do all these other things, right and so. Just tell me the truth. So, in that it means don’t be afraid to be judged. We all judge each other all the time. It’s terrible. It feels bad, but like also just let it go. Who cares?

In this quote, Abby normalized “judgments” as a general human behavior and not something that is unusual, personal, or something to be feared. Also, she is reframing by shifting the

conversation from judgment as something to be feared to judgment as a perception that is not particularly helpful.

Luara explained that,

The gender norms, I think, is a huge barrier in our world, that a lot of people look to women...So, how do you prioritize and even find the time to manage and maintain those relationships, both professionally and personally? It can be really difficult.

On the other hand, Sophia acknowledged that others, including her mentees, struggled with work-life balance and integration, but she worked to separate work and life aspects. Sophia shared,

When we talk about work-life, I'm very good at shutting it off and always have been... At the end of the day, it is a job, and while we feel very emotionally attached to the folks that we work with. It's still a job, and so we have to be able to turn it off. Not everyone is willing to do [that]. Not everyone is able to do that, and so I struggle with [shutting things off] because it's like you just can't step away.

This quote highlights the complexity of work-life balance barriers in NPOs, where the mission-driven nature of the work fosters an emotional attachment that can make boundary-setting challenging. Sophia's recognition that "not everyone is willing to do [that]" and "not everyone can do that" reflects her awareness that the expectation to disengage from mission-critical work emotionally represents a significant barrier for many women in NPOs, who may struggle more than others to separate their personal responsibilities from their professional responsibilities. The next section explores the second theme.

Recognizing communication style challenges: “Too blunt. Too direct. Never Just Right”

Half of the participant leaders believed that, through their mentorship and communication, they were raising awareness about communication style issues that created systemic barriers for women in the organization that could hinder mentees’ advancement into leadership roles. The common thread revolved around men and women’s communication styles clashing with workplace or social expectations, where authenticity, directness, or natural expression patterns often lead to being marginalized, overlooked, or silenced. Participants pointed out the frustrating dynamic in which the qualities that make someone genuine or passionate become why that person was pushed to the sidelines.

All 16 women NPO leaders recognized the differences in gender expectations and how this awareness influenced mentoring communication practices. For example, Elsa explained that “As a woman of color, particularly a black woman from the South. I’m always mindful about my communication because it can be very direct... There’s a big difference in the expectations of how I communicate in my mentorship than for others.” Olivia noted the importance of helping her mentees recognize gender expectation differences and then change their communication based on that realization. Olivia specifically explained that,

I’ve been told over and over [that] I was blunt. And I would work really hard not to be perceived as blunt, but I swear that there were men who were getting away with the same thing. So, I think that for me, just the nature of how I’m wired has made me very aware of that. But I think that everybody needs to be aware of how their expectations of individuals shape things, and that definitely I’m talking about gender, but also race, and everything else.

Alternatively, Luna encouraged her mentees to know that it is okay to be direct and have a voice in the workplace. Luna described,

I also think it's important for women to be able to like break that stereotype of like 'the niceness,' like you don't have to feel like you are relegated to just being the nice person at work, like you can be direct and that's ok.

Luna also discussed some aspects of nonverbal communication challenges. She focused on gender expectations and double standards in professional presentation and behavior. She explained that,

Like when you're navigating funders, and it's a male-dominated world. I think the gender norms can be a huge barrier, right? For example, her [mentee] founder and board president walk around with sweatshirts and shorts and high socks and tennis shoes, [when the founder and board president] come to work. [But for a woman], like I can't wear my workout clothes... And you know, if I were to walk into a [funders] meeting like that, like the gender norms, I think, is a huge barrier in our world.

Some participants advised mentees to adjust their communication to be more feminine (not loud or direct), while others recommend breaking the stereotypes. Mia acknowledged that to be heard as a woman, it is sometimes necessary and acceptable to interrupt and speak up. She stated, "When I entered the field...it was all men and men who talked over women often...I would say, advocate for yourself sometimes. Guess what? You have to. Because...men don't often let women talk."

Interestingly, Elsa recognized that the tension is not only between women and "others" but also between older and younger women. She narrated that,

Sometimes there is some, you know, unconscious conflict with older women and younger women... So, definitely depending on where a person is from... in some communities of color, if you're younger. The respect is just not there as it relates to being an authority of fear.

This quote demonstrates the complexity of communication style challenges that women face, revealing how age, race, and generational dynamics intersect to create additional barriers where younger women of color may struggle to establish authority and credibility even within their own communities. Elsa's recognition of this intersectional barrier illustrates how mentors must navigate not only external gender-based communication expectations but also internal community dynamics that can undermine women's leadership development, making her mentorship approach more nuanced in addressing multiple, layered forms of bias that affect women's advancement.

For some of these women, NPO leaders, a crucial aspect of recognizing barriers focused on their communication strategy, as collaborating closely with their mentees on tasks that were difficult or complex. This approach aimed to foster learning and build confidence, but she recognized that simply working through challenging tasks together is often not sufficient on its own to ensure her mentees' growth and development. Additional support strategies and follow-up steps were necessary to address their needs fully. Isabella specifically shared that,

It is still challenging to be a woman at nonprofits, and there is still a bias for men's competency over women's competency. And I don't know that I have entirely cracked that issue. Because at the one time, you can give a woman all of these really difficult tasks. But at the same time, sometimes [women] don't get the promotion or the title. So perhaps other than men do, and that's currently the situation at [name of organization].

To be honest, we have five men as leaders and no women, so it is something that we have been struggling with.

The barriers identified by these women NPO leaders, work-life balance challenges and communication style issues, represent deeply rooted systemic problems that cannot be solved through awareness alone. While recognizing these barriers is an important first step, the participants in this study showed that effective mentorship requires moving beyond identifying barriers to implementing concrete communication practices and strategic actions. As Isabella noted, “you can give a woman all these difficult tasks. But at the same time, sometimes [women] don’t get the promotion or the title,” highlighting the connection between recognizing barriers and overcoming them. The transition from recognition to action reflects the participants’ understanding that mentorship must be intentional and systematic to bring about meaningful progress in advancing women’s leadership.

The shift from identifying barriers to implementing solutions reveals how these women NPO leaders viewed their mentorship role as both diagnostic and actionable; they had first to understand the systemic challenges their mentees faced and then develop targeted communication strategies to address these specific obstacles. The barriers participants identified directly shaped the mentorship practices they used, creating a cohesive approach where their communication practices acted as strategic responses to systemic inequities they observed. This link between recognizing problems and applying solutions highlights the mentorship framework these leaders were building through their lived experiences navigating gender-based challenges while also working to dismantle barriers for others. Below are the themes that emerged in response to the second research question regarding the mentorship and communication practices used by the participants.

Communication Practices for Leadership Development and Capacity Building

The second research question aimed to investigate the specific mentorship communication practices and strategies participants used in their mentoring to develop leadership capacity. Before delving into the themes, five participants offered information on their motivation for engaging in mentorship that informed the practices they engaged in with their mentees. For example, Harper described, “I really believe in mentoring because people mentored me, and so I think it’s our duty, especially as women, to reach back and pull people forward with you.” Mia added, “In my life people have connected with me and mentored me and I feel like that’s mine to pass on, especially to young women.” Additionally, Ava said,

I really see part of my charge as the CEO of the organization to be to develop additional leaders within our organization and help to cultivate those individuals who have demonstrated the interest and potential to take on additional leadership.

These quotes illustrate the foundational motivation driving participants’ mentorship practices, a combination of a “pay-it-forward” obligation, gender-specific advocacy, and organizational leadership responsibility that creates the context within which these leaders both recognize systemic barriers and develop strategic communication practices to address them.

Three main themes emerged from the data: 1) relational development through trust and consistent communication; 2) capacity building with intentionally creating active career development paths with clear opportunities for advancement; and 3) addressing systemic barriers with practical solutions. These themes reflect how participants went beyond recognizing barriers to implementing strategic actions that systematically enhanced women’s leadership skills through deliberate communication and relationship-focused methods.

Relational Development: “My role has always been to support and connect.”

Participants were candid about separating job responsibilities from their mentoring practices. The participants perceived that mentoring was an additional responsibility on top of their job and went beyond the normal supervisor-teammate relationship. The participants came to this conclusion because all of them explained that, apart from managing or supervising a team where people report directly to them, all additional mentoring was informal. All 16 women NPO leaders acknowledged the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with mentees as a means of building trust for effective mentorship through various communication strategies. Participants discussed the importance of creating relational environments that foster effective mentorship communication, as part of building and maintaining mentor-mentee relationships. They described strategies and practices that enhanced open dialogue and mutual understanding for both mentors and mentees. Participants also emphasized that such mutually trusting relational environments were vital for the success of mentorship relationships and the overall development of mentees, as they facilitated trust, collaboration, and personal growth. Four subthemes emerged: building trust, maintaining regular contact, and documentation practices.

Building Trust. Some communication strategies that participants described included sharing their vulnerabilities as mentors to build trust and engagement. Firstly, the participants acknowledged that building and maintaining healthy mentoring relationships required an important element of trust. For example, Iris said, “I think it’s establishing that trust right [away] and establishing that safe space for the mentor and mentee to kind of come together, feel that [the mentees] have a trusted confidant.” These women leaders used various communication strategies to build trust, such as sharing their vulnerability, practicing transparency, acknowledging power dynamics, and demonstrating behavior.

Vulnerability as Trust-Building Communication Practice. Participants explained that sharing their vulnerability meant these mentors were open and honest about their feelings, experiences, and thoughts, especially those that could be face-threatening or perceived as a weakness or uncomfortable. This communication practice focused on building trust through the sharing of personal struggles and failures, where mentors were willing to openly acknowledge their uncertainties and failures, thereby creating a psychologically safe environment for mentees to do the same. Olivia explained, “So I do think I try to also immediately from the beginning just model some vulnerability by telling them about me and my family... making sure I acknowledge whenever there are power dynamics.” Oliva continued,

I will be vulnerable before I ask you to. ...I went to her and I said, you know, as I was thinking about your remarks the other day, it made me wonder about trust and how we are working together. And then we had a kind of explicit conversation. And I think we talked through some things that made us deepen our trust in each other. ... So, not treating it as a thing that is done, but treating it as a continual journey of deepening our relationship with each other.

Also, Mia also added,

My role has always been to support [and] connect, hopefully model some of the behaviors, and when I do poorly, it’s also to say, hey, guess what? That wasn’t the right way to handle that, or I did not advocate for myself, or I didn’t do this.”

When I asked Mia a follow-up about the communication practices that her mentees found most valuable, she expanded on the importance of vulnerability in building trust,

My mentees would say vulnerability, that I’m open sharing when I screwed up...sometimes that teaches them more when they’ll say, man, how did you deal with

this? Oh my God, I did not deal with it well but let me tell you my experience...and then [mentees] will also share their experience.

This practice of vulnerability built trust by demonstrating that mentors are fallible humans rather than infallible authorities, which reduced the power differential and encouraged honest communication about challenges.

Transparency as Trust-Building Communication Practice. Unlike vulnerability, transparency involves openly sharing information, decision-making processes, and organizational realities that are usually kept from lower-level staff. This communication approach builds trust by showing respect for mentees' judgment and including them in genuine organizational discussions. Laura added her voice to the discussion and explained, "I think openness is a big piece of communication. Transparency. Even without the mentor component, transparency, and nonprofit, I think it would be impossible to have life without that transparency.

Ava also said,

I'm willing to kind of share some of my challenges... and one of them certainly is trying to find that work-life balance... I'll openly admit to my team that I don't know that I'm always setting the best example in this and recognize that it's something that I'm trying to work on as well.

This quote demonstrates transparency as a trust-building practice through Ava's open admission of her ongoing struggles with work-life balance and her acknowledgment that she doesn't "always set the best example." Instead of sharing personal failures or uncertainties (vulnerability), Ava is being transparent about her current professional challenges and limitations as a leader. This transparency builds trust by showing her mentees that she doesn't portray

herself as having perfected all aspects of leadership, setting realistic expectations and being honest about the ongoing nature of professional growth. Her willingness to openly discuss her imperfections in front of her team illustrates transparency about leadership challenges rather than emotional vulnerability about personal struggles. This transparency builds trust by acknowledging ongoing struggles and positioning the mentor as someone who is still learning, rather than someone who has figured it all out.

Honest conversations as a trust-building communication practice. Engaging in honest conversations requires vulnerability and transparency, creating space for difficult topics that are often avoided in traditional workplace relationships. Elsa echoed the need for honest conversations as part of building trust and sharing vulnerability. Honest conversation requires vulnerability because it involves individuals sharing their authentic experiences, uncertainties, and challenges, rather than maintaining professional facades that might conceal areas where they need guidance or support. This vulnerability creates the foundation for meaningful mentoring relationships, as mentees must be willing to admit their limitations and mentors must be open about their struggles and failures to provide genuine, rather than superficial, developmental guidance. Elsa stated that “Being able to have those difficult conversations in a way that demonstrates love and care and that I model a level of emotional intelligence with the way I speak, that hopefully my mentee will adopt and incorporate [it in] their own lives.” This communication practice builds trust by showing that the mentoring relationship can handle tough topics and conflicting opinions without harming the relationship itself. Trust grows through repeated experiences of successfully navigating difficult conversations, demonstrating mutual respect and a commitment to growth even when discussions get uncomfortable. Collectively, these communication practices help build trust by consistently showing that mentors are genuine,

dependable, and dedicated to their mentees' success rather than just upholding professional hierarchies or safeguarding their own interests.

Maintaining Regular Contact. Secondly, participants explained how, as mentors, they employed other relational development communication strategies, such as regular check-ins involving a balance of formal and informal communication channels to maintain their mentor-mentee relationships, and the adaptation of communication methods based on mentee preferences. Participants had regular check-ins with their mentees, which occurred daily, weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, and even yearly, depending on their individual needs. For example, Sophia stated that “we had regular communication on kind of how to talk to donors and how to approach sponsorships for events, things like that.” Diana also described that,

I did what I call daily 30. So, 30 minutes every day. We can talk about whatever you want to talk about, but the time is for you and me to really just talk. And I built kind of a relationship based upon that. So then what I do then is I transform that or change it into weekly check-ins, where again there is time dedicated for you and me to talk, not to say that we don't talk outside of this time, but this is just you and me time. Let's talk about what's going on and then figure out, ok, in terms of my expectations, have I been clear on that? Are there goals that we're working together towards and just making sure that we have a clear path on what we're trying to do, and we've done everything that we need to set up for success.

Ava said that,

We have our monthly check-ins...at minimum, a monthly check-in with their staff members...during that time, yes, it's an opportunity to review goals. It's an opportunity to talk about, you know, kind of what's currently on their plates, but it's also really the

opportunity to continue to mentor and to provide a little bit deeper instruction... to continue to grow and develop.

Elsa also used meetings to build relationships with mentees, noting that one of her mentees had requested regular check-in meetings. She described that her mentee said, “let’s meet regularly,” and Elsa responded, “how often can you meet? [We agreed], ok, well, let’s check in every two months...Let’s check in on that progress.” Then Elsa assured her mentee, “I’m always available by phone, so you know, call me.”

These women NPO leaders consistently explained that consistent, structured communication served as a foundation for effective mentoring relationships, with leaders adjusting the frequency and format of check-ins based on each mentee’s needs and development stages. These regular contact practices created dedicated spaces for building relationships, aligning goals, and providing ongoing support that went beyond typical supervisory interactions, establishing mentoring as an intentional, ongoing communication process rather than sporadic advice-giving.

Documentation Practices. Thirdly, participants explained that, as mentors, they also build and maintain their mentor-mentee relationships through documentation practices, such as “paper trails” after meetings, both for confirmation and as an action towards accountability (which is about agreeing to do things between mentee/mentor), balance of formal and informal communication channels as media multiplexity theory suggests that the closer we are to someone, the more channels we use (Haythornthwaite, 2005), and the adaptation of communication methods based on mentee preferences. This practice served as a confirmation, as an action towards accountability (which is about agreeing to do things between the mentee and mentor), and helped mentors and mentees stay in touch and develop the relationship. Some

participants explained that the documentation process became a mentoring tool, enabling both the mentor and the mentee to identify patterns, track progress, and make more informed decisions about their career direction, specifically helping mentees understand and organize ideas. For example, Amelia said that “I always teach my mentees and my staff to have a paper trail...so I tell them, you know, send that e-mail after the meeting.” Diana also explained that she encouraged her mentee to write things down. She stated explicitly that she told her mentee,

Put your words on paper. Figure out what that is, and then later, when you look back on that, it manifests into whatever it’s supposed to be, right? But right now, I don’t, all the stuff you’re telling me is just scattered. And I can’t help you find closure until you figure out what it is that you want to focus on. And so, I said, part of your way to focus is to get these thoughts out of your head. And then as you’re writing these out, find the time to start, like focusing on, what is your next step? What is it that you want to do? Because what?... Do you still want to do what you were hired to do, or do you want to do the stuff that you ended up doing?

Diana’s guidance to her mentee illustrates how writing acts as a mentoring tool that turns scattered thoughts into practical insights.

Similarly, Harper also explained how she encouraged their mentees to write down their thoughts as well, noting that she told her mentees to,

I’ve often told them to write stuff down on paper, just write it down, you know. And if you’re in a meeting and there’s a group of people, try to [downplay] and you disagree, just write down what you’re thinking. You get it off your chest that way, and then you can think about, do I really need to say this? Or maybe that something will come back later on that will say, oh, I got an ‘aha’ moment after that.

Sophia recalled a mentee outside her organization who was struggling to keep up with the task. To help her mentee, Sophia gave her this advice to teach her mentee to think systematically about work processes and build their capacity to create scalable, repeatable systems. She added, “and then we were very big on creating like procedures for things, documented procedures, so that someone would be able to go back and repeat that activity, if need be, without a lot of guidance.”

Elsa echoed that having thoughts written down helped track next steps. She explicitly explained, “but it’s now, it’s [written thoughts] like in your face, on paper, articulated in words. Now you can take that information and build steps to grow and strengthen your resolve in various situations.” Luna shared that she did not explicitly tell her mentees to keep paper trails but after her mentees have been with her for some time, the mentees learn to keep notes. Luna stated that, “A lot of times...like I can say a whole lot, and then you better be writing your notes, because I’m probably going to forget it.”

All these examples demonstrate how participants saw the importance of keeping a paper trail or notes. These practices serve multiple purposes, including ensuring accountability, confirming actions or agreements, and promoting transparency. In doing so, the practices helped develop and maintain strong, effective mentor-mentee relationships. Such documentation practices built trust, clarified expectations, and provided a record that could be referenced when needed, ultimately strengthening the mentoring process.

Building capacity: “She’s gotten a series of three promotions.”

This theme explains how the participants in this study identify and create opportunities for advancement, support mentees through promotion processes, help negotiate raises and role expansions, and create experiences that build management and leadership skills. Participants also

encouraged skill building by focusing on the development of both technical and soft skills (teaching tools like strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis for decision-making, strategic thinking capabilities development). Three sub-themes representing how participants intentionally created career development pathways for their mentees are explained in the following sections.

Identifying and Creating Opportunities. The women NPO leaders consciously worked to create environments where women could develop and express their authentic leadership styles rather than conforming to traditional (often male-centric) leadership models. This theme explains how the mentors identified and created opportunities for their mentees by speaking for them when not in the room to identify opportunities for advancement for them. For example, Iris indicated,

I've often heard the phrase a mentor is somebody who talks about you when you are not in the room, which I love. So that means, like, advocating for you when you've left the room, and singing your praises and really talking about you as a person and the skill set that you bring. Yeah. So, I think that is a really important role for a mentor.

Iris's description of advocacy represents one dimension of opportunity creation, using positional influence to champion mentees in decision-making spaces they cannot access themselves.

Amelia also explained,

She had, you know, goals, [to be] director of a division or a program? She didn't have any budgeting experience. To give her a director-type experience, we had a tutoring component. So, she led the tutoring component, and she was over[seeing] the budget for the tutoring component and hiring the tutors and doing all those things. So, it was up to me to create opportunities for her to get that experience.

Building on this advocacy approach, Amelia shows how mentors intentionally craft developmental experiences, strategically assigning roles and responsibilities that develop specific skills mentees need for growth. Ava also stated,

So, one of my mentees started with the organization as just a teacher role, but she's someone who I definitely saw potential in and recognized just her vision in terms of not only her program but the organization and as a whole, of what we could achieve. So, she's someone that I feel like I really recognized. This is kind of a diamond in the rough in terms of someone who can really be developed. So, I've invested a lot of time with her...She's gotten a series of three promotions during the time that she's been here.

Ava's example demonstrates the long-term process of creating opportunities, showing how ongoing mentorship and strategic growth can lead to tangible progress over time.

Iris, in another instance, put it this way, "We have multiple examples of women who have asked for a raise that [the mentee] never thought [they could] because [the mentees] were mentored through that." This example also shows how mentors help mentees overcome self-advocacy barriers by providing both confidence and concrete strategies needed to negotiate for advancement, changing mentees' perceptions of what they can legitimately ask from their organizations. Luna described how, as part of creating opportunities for her mentees, she has worked alongside her mentees to sharpen some of their skills, making them better. Luna detailed,

Oh, I mean, I could give you plenty of examples. I mean, I've had to, you know, literally draft emails with, you know, mentees before. I just did that a week ago with one of my mentees who is applying for Graduate School, where I'm like you, take the first stab at it and I feel I like to have the conversation of what it is that you're trying to accomplish.

Luna's hands-on approach to skill development exemplifies the collaborative aspect of creating opportunities, where mentors work directly with mentees to develop skills in real-time. Together, these examples show how mentors systematically create pathways for growth through advocacy, strategic role assignment, ongoing investment, confidence building, and direct skill training that turn potential into real career progress.

Building Confidence and Self-Esteem. Nine out of 16 participants emphasized the need to build confidence in women to help them overcome self-doubt and impostor syndrome, which otherwise could prevent mentees from pursuing leadership roles. Participants also explained reclaiming confidence and self-esteem as increasing women's voice and teaching them to speak up for themselves and others appropriately. For example, Ava said this about her mentee, "She really did have so much doubts about her capability, you know? And so, I felt like that was, you know, just being direct. Like, Yep, you can make this decision."

Participants also described how being passionate/emotional is often seen as less professional for women, and so helping their mentees to own their emotions appropriately was important to help reclaim emotions. For instance, Emma explained, "I think first confidence, right? Like you really want them to feel confident in bringing their voice to the table."

Additionally, Abby stated,

For women specifically, I think it's a really, really beautiful thing when women can be emotional about what [the women] do. A lot of times in the corporate world and even in education...being highly emotional is seen as a negative. And in the nonprofit world, being highly emotional is what breathes life into our entire job.

In another instance, Abby continued that, "Self-worth. Yeah. And then we work on self-worth together by constantly reminding them [mentees] that they can. There are so many women who

don't know that they're allowed to take up space." Iris also highlighted how important it was to build confidence and skills, explaining that,

How many times will women look at a job? A role that is an open role, and because [the women] don't check every single box. They're like, I'm not going to apply for that role, but a mentor will say OK. You can learn if you don't have one of those skills; you can learn.

Iris continued, "we have evidence of mentors that advocate and women that have been promoted because their mentor said I'm going to give you the skill sets. I'm going to give you the tools to help you get to that next role. And then [the mentors encourage mentees], you can do it, you can do it."

These women NPO leaders also recognized differences between the expectations of men versus women and their actions. For example, Emma said that "Men will go for opportunities when [men] meet 60 percent of the qualifications, but women will tend to hold back until [women] meet 100%, right? So just sharing that is so eye-opening for women." Iris and Emma's approach demonstrates how mentors build confidence by educating mentees about gendered behavioral patterns that can limit their advancement. By naming these differences explicitly, Iris and Emma helped women recognize that their tendency to wait for perfect qualifications is a learned behavior rather than a personal failing, empowering them to challenge their own self-imposed limitations.

Creating Network Opportunities. Nine out of 16 participants deliberately created pathways and opportunities for women to advance into leadership roles, often through strategic networking and connections. Participants connected mentees with broader professional networks by introducing key industry contacts, creating formal networking opportunities, conferences, and

professional development opportunities to meet other people to broaden their informal networks. Laura said that “I’m very often like trying to advocate and introduce them to other people, and whenever I’m with them, I’m like, oh, meet this person, or this person is this person.” Laura’s approach shows direct networking, leveraging her professional connections to broaden her mentees’ access to influential contacts. Similarly, Amelia added the importance of having allies to help women speak up. Amelia explained that,

I would also say it’s important to be able to find allies. So sometimes, as women, we need to, especially women of color, it’s important for us to have allies. People who may be of a different race, different gender, to say or repeat the same things that we said, but because of the rooms we’re in, it’s heard by the people, not by us. So, it’s very important to establish those ally relationships as well.

Amelia’s focus on ally relationships highlights the strategic aspect of network building, understanding that effective networks need advocates who can boost women’s voices in spaces where they might not be heard directly. Ava described,

I have connected [my mentees] to a human resource partner to work on specific skill development and in particular areas. We have also invested in more formal training. This extends beyond just my mentorship relationship, also connecting them to professional development in the areas that they’re looking for. So just recently I had. A mentee who attended the [name of program], which was being offered by the [name of a Foundation]. I have another mentee who will be doing that next month. We’ve also just connected them, and our organization has paid for and supported other, more specific skill-building opportunities. I also encourage my mentees to be involved in professional organizations relevant to their area. So, for example, my [mentee], is part of [name of an organization].

Ava's comprehensive approach demonstrates how mentors build both internal organizational networks and external professional connections, ensuring mentees access diverse development opportunities and industry relationships. Further, Olivia indicated,

I know for me there have been times where I can give one example. I had told some mentees, hey, here are some events that are going on in the community. These might be good to check out, like take a look. Decide if you should go or not. Put it on your calendar. There were things where I was like, I think someone from the team might want to go.

Katie also explained, "I've really made a conscious decision to always try and build leadership skills beneath me, right with anybody who is underneath me. I want them to be successful, so I send them to conferences." Elsa added that "being able to help that next generation rise. What is my role? Somebody's helped me along my journey. How do I help them along their journey? By pointing them [mentees] towards opportunities outside to meet people." Katie's and Elsa's comments highlight the intentional, systematic approach to network building, where mentors actively seek out and create opportunities for mentees to develop professional relationships beyond their immediate organization. These examples collectively show how mentors strategically grow their mentees' professional networks through direct introductions, ally development, organizational connections, event identification, and external opportunity creation, recognizing that strong professional networks are crucial for leadership advancement in NPOs.

Modeling constructive behaviors. Lastly, the participants in this study explained how they, as mentors, utilized modeling to establish and sustain their mentor-mentee relationships. The participants explained modeling as trying to demonstrate and act out what their mentees are expected to do, and also role-played difficult conversations, thereby strengthening their mentor-

mentee relationships. This modeling practice was about demonstrating professional skills, communication techniques, and leadership behaviors that mentees needed to learn. Mentors taught specific professional skills such as handling difficult conversations, professional comportment, and advocacy techniques. The role-playing and practice sessions were intentionally designed to enhance mentees' confidence and abilities, and the examples illustrated how mentors help mentees prepare for specific professional challenges. For example, Emma stated,

One thing that we often did was just, I would role-play her manager and sort of help her build confidence in saying what she needed to say... So, like, if this happens, what are you going to do? And you know, and even things like how you carry yourself and what you wear that day and how you hold your body, you know, we would practice all of those things, and really just make it more comfortable for her to get those words out.

Emma's detailed role-playing approach demonstrates how mentors used experiential learning to build both communication skills and confidence simultaneously, addressing not just what to say but how to embody leadership presence through posture, attire, and delivery. Similarly, Laura explained,

So, in our programs, I model with our individuals how to do things in a capacity that's functional and aligned with their code of conduct. So, I think a lot of times with the individuals that I'm working with. I do the same... And so, a lot of times, I do see them in settings doing the same for others...But I really think it's a lead-by-example.

Laura's emphasis on "lead-by-example" modeling shows how mentors demonstrated proper professional behaviors in real time, creating learning opportunities through observation and imitation that go beyond formal mentoring sessions to influence how mentees interact with

others in their work environment. Sophia said that what she did was not necessarily role-playing but still captured the idea of modeling and role-playing. She explained,

So, I do a lot of kind of, not necessarily role-playing, but you know, walking through the scenario, talking about the different possible reactions. And then how, you know, you would handle each of those reactions? You know, if someone gets defensive, then you need to kind of back off a little bit... And then also teaching them a lot of, like letting them drive the car, you know, letting the employee lead you to the solution that's going to work for them.

From this quotation, it is evident that Sophia employed a capacity-building strategy that enhanced her mentees' leadership and communication skills through guided practice and strategic coaching. Sophia taught scenario analysis and strategic response planning. Sophia also provided specific communication tactics for managing challenging interpersonal dynamics, promoting a collaborative leadership approach and empowerment strategies, and instructing on when to adapt the approach based on situational cues. Ava explained,

You know, I would be part of meetings with her. You know, we would talk in advance about, ok, what are the things that we need to make sure that are being communicated... And then you know, I would be part of meetings with her and kind of model that and but also give her opportunities to contribute, and then and then again, we would debrief afterwards.

Ava's three-phase approach, preparation, live demonstration with guided participation, and reflection, is an example of how mentors created comprehensive learning experiences that went beyond simple observation to include strategic planning, supported practice, and consolidation of learning through debriefing.

Participants used modeling as a capacity-building tool that extended beyond simple demonstration to encompass systematic skill enhancement through guided practice and strategic coaching. Instead of just showing mentees what to do, these leaders created comprehensive learning experiences that developed both technical skills and emotional resilience needed for effective leadership. This modeling practice served as a targeted intervention, transforming abstract leadership ideas into practical, transferable skills through experiential learning in professional settings.

Removing barriers: “We’ve tried to have a flexible work schedule.”

Twelve out of 16 participants explained how, as mentors, they use practical solutions to address the systemic barriers acknowledged in the first research question. These mentors implement concrete interventions, including flexible work arrangements, support for working parents, assertiveness training, and analytical skill development, to directly counter the work-life balance and communication style challenges that impede women’s advancement.

Flexible Work Arrangements as Mentoring Interventions. Several participants addressed work-life balance barriers through strategic workplace accommodations. For example, Ava stated that, “so I have a mentee... and then she has the option either to work longer on other days or to finish up her day at home.” Ava’s flexible scheduling approach demonstrates how mentors created practical accommodations that allowed women to meet family obligations while maintaining professional responsibilities and advancement opportunities. Similarly, Iris added that, “We’ve tried to have a flexible work schedule...I have one staff member who we’ve kind of said, you know, she has a little bit longer commute. And so, we talked about Let’s have a dedicated work-from-home day.” Iris’s commute-based work-from-home arrangement shows

how mentors identified individual barriers and created tailored solutions that addressed specific challenges women face in accessing workplace opportunities.

Communication and Analytical Skill Development. Beyond workplace flexibility, mentors also address communication-related barriers by teaching assertiveness strategies and analytical frameworks. Mia addressed communication style challenges by teaching her mentees that assertive interruption is sometimes necessary. She explained that she tells her mentees that

Sometimes I would just have to interrupt others, and people would say that's interesting. I can never get them to stop talking, and I'd say, yeah, I was kind of rude, wasn't I? And it's no, it wasn't rude. But you got your point across.

Mia's example demonstrates how mentors normalize assertive communication behaviors for women by modeling strategic interruption and reframing it as effective rather than rude, helping mentees understand that getting heard sometimes requires challenging traditional politeness expectations.

Isabella employed a cognitive approach by stating that "I started doing with some of them is teaching them like how to do a SWOT [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats] analysis...so that you can make a quantified decision and not just based on opinion." This approach provided mentees with evidence-based decision-making frameworks that built their analytical credibility while countering biased assumptions about their strategic thinking capabilities. Another example mentioned in the previous section was Emma's detailed role-playing approach, which demonstrates how mentors used experiential learning to build both communication skills and confidence simultaneously; mentors addressed not just what to say but how to embody leadership presence through posture, attire, and delivery.

Overall, the findings from this study reveal a complex landscape where women NPO leaders simultaneously recognize persistent systemic barriers while implementing strategic mentorship practices to address them. The two research questions highlight the challenges these women NPO leaders identified, including work-life balance issues and communication style expectations, as well as the sophisticated communication practices they employed to build leadership capacity among other women. These findings indicate that effective mentorship in NPOs requires going beyond simple awareness of gender-based barriers to implementing concrete, relationship-centered interventions that systematically tackle these challenges.

The mentorship practices identified, ranging from vulnerability-based trust building to strategic career pathway development, are more than personal relationship tactics; they are organized efforts to address systemic inequalities that these leaders have experienced firsthand and now work to dismantle for others. The communication methods employed by these women NPO leaders reflect both the limitations of resource-scarce NPOs and the innovative strategies that emerge when mission-driven leaders are committed to promoting gender equity within their organizations. These findings raise important questions about the relationship between individual mentorship efforts and broader organizational change, the effectiveness of informal versus formal leadership development approaches, and how feminist mentoring principles can be effectively adapted within NPOs. The following discussion examines these findings within the context of existing literature on gender disparities in leadership, feminist mentoring theory, and nonprofit organizational dynamics, while considering theoretical implications and practical approaches to promoting women's leadership development.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how women nonprofit leaders identify barriers to women's advancement and use mentorship communication practices to build leadership capacity among other women in their organizations. The findings indicate both the ongoing presence of systemic barriers and the innovative strategies these leaders employ to tackle barriers within resource-limited nonprofit settings. This discussion interprets these findings within the broader context of existing research, explores their connection with feminist mentoring theory, and considers their practical implications for nonprofit leadership development. The findings illuminate a complex landscape where women in nonprofit leadership simultaneously navigate persistent gender-based barriers while actively working to dismantle them for future women leaders.

Perceived Barriers

In response to the first research question about the barriers these women NPO leaders perceive as they mentor other women, two primary barriers were identified: work-life balance issues and communication style challenges, which reflect deeply entrenched systemic inequities that extend far beyond individual organizations. These barriers align closely with existing research on gender disparities in leadership, particularly Acker's (1990, 2006, 2020) concept of the "ideal worker norm" and Heilman's (2012) analysis of the double-bind faced by women leaders.

Secondly, the recognition of work-life balance issues as a fundamental barrier connects directly to extensive research on the motherhood penalty (Correll et al., 2007) and the gendered expectations of caregiving responsibilities (Kirby et al., 2017). Charlotte's observation that "family can be a real problem for [women] or can really get in the way for women in a way that

doesn't for men" reflects the persistent cultural assumption that women are primary caregivers, regardless of their professional aspirations or capabilities.

However, these findings extend beyond mere recognition to reveal how women leaders actively implement accommodations and flexibility measures. Ava's approach of allowing staff to "work longer on other days or finish up at home" demonstrates practical solutions that address structural barriers at the organizational level. This aligns with research by Schulte (2014) on the need for workplace flexibility but goes further by showing how women leaders leverage their positional power to create change for others—moral underground. The flexible work arrangements used by participants in this study as mentoring interventions align with broader research indicating that workplace flexibility requires both individual advocacy and systemic organizational change. Dodson's (2009) concept of the "moral underground" illuminates how the women leaders in this study operated, subverting unfair organizational systems through informal accommodations while functioning within existing structures.

Similar to Dodson's (2009) ordinary Americans who find workarounds for economic inequalities, these NPO leaders leveraged their positional power to provide flexibility not offered by organizational policies, effectively creating a "mentoring underground" that addressed systemic work-life barriers through relationship-based solutions. However, this approach, while crucial, reflects what Williams (2000) describes as the limitation of accommodation strategies that do not challenge the underlying "ideal worker" norm, which presumes constant availability and minimal caregiving responsibilities.

The sustainability and scalability of these flexibility practices depend on integration with formal organizational interventions documented in recent workplace flexibility research. Kossek et al. (2024) demonstrate that combining supervisor training with work-life flexibility policies

provides more comprehensive support than individual efforts alone, suggesting that mentoring practices could be improved through systematic supervisor development programs. Fritz and Van Knippenberg's (2018) finding that work-life initiatives specifically influence women's leadership aspirations highlights the strategic importance of the accommodations these participants offered, while Moen and Chu's (2025) analysis shows that such interventions must be intentionally designed to challenge rather than reinforce traditional gender role expectations. Achieving lasting gender equity in NPO leadership requires what Mousa et al. (2021) call "multi-sector evidence on organizational interventions" (pp. 1)—formal policies and cultural changes that embed the flexibility and accommodations these women leaders currently provide through personal relationships.

Luna's discussion of women's "superpowers of balancing all the things" reflects both the burden and the strength that women bring to leadership roles. This duality is connected to research by Williams (2000) on how women's caregiving experiences can enhance their leadership capabilities, while simultaneously creating barriers to advancement. The participants' recognition and accommodation of these realities represent a form of institutional change that addresses structural inequities at the organizational level.

The second barrier—communication style issues framed as "Too blunt. Too direct. Never Just Right"—directly connects to extensive literature on the double-bind faced by women leaders (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Olivia's experience of being repeatedly told she was "blunt" while observing men "getting away with the same thing" exemplifies the gendered expectations around communication styles that have been documented across multiple industries and sectors. Elsa's awareness of needing to modify her communication "as a woman of color, particularly a black woman from the South" adds important intersectional dimensions that align with research by

Crenshaw (2018) on how multiple identities compound workplace challenges. This finding extends existing literature by revealing how women leaders of color must navigate additional layers of expectation and bias while simultaneously mentoring others through similar challenges.

The tension between authenticity and professional expectations emerged as particularly complex in nonprofit environments. Luna's encouragement for mentees to "break that stereotype of 'the niceness'" reflects the unique challenges women face in mission-driven organizations, where collaborative leadership styles are valued but may not be rewarded with advancement (Clerkin, 2024). This finding adds nuance to existing literature by revealing how even organizations with values-based cultures perpetuate gendered leadership expectations. Ultimately, this research shows that while individual mentorship efforts offer vital support for women's advancement from the mentors' perspective, lasting change requires combining these relationship-based efforts with systemic organizational reforms that tackle the structural causes of gender inequality in nonprofit leadership.

Communication Practices and Feminist Mentoring Theory: Theoretical Implications

The communication practices identified in this study demonstrate strong alignment with feminist mentoring theory while extending its practical applications within NPOs. The three primary themes, developing relationships, creating career development pathways, and addressing systemic barriers, reflect core principles of feminist mentorship while revealing sector-specific adaptations. The emphasis on vulnerability and trust-building directly supports Fletcher and Ragins' (2007) work on egalitarian mentoring relationships. Olivia's practice of being "vulnerable before I ask you to" and Mia's willingness to share "when I screwed up" exemplify the authentic communication that feminist mentoring theory prescribes. These findings expand on existing research by highlighting vulnerability as a key communication approach that enacts

the theory's focus on egalitarian relationships. The study illustrates the specific process through which power differences decrease, with mentors intentionally sharing their failures and uncertainties before asking mentees to be vulnerable. This “vulnerability-first” method offers a clear communication tactic that turns abstract theoretical ideas into practical actions, demonstrating how mentors can systematically reduce hierarchies through intentional self-disclosure.

The regular check-ins and documentation practices described by participants reflect what Corple et al. (2023) term “whole-person, care-oriented mentoring.” Diana's “daily 30” meetings and the emphasis on paper trails demonstrate systematic approaches to relationship maintenance that go beyond traditional supervision models. This finding enhances the feminist mentoring literature by providing a detailed understanding of how structured communication practices—such as regular meetings, clear expectations, and feedback mechanisms—can effectively foster egalitarian relationships between mentors and mentees. It also emphasizes that these practices support mutual respect and collaboration, ensuring that professional accountability is upheld without compromising the principles of gender equality.

The intentional creation of career development pathways strongly aligns with feminist mentoring theory's emphasis on empowerment and agency development (Blake-Beard et al., 2011). Amelia's creation of director-level experiences for her mentee and Ava's recognition of “diamond in the rough” potential demonstrate how women leaders actively construct opportunities for advancement. This expands existing research by showing that empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that addresses both individual confidence and systemic obstacles. The women NPO leaders interviewed did not merely enhance mentees' self-esteem in isolation; they combined confidence-building with practical solutions to barriers, such as flexible work

arrangements and strategic networking. This emphasizes that successful empowerment requires mentors to operate at both personal and systemic levels simultaneously, with documentation practices serving as both an empowerment tool and a systematic approach for capacity building.

Additionally, confidence-building strategies identified in this study particularly resonate with research on impostor syndrome and women's leadership development (Buzzanell, 2023). Emma's focus on helping mentees "feel confident in bringing their voice to the table" and Abby's work on helping women understand "they're allowed to take up space" demonstrate concrete approaches to addressing internalized barriers that prevent women from pursuing leadership roles. Participants' recognition of intersecting identities and their effects on career advancement aligns closely with feminist mentoring theory's emphasis on intersectionality awareness (Crenshaw, 2018). Elsa's navigation of age, race, and gender dynamics and Amelia's discussion of the need for allies reflect a sophisticated understanding of how multiple identities shape professional experiences. These findings reveal that the principle of intersectionality in feminist mentoring requires adaptable communication rather than static awareness. While the theory recognizes that mentees have multiple identities, this study demonstrates how effective mentors continually modify their communication strategies based on the specific intersection of identities each mentee holds, requiring mentors to develop flexible communication skills that can address different combinations of marginalized identities as they arise in mentorship conversations.

However, these findings also reveal tensions between individual empowerment and systemic change. Isabella's acknowledgment that despite giving women "all of these really difficult tasks," they still don't receive promotions reflects the limitations of individual mentoring efforts in addressing structural inequities. This finding contributes significantly to the

feminist mentoring literature by emphasizing the importance of implementing organizational-level interventions in addition to fostering and strengthening individual mentoring relationships. It suggests that effective mentorship within feminist contexts requires structural support and systemic change at an institutional level, alongside personal efforts to build meaningful connections.

In summary, this study both confirms and expands feminist mentoring theory in meaningful ways. The findings affirm the theory's core principles by showing how egalitarian relationships, mutual learning, empowerment, and intersectionality awareness are evident in nonprofit organizations. The focus on vulnerability, transparency, regular communication, and collaborative goal setting supports feminist mentoring theory's rejection of hierarchical, top-down approaches in favor of more democratic mentoring relationships. However, this research offers three key theoretical contributions that push the field beyond current scholarship. First, it defines vulnerability as a basic communication practice by outlining some steps through which mentors build trust and reduce hierarchies.

Second, it shows that empowerment involves both boosting confidence and removing practical barriers, highlighting how effective mentors address individual and systemic issues simultaneously through integrated methods. Third, it demonstrates that intersectionality awareness requires responsive communication strategies tailored to each mentee's unique identity intersections instead of applying one-size-fits-all frameworks. These contributions turn feminist mentoring theory from abstract ideas into clear, practical communication strategies while also exposing the theory's limits when individual mentoring efforts face ongoing organizational inequalities.

Contradictions and Limitations of Existing Theory

While the findings largely support feminist mentoring theory, several contradictions and limitations emerged. The informal nature of most mentoring relationships described by participants contrasts with the structured approaches often advocated in feminist mentoring literature. The participants' emphasis on separating mentoring from supervisory responsibilities suggests potential conflicts between egalitarian relationship ideals and organizational hierarchies.

Additionally, the resource constraints typical of NPOs created practical limitations on implementing comprehensive feminist mentoring approaches. Unlike corporate settings, where formal mentoring programs often receive dedicated funding and administrative support, these women leaders had to create mentoring opportunities within their existing role responsibilities and organizational constraints.

Practical Implications for Nonprofit Leadership Development

The findings reveal numerous strategies that nonprofit leaders can implement to advance women's leadership development without requiring formal programming or additional resources. These practical implications are particularly valuable for organizations that lack the capacity for structured mentoring initiatives.

Informal Network Building and Advocacy

The participants' emphasis on being mentors who "talk about you when you're not in the room" provides a concrete strategy that requires no additional resources beyond intentional communication. Luna's practice of "literally drafting emails" with mentees and Laura's approach of consistently introducing mentees to new contacts demonstrate low-cost, high-impact networking strategies that can be implemented within existing workflows. Nonprofit leaders can do this by regularly identifying networking opportunities during organizational activities, making

strategic introductions at existing meetings and events, and actively promoting mentees' leadership skills in discussions and decision-making processes.

Flexible Work Arrangements as Mentoring Tools

The accommodation strategies described by participants—such as Ava's flexible scheduling for parents and Sophia's emphasis on work-life boundaries—demonstrate how operational decisions can function as mentoring interventions. These approaches require leadership commitment rather than additional funding, making them accessible to resource-constrained organizations. Nonprofit leaders can achieve this by reviewing existing policies for flexibility options, developing personalized accommodation plans tailored to employees' specific challenges, and setting healthy work-life boundaries, all while clearly discussing these practices with mentees.

Documentation and Skill-Building Integration

Nonprofit leaders can implement this by incorporating reflective writing exercises into regular supervision meetings, encouraging strategic planning documentation, and using written goal setting and progress tracking as both mentoring tools and organizational development practices.

Participants' emphasis on paper trails and written reflection provides practical tools that support both professional development and organizational accountability. Diana's encouragement for mentees to "put your words on paper" and Harper's advice to "write down what you're thinking" offer concrete strategies that can be integrated into existing supervision and project management processes. Nonprofit leaders can implement this by incorporating reflective writing exercises into regular supervision meetings, encouraging strategic planning

documentation, and using written goal setting and progress tracking as both mentoring tools and organizational development practices.

Role Modeling and Experiential Learning

The modeling approaches described by participants—from Emma’s role-playing difficult conversations to Sophia’s “letting them drive the car” philosophy—provide cost-effective development strategies that can be embedded within regular work activities. These approaches align with feminist mentoring principles while remaining feasible within nonprofit operational realities. Nonprofit leaders can implement this by creating opportunities for mentees to observe and participate in high-level meetings, practicing difficult conversations through structured role-play sessions, and gradually transferring leadership responsibilities while providing guided support and feedback.

Implications for Organizational Change

The findings suggest that while individual mentoring relationships can provide significant support for women’s advancement, systemic change requires organizational-level interventions that address structural barriers. The participants’ recognition of persistent gender disparities despite their mentoring efforts highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that combine individual development with policy and cultural change initiatives. Organizations seeking to advance women’s leadership should consider implementing flexible work policies, transparency in promotion processes, and accountability measures for leadership diversity. The communication practices identified in this study can inform the development of mentoring guidelines and supervisory training that incorporates feminist mentoring principles without requiring extensive resource allocation.

Additionally, the emphasis on intersectionality awareness suggests the need for mentoring approaches that acknowledge the complex, multiple identities that women bring to their professional development. Recognizing these intersecting identities enables mentors to provide more targeted support that addresses the unique combination of barriers each woman faces, rather than applying generic approaches that may miss critical aspects of their experience. Organizations should consider how mentoring programs can address not only gender-based barriers but also the intersecting effects of race, age, socioeconomic status, and other identity dimensions.

This study contributes to existing literature by providing concrete examples of feminist mentoring practices within nonprofit contexts, revealing sector-specific adaptations and constraints that have received limited attention in previous research. The findings extend understanding of how women leaders navigate systemic barriers while simultaneously working to dismantle them for others. The intersection of feminist mentoring theory with nonprofit organizational dynamics represents a rich area for continued exploration, particularly as the sector continues to grapple with the contradiction between social justice missions and persistent leadership.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study offers valuable insights into how women in nonprofit leadership recognize barriers and employ mentorship practices to advance other women into leadership roles. However, several limitations must be acknowledged, along with the intentional methodological choices that shaped the research design.

The midwestern metropolitan area for this study provides a representative context for examining women's leadership mentorship practices in nonprofit organizations, which enhances

rather than restricts the generalizability of these findings. This region's nonprofit sector reflects national patterns in several key ways: the distribution of organizational sizes aligns with national trends, where most nonprofit employment occurs in medium to large organizations like those targeted in this study (\$100,000 to \$10 million in annual revenue), and the sector diversity among participants mirrors the national distribution, with health care/social assistance and educational services representing the largest shares of nonprofit employment (Candid, n.d.). Most importantly, the gender leadership disparities observed in this metropolitan area correspond to national statistics, where women make up 70-75% of the nonprofit workforce but hold only 18-30% of executive leadership roles (Clerkin, 2024).

This midwestern statewide data confirms its representativeness, with 56% of nonprofits operating within the study's target revenue range (UWM Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management, 2019) and nonprofit employment accounting for 11.9% of the state's total workforce. This significant economic presence parallels national nonprofit sector contributions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The study participants' organizational types—charitable organizations (62.5%), higher education (12.5%), and 501(c)(6) organizations (12.5%)—align with the region's composition, where human services (39%) and education (14%) dominate (UWM Helen Bader Institute for Nonprofit Management, 2019). Additionally, this area's strong nonprofit infrastructure, evidenced by \$37.9 billion in annual revenue and the region's fourth-place national ranking in volunteer participation (35.7%) (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2015), creates a relatively supportive environment for nonprofit operations.

While specific regional demographic data for women's participation and leadership in this midwestern area nonprofits is not readily available from recent studies, the Helen Bader Institute's focus on diversity research in the region's NPOs suggests ongoing attention to

leadership representation issues, and the consistency between the midwestern area patterns and national NPO demographics indicates this metropolitan area likely reflects the broader national trends of women representation in leadership positions overall.

The geographical context also provides specific features that may enhance the applicability of the findings. The region's well-established philanthropic infrastructure offers professional development opportunities that several participants mentioned, while its dense metropolitan geography supports the cross-organizational mentoring relationships seen in the data. These features create a relatively supportive setting for informal mentoring practices. The data in this dissertation indicate that suppose women leaders in this favorable environment still face major systemic barriers and depend heavily on informal mentoring because of a lack of formal programs. These findings suggest that NPO gender leadership disparity may be even more severe in less resource-rich areas, making the strategies identified in this dissertation especially useful for wider application.

However, the geographic focus ultimately centered on a midwestern metropolitan area, despite the general criteria being U.S.-wide, and involved leaders from medium to large NPOs (annual revenue ranging from \$100,000 to \$10 million, with one organization exceeding \$10 million). Selecting one metropolitan area allowed for in-depth exploration of mentorship practices within a specific nonprofit ecosystem while maintaining feasibility for data collection. This concentration enabled the study to examine how regional factors, such as funding environments, collaborative networks among organizations, and local cultural norms, might influence mentorship approaches and the recognition of barriers. Nonprofit sector characteristics in this area, including its mix of large and small organizations, diverse service populations, and particular funding landscape, provided a rich context for understanding mentorship dynamics.

However, this choice may limit generalizability and highlight the need for comparative research across different geographic and economic contexts. This study area's particular demographics, financial landscape, and NPO infrastructure may have influenced the barriers and strategies identified by participants. For example, the work-life balance challenges and communication style issues recognized by these leaders may manifest differently in regions with varying cultural expectations around gender roles, different economic pressures, or distinct NPO histories. Future research should examine mentorship practices across diverse geographic areas to understand how local contexts shape leadership development approaches and the recognition of barriers. Also, comparative studies across urban, suburban, and rural NPOs could reveal how community characteristics, funding landscapes, and cultural norms shape mentorship opportunities and challenges.

Second, the focus on medium to large NPOs was intentional, based on the assumption that these organizations would have sufficient staffing levels and organizational complexity to support formal or informal mentorship relationships. Smaller organizations may lack the hierarchical structure or role differentiation necessary for traditional mentorship dynamics, while larger organizations may have more formalized human resource development processes that can obscure informal mentorship practices. This choice enabled the examination of mentorship within organizations that have some capacity for leadership development, while still facing the resource constraints typical of the NPOs. Interestingly, a lot of the mentoring occurred across organizations, and many leaders separated supervision from mentoring.

It is important to note though that the decision to limit participation based on NPO revenue necessarily excludes the experiences of leaders in smaller organizations who may face different challenges and employ alternative strategies for supporting women's advancement.

Comparative studies examining mentoring practices across varying nonprofit sub-sectors could reveal how organizational mission and focus influence leadership development approaches. International comparative research could also provide valuable insights into how different cultural contexts influence the effectiveness of gender-based barriers and mentorship. Examining nonprofit leadership development in countries with different gender equality policies, cultural norms around work-life balance, or NPO structures could inform more culturally responsive mentorship approaches.

Third, this study intentionally focused exclusively on women leaders' perspectives as mentors, which represents both a methodological strength and a limitation. The decision to focus solely on women leaders as mentors was intentional and theoretically grounded. Given the significant underrepresentation of women in NPO leadership positions, despite their majority presence in the sector's workforce, understanding how women leaders specifically navigate and address gender-based barriers represents a critical gap in the existing literature. Women leaders bring unique insights into the challenges faced by other women and may employ mentorship approaches that differ from those used by male mentors (Hewlett et al., 2010; Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Long et al., 2018; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). The focus on women also aligns with feminist mentoring theory's emphasis on the importance of role models and advocates who have navigated similar challenges. The assumption underlying this choice is that women leaders, having experienced gender-based barriers themselves, may be particularly attuned to recognizing these challenges in others and developing targeted strategies to address them.

The findings support this assumption, as participants demonstrated sophisticated awareness of systemic barriers and employed specific communication practices designed to address them. However, this approach necessarily excludes the perspectives of male leaders who

may also serve as mentors to women, as well as the experiences of mentees who have participated in these relationships, which would provide valuable insights into the perceived effectiveness and impact of these practices. Additionally, understanding how women who have participated in mentorship relationships perceive the effectiveness of different communication practices, their impact on leadership development, and the ongoing challenges they face would provide essential validation and refinement of the findings from this study.

The participants in this study were predominantly white (11 out of 16), with limited representation from women of color (one Asian, three Black or African American). While the study included some discussion of intersectional challenges, particularly from participants like Elsa who spoke about navigating identity as “a black woman from the South,” the limited racial and ethnic diversity among participants constrains the ability to fully understand how mentorship practices must adapt to address the complex, intersecting barriers faced by women of color in NPO leadership. Additionally, all participants held leadership positions with supervisory responsibilities and relatively stable employment within their organizations. This perspective may not capture the experiences of women in more precarious employment situations, those in entry-level positions, or women working in organizations with less supportive leadership structures. The mentorship needs and barriers faced by women in different organizational positions may vary significantly from those identified in this study.

Finally, the semi-structured interview approach, while valuable for exploring nuanced experiences and perspectives, relied on participants’ self-reported practices and perceptions. Social desirability bias may have influenced responses, particularly around sensitive topics related to organizational inequities or personal mentorship failures. Participants may have emphasized successful mentorship examples while minimizing challenges or unsuccessful

attempts at leadership development. The study's cross-sectional design captured participants' perspectives at a single point in time, limiting understanding of how mentorship practices evolve, how barriers change over time, or how the effectiveness of different approaches may vary across career stages or organizational contexts. Longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into the sustained impact of mentorship relationships and the long-term efficacy of specific communication practices.

Beyond addressing the methodological limitations identified above, several promising paths for future research arise from the findings themselves that could greatly improve understanding of mentorship communication practices in nonprofit organizations. Cross-gender mentoring dynamics are a crucial area for study. This study identified that women NPO leaders used specific communication strategies, such as sharing vulnerability and accommodating work-life balance, which originate from their personal experiences with systemic barriers. This prompts important questions about whether male mentors can effectively address these same barriers and how they attempt to do so. Future research should investigate how male NPO leaders mentor women, especially whether they can genuinely model work-life integration when they may not have faced the same caregiving expectations, or how they handle conversations about communication style double-binds they haven't personally experienced. Comparing mentorship results across gender pairings would advance understanding to determine if certain barrier-removal strategies are adaptable or need shared experiences.

The modeling behaviors identified in this study, such as role-playing difficult conversations, demonstrating strategic communication, and exhibiting authentic leadership presence, deserve further examination of their perceived effectiveness and long-term effects. Participants highlighted modeling as a key practice, but questions remain about which specific

behaviors mentees find most influential for their leadership development. Future research could use longitudinal designs to observe how particular modeling techniques translate into mentees' actual leadership actions and career growth over time. Additionally, exploring how cultural and generational differences influence the reception and interpretation of modeled behaviors would offer insights into customizing mentorship strategies for diverse mentee groups.

The findings on intersectionality, particularly Elsa's navigation of age, race, and generational dynamics, suggest rich possibilities for expanding research on communication strategies for managing multiple, intersecting identities in mentorship relationships. Future studies should examine how mentors adapt their communication practices when mentoring women with different combinations of marginalized identities, exploring whether certain approaches are more effective for addressing compound barriers. Research could also investigate how mentees with multiple marginalized identities prefer to discuss identity-related challenges and what communication frameworks best support their leadership development without tokenizing their experiences. This avenue will be useful to inform the development of more nuanced, culturally responsive mentorship training that moves beyond single-identity approaches to embrace the complexity of intersectional experiences in nonprofit leadership development.

Conclusion

This study examined how women NPO leaders recognize barriers to women's advancement and employ specific mentorship communication practices to build leadership capacity among other women in their organizations. The findings reveal that these leaders possess sophisticated awareness of systemic barriers, particularly work-life balance challenges and communication style expectations, that disproportionately affect women's career progression. More importantly, they actively implement strategic mentorship practices that

address these barriers through relationship-building, intentional career development, and practical accommodations. The communication strategies identified, including vulnerability-based trust building, regular check-ins, documentation practices, modeling behaviors, and creating advancement opportunities, demonstrate how feminist mentoring principles can be effectively adapted within resource-constrained NPOs.

The research contributes to both feminist mentoring theory and nonprofit leadership research by providing concrete examples of how women leaders navigate the paradox of working within organizations dedicated to social justice while simultaneously addressing internal gender inequities. The strategies revealed in this study offer practical approaches that require minimal resources but significant intentionality, making them accessible to NPOs of various sizes and capacities. However, the findings also highlight the limitations of individual mentorship efforts in addressing systemic inequities, suggesting that sustainable change requires combining personal development approaches with organizational-level structural reforms. As NPOs continue to grapple with the contradiction between their social justice missions and persistent leadership disparities, this research provides evidence-based insights for creating more equitable pathways to leadership while maximizing the sector's potential for social impact through diverse, representative leadership. Ultimately, this research shows that while individual mentorship efforts offer vital support for women's advancement from the mentors' perspective, lasting change requires combining these relationship-based efforts with systemic organizational reforms that tackle the structural causes of gender inequality in nonprofit leadership.

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Appendix A (Pre-screening Survey)

My name is Misornu, and I am a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am researching how women leaders in nonprofits mentor other women in nonprofit organizations. This is a pre-screening survey to assess whether you meet the selection criteria. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Please note that all information shared will be confidential, and any identifying details will be replaced with pseudonyms in transcripts to ensure your privacy. Thank you for your participation.

1. Please enter your name and email address
 - Name
 - Email
2. Are you or have you been a woman leader with an official title or position (for example, CEO, Director, or others) in a nonprofit organization in the U.S.?
 - If yes, type in your position title and continue.
 - If no, thank you for your interest in participating in this research, but unfortunately, you do not meet the participation.
3. What is the annual revenue budget of your nonprofit employer?
 - Under \$100,000
 - \$100,000 to \$500,000
 - \$500,000 to \$10 million
 - Over \$10 million
 - If B or C, continue
 - If A or D, thank you for your interest in participating in this research. Unfortunately, your organization does not meet the participation criteria.

4. Have you mentored a woman in your nonprofit or other nonprofits, formally or informally, to help them advance professionally?
- If yes, continue
 - If no, thank you for your interest in participating in this research. Unfortunately, you do not meet the participation criteria.
5. Please answer the following questions to help collect demographics to report in the research study in aggregate. All information you provide will be confidential.

(Demographics):

- What is the type of nonprofit you work at?
 - a. Charitable organization.
 - b. Church or religious organization.
 - c. Private foundation.
 - d. Political organization.
 - e. Other: specify
- How many years have you worked for this organization?
 - a.
- How many years have you been in your current position?
 - a.
- How many people do you currently supervise (direct reports)?
- What is your highest level of education?
 - a. High School Graduate
 - b. Technical College Degree
 - c. Associate's Degree

- d. Bachelors College Degree
 - e. Master's Degree
 - f. Doctoral Degree
 - g. Other: specify
- What is your race?
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Hispanic or Latinx
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. White
 - g. Other: specify
- How old are you in years?
 - a.
- What is your marital status?
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. Divorced
 - d. Widowed
 - e. Other, specify
- Do you currently care or have you cared for children?
 - a. If yes, please provide the number of children you care for and their ages.
Blanks (number of children and ages)

- Do you currently care or have you cared for parents or other family members?
 - a. If yes, list (for example, sibling, parent) and how many
 - Indicate which range best describes your individual income level.
 - a. \$0 to \$30,000
 - b. \$30,001–\$58,020
 - c. \$58,021–\$94,000
 - d. \$94,001–\$153,000
 - e. Greater than \$153,000
6. Do you have a pseudonym you would like me to use in the study, or if you prefer, I will select one for you
- Yes, ...
 - No, choose for me

Appendix B (Interview Protocol)

My name is Misornu, and I am a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. As part of my degree requirement, I am studying how women leaders in nonprofit organizations mentor other women in nonprofits. Thank you for deciding to share your experiences. Before we begin, please confirm that you are a woman leader with an official title or position (for example, CEO or director) in a nonprofit organization in the U.S. who has mentored other women in your nonprofit or other nonprofits.

Have you had a chance to review the consent form? Do you have any questions about the consent form? The interview should last about an hour and is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer all or any of my questions, and we can stop anytime you want. It would be helpful if you elaborated on your answers and provided examples as much as possible so I can better understand your experiences. Please avoid using specific names of people or entities, but if you share any identifying information, I will remove or replace the information in the interview transcripts with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Everything you share with me will be confidential. The study will report themes and use direct quotes, but I will only share your information after de-identifying the data so people cannot identify you. I will record the interview to ensure I get everything you say captured correctly. Are you comfortable with us recording this interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Begin recording.

Mentorship and Communication Practices

1. In your own words, what does it mean to mentor people?
 - What role do you think communication plays in mentoring?

- Can you give me some examples of some of the ways you used communication in your mentoring
 - What are the benefits and drawbacks of mentoring?
 - Please give me some specific examples.
2. Tell me a story of how you developed a mentoring relationship with your woman (women) mentee in your nonprofit or other nonprofits.
 - How did the relationship start?
 - What factors were important in the decision to mentor this individual?
 - Please talk me through some important mentoring moments.
 - What were some of the things that happened due to your mentoring?
 3. What is essential for women in your nonprofit organization to know or be able to do?
 - What are essential communication skills to have?
 4. What types of skills or qualities do you focus on developing when working with women in your role as a mentor?
 - How do you decide which areas to emphasize?
 - Do you do anything to help encourage those skills or qualities? If yes, please give me some examples.
 5. Can you tell me of a time when you mentored to help your mentee(s) develop their ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively?
 - Which aspects of your communication do you find most crucial in your mentorship to develop your mentee(s) skills and abilities?
 - How do you communicate to build these skills in your mentees?
 6. In your experience, how do you mentor others to handle conflicts within a team setting?

- Can you give me a specific example of when you did this?
 - What communication strategies do you emphasize during this process?
 - Could you describe a time when your communication influenced the outcome of a conflict?
 - What challenges have you encountered when resolving conflicts through communication, and how do you support others in navigating conflict situations?
7. In your experience, how do you mentor others to develop strategic thinking and decision-making within a team setting?
 - Can you give me a specific example of when you did this?
 8. In your experience, how do you mentor others to develop emotional intelligence within a team setting?
 - Can you give me a specific example of when you did this?
 9. Please share an example of how your communication played a role in an unsuccessful mentorship experience.
 10. Please share an example of how your communication played a role in a successful mentorship experience.

Impact and Outcome of Mentorship (Leadership Capacity Building)

1. Can you describe instances where your mentoring has directly or indirectly influenced a woman mentee's path to leadership or career advancement?
 - Was the influence good or bad? Please explain.
2. Did you ever feel like you missed a chance to create opportunities for women to take on new challenges or responsibilities as part of your mentorship? Please provide an example.

- So, what did you say? Or not say? What was the context like? Were there any factors that hindered progress?
3. On the other hand, did you ever feel like you created an opportunity for women as part of your mentorship?
 - What did you say? Or not say? What was the context like? Were there any factors that promoted progress?
 - What role do these opportunities play in their overall development or make a difference?
 4. Do you encourage your women mentees to advocate for themselves and other women within your nonprofit or other nonprofits?
 - If yes, how do you do this?
 - If no, is there a reason you don't do this?
 - In what ways do you think your mentorship practices contribute to advancing women in their careers in your nonprofit or other nonprofits?
 5. What do you consider to be the most significant benefits that women in your organization have gained from your mentorship?
 - How do these benefits align with their career goals or aspirations?
 6. What do you consider to be some of the downsides that women in your organization have experienced about mentorship?
 - How do these drawbacks impact your mentee(s)' career goals or aspirations?
 7. Are there formal mentorship programs or practices within your organization? If so, what do they involve?
 - Please tell me about meaningful mentoring experiences you have had.

- What is an example of how you experienced mentorship that has impacted you?
- Has mentoring influenced your career trajectory at all? If so, how?

Gender Equity in Nonprofit Leadership

1. What is the gender makeup of the nonprofit organization leadership you work at?
 - How many people make up the top leadership?
 - How many are women or men?
 - Does your nonprofit have a board of directors?
 - How many people are on the board?
 - How many are women or men?
2. In your experience, do you mentor women who aspire to advance their career into leadership roles?
 - How do your women mentees communicate their career advancement aspirations with you?
 - What do your mentees say or do to indicate they are interested in leadership?
 - Do you ever have to encourage women mentees to have more confidence in their own abilities? Can you share an example?
 - Can you describe any specific strategies you use in your communication to support women mentees aspiring to leadership roles?
 - How do you address barriers women may face when moving into leadership positions?
3. Have you ever helped mentor other women through a challenging issue (s) or event (S)?
 - If yes, what are some of those challenging issues or events?

- Have you ever mentored a woman to help her overcome barriers to advancing into a leadership position? If so, can you give me an example?
4. If you mentor both women and men,
 - Is your mentoring the same for both women and men or if not, how does that mentoring process differ? Particularly in terms of what you communicate.
 - Have you noticed any changes in how women are mentored compared to men in your organization?
 5. What advice would you give to other nonprofit leaders who want to create more inclusive mentorship programs for women?
 - In what ways can nonprofit organizations improve their mentorship programs to support women leaders' leadership development better?

Career and Personal Timelines (Please note that I put the timeline questions here since the focus is on the mentor more than the mentee to give room for questions that focus on the mentees and questions that will answer the research questions first)

1. Please create a timeline with time stamps for your work/career trajectory. (direction: organize your key achievements and relevant dates chronologically on a document or visual tool, emphasizing significant milestones and transitions between roles to showcase your career progression and impact)
2. Tell me about the career trajectory you drew on your timeline.
 - When did you start working professionally?
 - How did you first become involved with nonprofit organizations?
 - What led to your decision to work in nonprofits?
 - What influenced your decision to leave different jobs/positions?

- Describe your role and experiences within the nonprofit organization where you work.
 - Looking at your timeline, what important mentoring moments influenced your professional or personal timeline events?
 - How do you use communication to foster an inclusive environment and guide or inspire others?
 - Which areas do you find most challenging in your mentorship, and why?
3. Please create a timeline with time stamps for your life events (direction: organize your key life events and relevant dates chronologically on the document provided, emphasizing significant milestones and transitions between events to showcase your life progression and impact)
- How did any of these events impact your career and what you do—how you mentor others?

Closing:

1. Is there anything else you want to add regarding mentorship, leadership, or succession within the organization?
2. Can I contact you if I need to extend our conversation?

Thank the participant for their time and participation.

Appendix C (Informed Consent)



Informed Consent for Research Participation

IRB #: 25.090

IRB Approval Date: November 12, 2024

Study title	Women Nonprofit Leaders' Mentoring of Women
Researcher	(Gertrude) Misornu Nartey/ Ph.D. candidate/ Communication
PI	Sarah Riforgiate, Ph.D., Communication

We're inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. Whatever you decide, there are no negative consequences.

What is the purpose of this study?

This research aims to understand how mentorship can help more women take on leadership roles in nonprofit organizations. It will explore how communication between women leader mentors and their female mentees helps the women mentees develop leadership skills and overcome barriers that prevent them from advancing in their careers.

Participation Qualification

To take this survey, you must be:

- At least 18 years old
- In a nonprofit leadership role with an official title (i.e., Director, CEO)
- Working in a medium to large nonprofit in the U.S.
- Mentoring other woma(e)n in a nonprofit
- An English speaker

What will I do?

I will conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants, which should last approximately 60 minutes, depending on participant response length. The interview questions ask about women leaders in nonprofit organizations, their experience primarily mentoring other women to leadership capacity building, and possibly their own mentoring experiences. I will ask them to share stories and examples of experiences with mentorship and communication practices, the impact and outcome of mentorship (Leadership Capacity Building), gender equity in nonprofit leadership, and career and personal timelines.

Risks

Possible risks	How we're minimizing these risks
Some questions may be personal or upsetting	You can skip any questions you don't want to answer. Additionally, participants can skip questions and/or ask to remove their information from the study, and we will remove it.
Online data being hacked or intercepted	I am using a secure system to collect this data
Breach of confidentiality: There is a slight risk that participants may be identified	• All study information will be stored within a password protected computer. • Further, participant interview information will be de-identified, meaning that all identifying information

based on information they provide.	(i.e., names, locations) will be removed from the interview transcripts and the recordings will be deleted after transcription.
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Other Study Information

Possible benefits	• By participating, you can help advance understanding of how nonprofit women leaders use communication in mentoring, potentially identifying practices that benefit others. • This study may offer you new insights or increased self-awareness, helping you make more informed decisions about mentoring in the future while contributing to the greater good.
Estimated number of participants	50 Women leaders in nonprofits in the US.
How long will it take?	The interview will take about 60 minutes
Costs/Compensation	There is no cost other than your time to participate, and participation is not compensated.
Future research	De-identified data (all identifying information removed) may be shared with other researchers. You won't be told specific details about these future research studies.
Recordings	• I will use the recording features provided by the selected platform (Microsoft Teams or Zoom) to capture the audio and, if applicable, the visual components of the interviews conducted with the participants. These recordings will accurately document the participants' responses, ensuring the data collected is comprehensive and can be reviewed during the analysis phase. • Also, I will audio record and transcribe the recordings for people who want to meet in person • Once the recorded interviews (audio/video or audio) are transcribed and checked for accuracy, they will be deleted; all typed transcripts will be de-identified and kept for future analysis and studies.
Conflicts of Interest	None

Data Security

What identifying information will be collected and why?	We'll collect the following identifying information for the research: your name, email address, job title, where you work, and other personal demographic data. This information is necessary to report in the research study in aggregate.
How long will my data be kept?	The recording will be kept until they are fully transcribed within 48 hours of collection. Transcribed data will be securely kept in my UWM OneDrive account until the project is completed (12/1/2026).

How is data kept secure?	• All identifying information is removed and replaced with a pseudonym • We'll remove all identifiers within 48 hours after the interviews • We'll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer. • We'll store all paper data in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. • As with any data collected online, there is always a risk of hacked or intercepted data. We're using a secure system to collect this data (UWM Microsoft Teams), but we can't completely eliminate this risk.
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Who might see my data and why?

The researchers	To conduct the study and analyze the data
The IRB (Institutional Review Board) at UWM The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) or other federal agencies	To ensure we're following laws and ethical guidelines
Anyone (public)	I plan to share my findings in publications or presentations. You will not be identified by name. If I quote you directly, I will use a pseudonym.

Contact information:

For questions about the research, problems, or complaints	Misornu Nartey	414-530-9910/ gertrude@uwm.edu
For questions about your rights as a research participant, problems, or complaints	IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)	414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu

Signatures

Remember, your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study anytime. Do you have any questions about the study? Do you agree to participate?

Appendix D (Recruitment Scripts)

Recruitment Email Script:

Subject: Participate in Research on Mentorship and Women's Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations

Dear

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Misornu, and I am conducting a research study as part of my dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The study focuses on women leaders' mentorship communication. Given your leadership experience in the nonprofit sector, I invite you to participate in this study.

Your insights and experiences would be invaluable to this research.

Participation Details:

- The study involves a demographic presurvey of about 5-7 minutes and a confidential interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interview can be conducted at a time and via a convenient platform (in-person, phone, or virtual).
- Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.
- The results of this study will contribute to developing practical mentorship strategies for the nonprofit sector.

Who should participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

To take this survey, you must be:

- At least 18 years old
- In a nonprofit leadership role with an official title (i.e., Director, CEO)
- Working in a medium to large nonprofit in the U.S.

- Mentoring other woma(e)n in a nonprofit
- An English speaker

If you are interested in participating or have questions, please reply to this email. I would be happy to provide further information. Thank you for considering this opportunity to participate.

Best regards,

Misornu

Social Media Recruitment Post (for Flyer):

Calling Women Leaders in Nonprofit Organizations!

Are you, or have you been, a woman leader in a nonprofit organization with an official job title or position (for example, director or CEO)? Have you mentored other women in nonprofit organizations? Is the nonprofit you work for a medium to large nonprofit organization (annual budget or revenue between \$100,000 and \$10 million)? I am researching women in nonprofit leadership positions and mentoring.

I would love to hear from you!

What's involved?

A demographic presurvey (5-7 minutes online) and a confidential interview (virtual, in-person, or phone lasting approximately 60 minutes) to share your experiences and perspectives on mentoring women in nonprofit organizations.

Who can participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

To take this survey, you must be:

- At least 18 years old
- In a nonprofit leadership role with an official title (i.e., Director, CEO)

- Working in a medium to large nonprofit in the U.S.
- Mentoring other woma(e)n in a nonprofit
- An English speaker

Why participate?

Help contribute to research on women in leadership in nonprofits and share your experiences mentoring other women.

If you're interested or want to learn more, please message or email me at gertrude@uwm.edu or 414-530-9910. Your voice can make a difference!

#Leadership #WomenInLeadership #NonprofitLeadership #Mentorship #Research

#GenderEquity

Appendix E (Recruitment Fliers)



DEPTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION

IRB #: 25.090

Participants Needed!!! Calling Women Leaders in Nonprofit Organizations!

Are you, or have you been, a woman leader in a nonprofit organization with an official job title or position (for example, director or CEO)? I am researching women in nonprofit leadership positions and mentoring.

I would love to hear from you!

Who can participate?

- At least 18 years old
- In a nonprofit leadership role with an official title (i.e., Director, CEO)
- Working in a medium to large nonprofit in the U.S.
- Mentoring other woma(e)n in a nonprofit
- An English speaker

What's involved?

- A demographic presurvey (5-7 minutes online)
- Confidential interview (approximately 60 minutes)

***INTERESTED? Scan the
QR code for eligibility &
for more information,
please email, text, or
call us at:***

414-530-9910
gertrude@uwm.edu



IRB #: 25.090



**DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION**

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

CALLING WOMEN LEADERS IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS!

Are you, or have you been, a woman leader in a nonprofit organization with an official job title or position (for example, director or CEO)? I am researching women in nonprofit leadership positions and mentoring.

I would love to hear from you!

WHAT'S INVOLVED?

- A demographic pre-survey (5-7 minutes online)
- Confidential interview (approx. 60 minutes)

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- At least 18 years old
- In a nonprofit leadership role with an official title (i.e., Director, CEO)
- Working in a medium to large nonprofit in the U.S.
- Mentoring other woma(e)n in a nonprofit
- An English speaker

INTERESTED? Scan the QR code for eligibility & for more information, please email, text, or call Misornu Nartey at:



CONTACT



414-530-9910



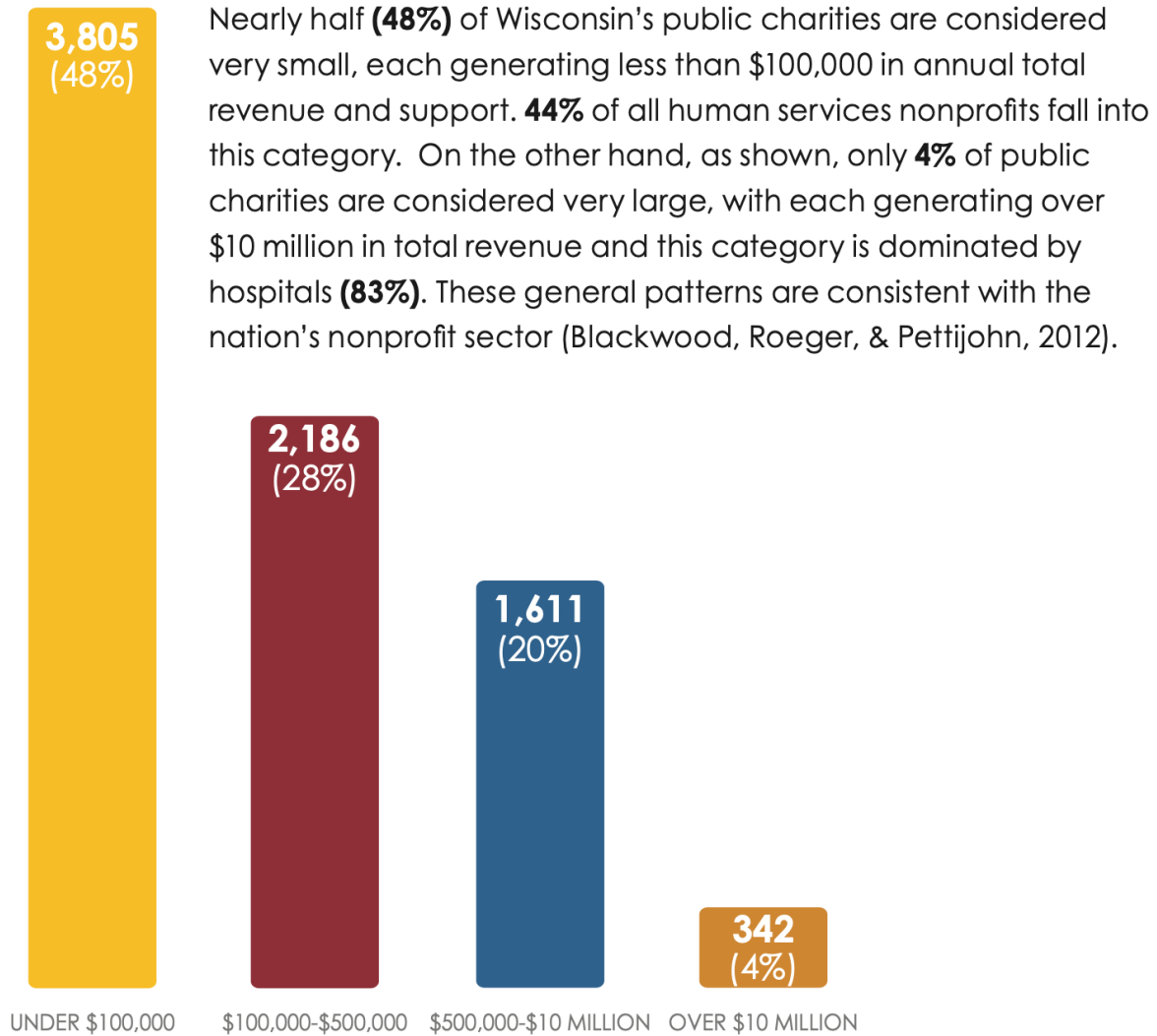
gertrude@uwm.edu

Appendix F (Internal Revenue Service – 501)

Section 501(c) of the Internal Revenue Code	
Revenue Code	Description
501(c)(3)	Religious, educational, charitable, scientific, or literary organizations; testing for public safety organizations. Also, organizations preventing cruelty to children or animals, or fostering national or international amateur sports competition
501(c)(4)	Civic leagues, social welfare organizations, and local associations of employees
501(c)(5)	Labor, agriculture, and horticultural organizations
501(c)(6)	Business leagues, chambers of commerce, and real estate boards
501(c)(7)	Social and recreational clubs
501(c)(8)	Fraternal beneficiary societies and associations
501(c)(9)	Voluntary employee beneficiary associations

Appendix G (Nonprofit size classification)

NONPROFITS BY TOTAL REVENUE AND SUPPORT



Curriculum Vitae

GERTRUDE MISORNU NARTEY, Ph.D.

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy, Communication August 2025
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
Specialty: Organizational Communication with a focus on women in leadership,
gendered expectations, and mentorship

Master of Arts, Communication August 2021
Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI
Specialty: Communication and Media Studies
Thesis: Understanding the cultural narrative of the Spanish Flu as told *through The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*
University of London

Bachelor of Science, Business Administration August 2014
University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana
Specialty: Marketing, Advertising, Branding
Honors: First Class (*Summa Cum Laude*):

Higher National Diploma (HND), Marketing July 2009
Cape Coast Polytechnic (Cape Coast Technical University)
Research: The impact of advertising on the sale of goods in rural communities. A case study in the Cape Coast metropolis.
Honors: Second Class Upper (*Magna Cum Laude*)

ACADEMIC TEACHING/RESEARCH APPOINTMENTS

Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois July 2025 to Present
Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Communication
Teaching Public Speaking, Communication and Diversity, Group Dynamics

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee August 2021 to May 2025
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Communication
Primary Instructor of Record
Interviewers and Interviewing (COMMUN 300)
In Person: Fall 2024 (one section)
Interpersonal Communication Processes (COMMUN 301)
Online: Fall 2024 (one section); Spring 2024 (two sections)
In Person: Fall 2023 (two sections); Spring 2023 (two sections)

Introduction to Interpersonal Communication (COMMUN 101)

Online: Summer 2024 (one section)

College for Kids and Teens

In Person: Summer 2024 (Building Your Debate/ Advertising 101: 6 – 8 grade)

Introduction to Public Speaking (COMMUN 103)

Online: Spring 2023 (one section); Fall 2022 (two sections); Summer 2022 (one section)

Lab Sections

Introduction to Public Speaking (COMMUN 103)

In Person: Spring 2022 (two lab sections)

Online: Fall 2021 (two lab sections)

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Diederich College of Communication

Media in Society (COMM 1200)

In-person: Spring 2021(three sections)

Communication Pathways (COMM 1050)

Online: Fall 2020 (entire lecture class)

Human Communication, Culture, and Society (COMM 1000)

Online: Fall 2020 (two sections)

Media in Society (COMM 1200)

In Person moved online during COVID: Spring 2020 (three sections)

Research Assistant, Diederich College of Communication

Fall 2020: Dr. Kati Berg

Fall 2019: Dr. Young Kim, Dr. Nathan Gilkerson

TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Improving University Teaching Conference – July 31 to August 2, 2024

A Collaborative Space to Future-Proof the Flipped Classroom. Jenny Coady & Anna Sedda
(Heriot-Watt University, UK)

Applying an Equity Lens to Transform a SoTL-Based Professional Development Program.

Valerie Barske & Heather Pelzel (University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, USA)

Engaging our students: Engaging students through community-based service-learning in Online Asynchronous Classes. Sarah Riforgiate (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) & Cody Coker (Boise State University, USA); Using the 3-Minute Presentation (3MP) as an Instructional Tool. Stephanie Rodriguez & Gina Hawkins (Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi)

Foundational Concepts: Making the Abstract Understandable with Models in University Teaching. Judith Puncochar & Don Faust (Northern Michigan University, USA);

MELTing Theoretical Teaching Frameworks to Reflective Practice. Sylvia Tiala (University of Wisconsin, USA); Modeling Confirmation Bias in Education and an Exploration of Possible Remedies. Fahed Masalkhi (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA)

University of Wisconsin System

Information Security Awareness Training – 2024

Sexual Harassment (Title IX) – 2024

Inclusive Teaching Toward Justice – 2022

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Communication Department

TA orientation/training – 2024, 2023, 2022, 2021

Workshop on trauma-informed care and teaching – May 3, 2024

Workshop on trauma-informed care and teaching – April 12, 2024

CSCA practice session – March 29, 2024

Mentoring: Advisors, Committees, and Mentors: In anticipation of the many program forms – February 9, 2024

Dissertator Research, Support, and Peer Mentoring – December 8, 2023

NCA Practice Presentations – November 10, 2023

How can GTAs best support students of all abilities, and what resources does ARC offer to assist you? ARC Representatives, October 6, 2023

Third-Year Cohort Professional Development: Applying for Jobs – September 15, 2023

Policing the Mobile Imagination: The Prosecution of Jack Johnson and the Protection of White Womanhood – May 5, 2023

The Art of Writing and Peer Reviewing – April 7, 2023

CSCA Practice Presentations – March 17, 2023

Resources: National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity – February 10, 2023

Graduate Panel on the Dissertation Process – December 2, 2022

NCA Practice Presentations – November 4, 2022

Pedagogy for Just and Inclusive Learning Spaces and Navigating Conflict in the Classroom, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) – October 14, 2022

Stress Reduction Training – April 22, 2022

Rhetorical Leadership Lecture – March 2022

From Academia to Analytics and Data Literacy: Organizational Communication Insights from a Corporate Career Journey – February 2022

NCA Practice Presentations – November 2021

Non-Faculty Academic Careers – October 2021

Reassessing Assessment – September 2021

AWARDS

2021 *Chancellor's Graduate Student Award*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Research Awards

2024 Paul D. Skalski Award for Top Paper, Top Debut Paper, Graduate Student Caucus, Central States Communication Association (CSCA) for Nartey, G. M. (2024, April). *The representation of intercultural marriages in pop culture through the lens of performance of whiteness: A critical analysis of You People*.

2024 Top Paper Panel, Organizational and Professional Communication Division, Central States Communication Association for Ibiwoye, C. O., Nartey, M., Riforgiate, S. E., Ruh, C., & Zinia, J. F. (2024, April). *Breaking boundaries and building balance: A collaborative inquiry into the work-life needs of women in academia*.

RESEARCH

Publications

Nartey, G. M. (2025). Performing Whiteness in Intercultural Marriages: A Critical Analysis of the Film *You People* in Pop Culture. *Communication and Linguistics Studies*, 11(2), 42–52. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.cls.20251102.11>

Nartey, G. M. (2025). The Negotiations of the Ideal Worker Norm: A Close Analysis of the Work/Life Portrayal in the Intern. *Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13(2), 119–125. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.hss.20251302.13>

Academic Conference Competitively Selected Research Papers

Nartey, G. M. (2025, April). ‘*You have a beautiful smile, use it:*’ *Gendered expectations of women’s experiences in the workplace*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association—Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group, Cincinnati, OH.

Nartey, G. M. (2025, April). *Mentorship towards leadership capacity building for women in non-profit organizations*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association—Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group, Cincinnati, OH.

Sahlstein Parcell, E., Ambrose, O., Holt, J., Nartey, G. M., Rorer, M., & Ruh, C. (2024, November). “*They’re welcome to ask, but it’s complicated*”: *Parent considerations in (non)communication with children about estrangement from their (grand)parents*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association convention, New Orleans, LA.

Nartey, G. M. (2024, April). *The representation of intercultural marriages in pop culture through the lens of performance of whiteness: A critical analysis of You People*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association, Grand Rapids, MI. **Paul D. Skalski Award for Top Paper, Top Debut Paper, Graduate Student Caucus.**

Academic Conference Competitively Selected Paper Panels

Nartey, G. M., Schmidt, M., & Ruh, C. (2024, June). *Mediated Realities: Thematic session of multiple paper presentations*. Paper presented at Work and Family Researchers Network, Montreal, Canada

Ibiwoye, C. O., **Nartey, G. M.,** Riforgiate, S. E., Ruh, C., & Zinia, J. F. (2024, April). *Breaking boundaries and building balance: A collaborative inquiry into the work-life needs of women in academia*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Grand Rapids, MI. **Top Paper Panel, Organizational and Professional Communication Division.**

Ibiwoye, C. O., **Nartey, G. M.,** Riforgiate, S. E., Ruh, C., & Zinia, J. F. (2024, April). *Navigating incoherence and “paying it forward”: Female academic leader rhizomatic network development*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Grand Rapids, MI.

Academic Conference Competitively Selected Discussion Panels

Ibiwoye, C. O., **Nartey, G. M.,** Riforgiate, S. E., Ruh, C., & Zinia, J. F. (2025, April). *Many facets of student mentoring: Widening the scope of mentoring possibilities through research, internships, and teaching*. Panel Discussion at the Central States Communication Association—Organizational and Professional Communication Interest Group, Cincinnati, OH.

Ebohon, E. B., **Nartey, G. M.,** Okafor, B. E., Pringle, M., & Woodwall, A. (2024, April). *Getting comfortable with the incoherence of graduate school*. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, Grand Rapids, MI.

Ambrose, O., Begum, A., **Nartey, G. M.,** Vanderbeke, M., & Wyant, M. (2024, April). *Graduate student mom-researchers: A round-table discussion of how graduate school moms navigate failure and the fear of the future*. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, Grand Rapids, MI.

Gabryelczyk, K., & **Nartey, G. M.** (2023, November). *Advocating for theoretical freedom: Using (new) theories in interpersonal communication to diversify its scholarship*. Panel Discussion presented at the National Communication Association, National Harbor, MD.

Ezumba, I., Kim, G., Kiura, M., **Ofori-Parku, G. M.,** Wang, N., & Yue, J. (2023, March). *Unspoken Classroom Struggles/Experiences; The international graduate students’ perspective*. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, St. Louis, MO.

Culbreth, N., Dumsky, T., Haley, J., Holt, J., Ibiwoye, C. O., Okeke, D., **Ofori-Parku, G. M.,** Ortiz, A. C., Riforgiate, S. E., Rorer, M. B., & Ruh, C. (2023, March). *Listening across organizational voices: Community-based service-learning in nonprofit organizations to*

enhance communication. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, St. Louis, MO.

Eshun, E., Frederick, A. T., **Ofori-Parku, G. M.**, & Watson, O. (2023, March). *Moving forward on works in progress: Research round table*. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, St. Louis, MO.

Ofori-Parku, G. M., Pringle, M., Whiteside, A., & Wilcox, C. (2023, March). *Navigating the Ivory—a space for graduate student peers*. Panel Discussion presented at the Central States Communication Association, St. Louis, MO.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Service to the Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Ph.D. Faculty Representative, Communication – Graduate Student Council, Communication Department – August 2024 to August 2025

Graduate Student Recruitment

Volunteer: Lunch with prospective PhD student, Communication Department – April 6, 2022

Volunteer: Graduate School Virtual Open House (online), Communication Department – October 26, 2023

Volunteer: Graduate School Virtual Open House (online), Communication Department – October 27, 2022

Volunteer: Graduate School Open House (in-person), Communication Department – November 10, 2022

Service to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

4 Poster Judge, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Undergraduate Research Symposium – April 2022

Service to the Discipline

Improving University Teaching Conference 2024 hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee – July 31 to August 2, 2024. Volunteered to help with registration.

Central States Communication Association – Graduate Student Caucus

Chair – April 2024 to April 2025

Vice-chair – March 2023 to April 2024

Secretary – April 2022 to March 2023

Submission Reviewer - 2023, 2024

Central States Communication Association

Registration Volunteer – 2022, 2024

Service to the Community

Participated in a graduate class, coordinated by the professor and the Center for Community-Based Learning, Leadership and Research at UWM, that implemented a service-learning project with other graduate students and three community partner organizations in the Organizational Communication Survey Graduate Class (Communication 810) – September to December 2022

PROFESSIONAL/ ACADEMIC AFFILIATIONS

National Communication Association (NCA)

Central States Communication Association (CSCA)

Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN)

Organizational Communication Mini-Conference (OCMC)

PROFESSIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE

The Lord's Pentecostal Church Int'l – Ashaiman

May 2012 – Jul 2019

Administrative Officer & Community Liaison

- Develop and maintain positive relations with members, other offices, groups, and the local community
- Supervise the performance of general office, administrative, and secretarial duties
- Manage budget, procurement, internal audit, and staffing processes
- Train interns and junior staff
- Coordinate itineraries/agendas, set up and maintain files (database and/or hardcopy)
- Oversee purchase requisitions, miscellaneous disbursement vouchers
- Supervise cash book and ledger analysis, general cash inflow, and outflow
- Administer the compilation of data, prepare reports, maintain office supplies inventory, maintain budget records

Airtel Call Centre

Apr 2011 – Nov 2011

Customer Relationships Associate (contract employment)

- Handled customer queries by offering first-time resolutions
- Handled customer complaints by forwarding them to appropriate channels for further resolutions
- Educated customers about products and services
- Adjudged “associate of the month” for three consecutive months

Ghana Statistical Service

Oct 2010 – Nov 2010

Census Field Officer (Vacation Employment)

- I listed all structures as required in the given enumeration area. Listed 258 structures

- Enumerated all persons in the given enumeration area as required.
- Enumerated 629 males and 690 females

Ashaiman Municipal Assembly (i.e., Local Government Agency) Oct 2009 – Aug 2010

Revenue Officer (National Service)

- Received and checked cash and cheques from revenue collectors of the Assembly
- Issued up-to-date receipts to payers
- Paid in cash and cheques to the Assembly's bank every day
- Made daily cash book entries both manually and electronically
- Maintained a payment voucher management system