



The influence of executive coaching on female leadership in East Africa

Sabrina Ann Blades
2777126@students.wits.ac.za

Research submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University
of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Business Administration

Johannesburg, 2025

i. Abstract

This research investigates the influence of executive coaching on the leadership development of women leaders in East Africa, a region marked by patriarchal norms, high power-distance cultures and underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the study draws on in-depth interviews with five women leaders and five executive coaches operating across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and South Sudan. Thematic and discourse analyses reveal that executive coaching serves as both a developmental tool and a mechanism of resistance, enabling women to navigate gendered expectations, balance personal and professional identities and assert leadership in male-dominated sectors.

Executive coaching was found to significantly enhance strategic thinking, communication, decision-making and stakeholder engagement, while also cultivating psychological resilience and authentic leadership presence. Furthermore, participants reported that coaching empowered them to challenge organisational bias, champion inclusion and mentor other women—amplifying their influence beyond the individual level to drive systemic and cultural transformation. By situating coaching within the sociocultural realities of East Africa, this study extends existing leadership theories and coaching frameworks, offering original insight into how culturally attuned executive coaching interventions can unlock the leadership potential of women and catalyse sustainable organisational change. These findings hold practical implications for leadership development programmes, executive coaches and policymakers seeking to build inclusive and resilient institutions across emerging economies.

ii. Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to the remarkable women leaders and executive coaches across East Africa who so generously shared their lived experiences, reflections and wisdom. Your voices form the heart of this research and your courage continues to inspire.

To my family, thank you for standing beside me with love, patience and quiet strength. In moments when the road felt long, your unwavering belief reminded me of who I am and why this journey mattered.

Finally, I acknowledge the wider network of support that surrounds me , a reminder that leadership is never a solitary pursuit, but a shared journey rooted in connection, resilience and purpose. As the East African proverb wisely reminds us, *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."*

iii. Dedication

To the women of East Africa — who lead with strength, grace, and resilience — and to those who are yet to take their rightful place at the table.

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vi. Key Words

Authentic leadership, boardroom wife, double bind, empowerment, executive coaching, gender bias, growth mindset, imposter syndrome, patriarchal systems, power distance index, professionalism vs. femininity, visibility, female leadership, transformational leadership, strategic thinking, decision-making, leadership identity, patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, social role theory, high power-distance culture, cultural sensitivity, East African context, traditional gender roles, work–life balance, leadership bias, structural inequality, male-dominated environments, caregiving expectations, career progression, mentorship and sponsorship, networking opportunities, stakeholder management, leadership presence, psychological resilience, organisational change, inclusive leadership, diversity management theory, transformational leadership theory, systemic coaching, coaching for change.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Contextual Background

1.1 Introduction

This research aimed to examine the ways in which coaching influences the leadership styles and behaviours of female leaders in East African organisations, with the view of understanding how coaching can enhance leadership capacity and contribute to greater organisational goal achievement. Given the unique cultural and business landscape of the East African region, this study explored the potential of coaching to support women leaders in navigating challenges while maximising their contribution to organisational success.

Chapter 1 is organised as follows. Section 1.2 presents the background of the study. Section 1.3 outlines the research problem. Section 1.4 sets out the research objectives. Section 1.5 explains the significance of the study. Section 1.6 presents the delimitations of the study and, lastly, section 1.7 provides the chapter summary.

1.2 Background of the Study

Coaching is a powerful tool to facilitate personal and professional growth, enabling individuals to gain clarity, overcome challenges and develop essential skills (Sindhu & Deshpande, 2024). Executive coaching tailors this approach to leadership, addressing unique challenges while fostering inclusive and high-performing organisations (Hernez-Broome & Boyce, 2010).

For women aspiring to leadership positions, executive coaching helps candidates to navigate obstacles such as unconscious biases, male-dominated environments and work-life balance. It provides a supportive space to develop strategies, build confidence and embrace authentic leadership styles (Al Naqbi, 2023). East Africa's diverse economic, cultural and social landscapes shape its leadership environment. While the region has seen rapid economic growth (McAuliffe et al., 2012) and progress toward gender equality (Moreno Ruiz, 2020), disparities in leadership remain (Enaifoghe & Maseko, 2023).

Sociocultural attitudes play a significant role in shaping leadership dynamics in Africa, influencing the emergence and progression of women leaders. Despite the existence of some matriarchal societies in the region, patriarchal norms continue to dominate, restricting women's access to leadership positions across sectors. The persistence of these systemic barriers reinforces gender imbalances, making it essential to challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. Addressing these norms is crucial for fostering more inclusive and diverse leadership environments (Haile et al., 2016).

1.3 Research Problem

East Africa's dynamic economy holds significant growth potential, yet women encounter entrenched barriers such as traditional gender roles, work-life balance pressures and limited access to tailored development that restrict their representation in senior leadership and, by extension, constrain both organisational performance and regional economic growth. Although executive coaching has demonstrated promise as a leadership-development tool, existing programmes seldom account for the region's distinct cultural and economic realities and empirical evidence of their impact on East African women leaders remains scarce. To address this gap, the present study explores the unique challenges and opportunities women leaders face in East African organisations, investigates how executive coaching shapes their strategic thinking, decision-making and communication skills, examines their perceptions of coaching-driven development in enhancing organisational financial performance and innovation, and considers the potential of such interventions to accelerate their career progression. In doing so, it aims to generate culturally grounded insights that can guide the design of coaching interventions capable of empowering women leaders, advancing organisational success and unlocking the region's full economic potential.

1.4 Research Objectives

The research objectives for this study are set out below:

1. To examine the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders in the East African business context
2. To assess the impact of executive coaching on the development of strategic thinking, decision-making and communication skills in women leaders of East Africa
3. To explore how women leaders in East African organisations perceive the impact of coaching-driven leadership development on their ability to contribute to organisational financial and innovation goals
4. To explore the potential of executive coaching to accelerate the career progression of women leaders in East Africa

1.5 Significance of the Study

While research brings the benefits of coaching and women leadership development to light, little is known about how executive coaching supports the leadership roles of women in East Africa. Existing studies often focus on Western contexts, overlooking the region's unique cultural, organisational and societal factors. This study addressed that gap by exploring how executive coaching interacts with these dynamics. The findings could help organisations to tailor coaching programmes to better support women in East Africa.

1.6 Delimitations of the Study

This study examined the effectiveness of executive coaching in developing leadership competencies among women in East Africa, focusing on strategic thinking, decision-making and communication. It prioritised the impact of coaching on organisational goals, particularly financial performance and innovation, in medium to large organisations where the number of women holding leadership roles was notable. The research targeted mid-to-senior-level women leaders and adopted a qualitative

approach, using in-depth interviews to explore their lived experiences and the role of executive coaching in their leadership development.

1.7 Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the study by examining the challenges that women leaders face in East Africa and the potential of executive coaching to support their development. While executive coaching is recognised as a valuable tool, there is a lack of research tailored to the unique experiences of women leaders in this region. The chapter highlights the need to explore how coaching influences leadership growth in East Africa's cultural and economic context, setting the stage for this study's contribution to the field.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how executive coaching influences women in leadership roles and organisational success in East Africa, considering the region's unique economic, cultural and social landscape. While women leadership development is becoming increasingly valued, research on the specific impact of executive coaching in East Africa remains limited. Given the region's distinct challenges, targeted research is essential.

The chapter is structured as follows. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 discuss diversity management theory and the role of organisational culture in women's leadership. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 examine the impact of executive coaching on leadership development and success. Section 2.6 explores the East African context, and section 2.7 concludes the chapter.

2.2 Relevant Management Theories

2.2.1 Diversity Management Theory

Diversity management theory suggests that teams with varied perspectives, experiences, and problem-solving approaches outperform homogeneous teams by fostering innovation and creativity (Hoogendoorn, 2013). However, realising these benefits requires careful management, as diversity can also introduce communication challenges and conflicts. Inclusive leadership and open communication are essential for maximising its positive impact.

Gotsis and Grimani (2016) explored how diversity influences leadership effectiveness, integrating it into various leadership theories. They examined leadership styles – ethical, authentic, servant, and spiritual – that foster inclusive and supportive organisational cultures. Their research brought to light the importance of context and leader–follower dynamics in successfully implementing diversity initiatives. They

argued that effective leadership should not only drive organisational goals but should also actively affirm and support diversity. By identifying conditions for successful inclusion strategies, their study provides valuable insights into how diverse employees can thrive in organisations committed to inclusiveness.

In the present globalised environment, Eagly and Chin (2010) emphasised the critical need for diverse leadership teams to navigate complex challenges and drive organisational change. Their work reinforces the importance not just of diversity in numbers but also of fostering inclusive cultures that leverage the strengths of a diverse team. Ritter-Hayashi et al. (2019) stressed the positive impact of gender diversity on innovation, particularly in developing countries. This is an under-researched area, making it relevant to this study. Diversity management, while offering immense potential, requires focused effort to overcome challenges and create fully inclusive environments. Unconscious bias and societal expectations remain significant hurdles.

2.2.2 Social Role Theory

As highlighted by Wood and Eagly (2012), societal norms and gender-related conventions create barriers to effective diversity management by shaping leadership styles and interaction patterns. Women are typically expected to exhibit communal, nurturing and cooperative traits, while men are associated with assertiveness, competitiveness and independence. These ingrained expectations can restrict women's ability to fully leverage their leadership potential, influencing both their leadership approach and how they are perceived in their organisations.

2.2.3 Organisational Culture and Women Leader Prejudices

Organisational culture in East Africa can either support or hinder leadership development of women. High power-distance cultures and gender biases create significant barriers for women leaders (Okunade et al., 2023). However, studies show that women holding leadership roles enhance corporate governance and financial transparency (El-Dyasty & Elamer, 2023).

Biases framing leadership as inherently being the domain of men lead to harsher evaluations and fewer advancement opportunities for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). They argued that leadership development should balance assertiveness with communal traits to counteract these biases. While gender-diverse teams strengthen decision-making and performance, unconscious bias continues to influence hiring, promotions, and workplace interactions (Krause & Hartney, 2021; Ritter-Hayashi et al., 2019). Women leaders tend to adopt transformational leadership styles, which then positively influence organisational dynamics (Johannesen-Schmidt et al., 2003). Research further elucidates the economic benefits to be gained from women leaders, including improved oversight, strategic decision-making and cooperation (Amore et al., 2014; Siri et al., 2016). However, traditional East African organisational cultures often reinforce gender bias, restricting women's leadership opportunities.

To address these challenges, executive coaching focusing on cultural biases and transformational leadership can equip women leaders with strategies to navigate systemic barriers. By fostering inclusivity, coaching can drive organisational change, enhance governance, and improve financial performance.

2.2.4 Executive Leadership Coaching

The increasing prevalence of executive coaching reflects its effectiveness in helping leaders to navigate complex business environments (Ciporen, 2015). Rooted in psychological disciplines, coaching fosters solution-oriented mindsets and mental agility, driving positive behavioural change (Knowles, 2021). Existing studies underscore the critical role of a coachee's intrinsic motivation in driving and maintaining transformative outcomes in leadership development programmes, as explored in contexts of executive coaching for women leaders in East Africa (Skinner, 2014).

To maximise impact, coaching must go beyond individual development and adopt a systemic approach (Hawkins & Turner, 2019). This aligns with 'coaching for change' (Bachkirova et al., 2020) where coaching benefits not only the leader but also the organisation and its stakeholders. For senior women, leadership identity development

is crucial. Coaching helps women to navigate internalised gender biases, societal expectations, and agentic leadership norms associated with men (Skinner, 2014). Similarly, the research of Gray et al. (2019) on ‘coaching the ideal worker’ explored how leadership programmes support the advancement of women while sometimes reinforcing gendered organisational expectations. Despite this tension, coaching interventions had a positive impact.

The literature underscores the value of executive coaching in leadership development, balancing individual motivation, systemic approaches, and gender-aware coaching. However, a critical gap remains in understanding how coaching can be tailored to East Africa’s unique cultural and gender norms. This research sought to explore how coaching can address these regional challenges while fostering leadership growth.

2.2.5 Gender Diversity, Goal Achievement and Organisational Success

Diversity management theory recognises gender diversity in leadership as essential for organisational success.

Amore et al. (2014) point out the link between women as leaders and profitability, particularly in family firms, where women’s unique perspectives enhance decision-making and governance. Their inclusion in top management fosters diverse thought, better risk assessment, and long-term strategic thinking – and thus improving financial performance. Similarly, Garcia-Solarte et al. (2018) show that gender-diverse leadership in high-tech small and medium enterprises drives innovation, ethical governance, and overall success, positioning diversity as a competitive advantage.

Other studies reinforce these economic benefits. Cook et al. (2019) demonstrated how women representation on boards helps close the executive gender gap. Flabbi et al. (2019) linked women executives to reduced gender wage gaps and enhanced firm performance. However, Korphaibool et al. (2023) suggested that risk-averse decision-making by women directors may limit innovation investments, while Bogdan et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between women board members and financial metrics such as return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE), though diversity

measures may influence this relationship. Furthermore, Luh and Kusi (2023) noted that women CEOs may have a positive influence on short-term financial performance, highlighting the need for contextual analysis. The leadership of women influences organisations beyond financial performance. Adams and Ferreira (2009) showed evidence of governance improvements, while Dezsö and Ross (2012) linked gender-diverse leadership to inclusive workplace practices and enhanced outcomes. Mooney (2022) stressed the importance of engaging women executives to maximise their positive impact on the workplace, and Tichenor et al. (2022) encouraged the examination of affective and social outcomes beyond financial measures.

Existing research largely supports a positive link between women's leadership and organisational success, though outcomes vary depending on industry, role, and diversity management strategies. In the context of East Africa, coaching interventions that foster inclusive leadership may play a role in helping women leaders navigate barriers and enhance their contributions. This perspective sets the stage for exploring how such interventions could impact organisational success in the region.

2.2.6 The Significance of the East African Context

Research suggests a positive link between women directors and board effectiveness (Adams & Ferreira, 2009) but its relevance to East Africa remains uncertain. This underscores the need for region-specific studies to provide a better understanding of the social, cultural, and economic factors shaping the leadership of women. Stuhlhofer (2022) explored concepts of African marriage and divorce as theoretical frameworks, highlighting how societal roles influence perceptions of women leaders. These insights can inform culturally sensitive leadership development and diversity initiatives in East Africa.

Traditional gender norms and high power-distance structures may challenge women leaders in asserting authority and gaining acceptance. Understanding the power-distance influence on leadership is key to fostering women's leadership success. To assess women executives' impact on firm profitability, it is essential to examine how gender norms, stereotypes, and cultural expectations shape leadership advancement

and organisational interactions. Executive coaching tailored to the East African context can empower women leaders, helping them to overcome barriers and enhance organisational performance.

2.3 Conclusion and Research Gap

Adams and Ferreira (2009) found that women directors enhance board effectiveness, but their study did not focus on East Africa. This accents the need for region-specific research on women executive influence on profitability. While studies link gender diversity to organisational success (Amore et al., 2014; Garcia-Solarte et al., 2018), East Africa's unique cultural norms and high-power distance index require a more nuanced understanding. Although research supports the benefits of leadership coaching for women executives, there is limited knowledge about how East African women leaders perceive coaching and the impact of coaching on organisational success. This study explored the lived experiences of women leaders in East Africa, examining how leadership coaching empowers them to navigate cultural barriers and achieve success.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 delves into the methodological framework selected to investigate the impact of executive coaching on women's leadership development in the East African context, Chapter 3 details the specific strategies employed to gather rich qualitative data and rigorously analyse the data. The chapter is organised as follows. Section 3.2 presents the research approach. Section 3.3 sets out the research design. Section 3.4 focuses on the data collection methods, as well as the data analysis strategies and interpretation. Section 3.4 details the ethical considerations. Lastly, Section 3.5 summarises the chapter.

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research excels at capturing the nuances of individual experiences, perceptions, and motivations (Patton, 2002). This capability was considered essential when investigating the complex ways in which coaching shaped the development of leadership skills, confidence, and career progression for women leaders in the East African context. Qualitative research was able to explore how cultural norms, organisational structures, and societal expectations in East Africa shaped the coaching experience and its outcomes. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture women leaders' challenges and to discover how coaching helped them to navigate these barriers.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Data Collection Methods

Two populations were targeted for this study. The first population comprised women leaders in mid-to-senior-level management positions in organisations in East Africa that offer executive coaching programmes. The second population for this study

comprised executive coaches with experience in coaching women leaders in East Africa.

3.3.2 Sample and Sampling Method

A purposive sampling approach ensured the deliberate selection of participants who were able to provide rich insights and diverse perspectives (Patton, 2002). The sample included five woman leaders and five executive coaches from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan and Zambia, balancing mid- and senior-level leadership for broader representation. This type of sampling provided the potential to reach saturation while delving into each participant's experience. Participants were identified through the researcher's professional networks, leveraging existing contacts among women leaders and executive coaches with relevant experience in East Africa.

3.3.3 The Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary research instrument for this qualitative study. The chosen research design allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of how executive coaching influenced women leaders' experiences in the East African context. The interview schedule was designed around key thematic areas derived from the research objectives and was informed by relevant literature. The interview schedule included questions specifically composed to elicit participants' insights into unique cultural, societal, or business factors in the East African context.

3.3.4 Data Analysis Strategies and Interpretation

This study employed thematic analysis, supplemented by discourse analysis, to interpret interview data. The thematic analysis identified shared experiences and recurring patterns, while discourse analysis examined language and meaning-making around the impact of coaching. The process included transcription, coding, and linking themes to existing literature on women's leadership and coaching in East Africa. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with all correspondence handled via email.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines of the Witwatersrand Business School, ensuring participant well-being and privacy. The research design and interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity, respecting East African norms and values throughout the process.

3.5 Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 outlines a qualitative approach designed to capture the lived experiences of women leaders and executive coaches in East Africa. By combining rigorous research with culturally sensitive treatment of participants, the study aimed to provide both academic insights and practical guidance for leadership development. Careful participant selection, in-depth interviews, and thorough analysis laid the foundation for a nuanced exploration, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive environment for women leaders in the region.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Emergent Themes

4.1 Introduction

Adopting a qualitative approach, Chapter 4 explores the lived experiences of women leaders in East Africa, with thematic analysis guiding data interpretation. The findings in the existing literature are also examined in order to critically evaluate key emerging themes.

The chapter throws light on the pivotal role of executive coaching in leadership development, particularly in helping women leaders to balance professional and personal responsibilities. It explores how coaching fosters both individual growth and organisational success, empowering women to overcome challenges and drive development. In addition, the chapter examines the barriers and opportunities that women leaders encounter, illustrating how systemic and cultural factors influence leadership development. The findings underscore the importance of targeted support, such as executive coaching, in addressing gender-specific challenges and enhancing leadership effectiveness. The discussion expands on the role of coaching as a catalyst for personal and organisational transformation in East Africa.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 4.2 presents participant demographics, providing context for the analysis. Section 4.3 identifies key themes supported by participant insights and literature and explores subthemes that reflect the impact of coaching on daily challenges and long-term success, bridging lived experiences with broader academic discussions. Section 4.4 concludes the chapter. Participant privacy and confidentiality are maintained throughout. By integrating their perspectives with existing research, this chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of the impact of executive coaching on the leadership of women in East Africa.

4.2 Demographics of Participants

Understanding the backgrounds of participants is crucial for contextualising the findings. The study included five women leaders from the banking and financial

services sector in East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia), holding mid-to-senior management positions with five to 20 years of leadership experience. Their organisations, varying in size, all offered formal executive coaching, though some leaders sought coaching independently for confidential leadership challenges.

The five executive coaches had extensive experience working with women leaders across East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, and Zambia). Four had lived in the region for years and could thus offer deep sociocultural insights. The group, including three men coaches, employed diverse coaching approaches, ranging from transformative to skills-based, with strong expertise in banking and financial services. Participants were selected through non-probability sampling to ensure diversity in leadership roles, geography, and experiences. This approach provided valuable perspectives on cultural and gender barriers, organisational dynamics, and the role of coaching in leadership effectiveness, thus offering a rich foundation for exploring the impact of executive coaching in East Africa.

4.3 Key Themes

This section presents the key themes identified through data analysis, structured in alignment with the research objectives of this study. Each theme is further explored through relevant subthemes, with explanations provided to demonstrate their connection to the focus of the study.

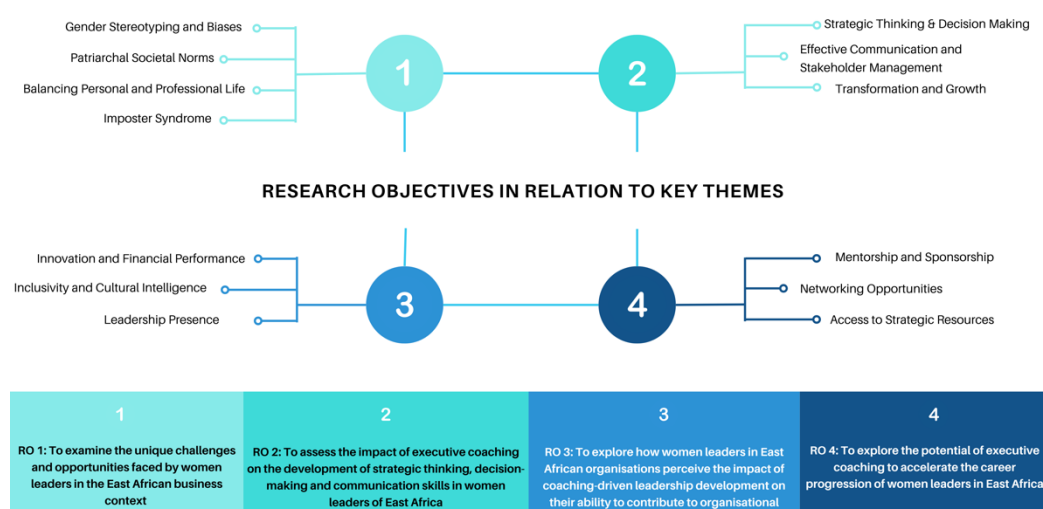


Figure 2: Research Objectives in Relation to Key Themes

4.3.1 Challenges and Opportunities for Women Leaders

The first research objective examined the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders in East Africa. Participants freely shared their experiences, which were categorised into four subthemes: *dealing with gender stereotyping and biases*; *facing patriarchal societal norms*; *handling work–life balance*; and *experiencing imposter syndrome*. Each subtheme is explored in detail in the following sections.

4.3.1.1 Gender stereotyping and biases

Women leaders in East Africa frequently encountered entrenched gender stereotyping that undermined their authority and limited their leadership opportunities. These biases often relegated women to subordinate roles and cast doubt on their capabilities.

The ‘boardroom wife’ stereotype exemplified these biases, where women were expected to handle support tasks, such as refilling coffee cups, rather than being valued for their strategic expertise. Executive coaching played a pivotal role in helping women to challenge and resist stereotyping of this kind. Women leaders were guided to identify unconscious behaviours that reinforced biases, such as instinctively taking on of support roles during meetings. For example, one participant explained how her coach encouraged her to step back, observe, and allow men colleagues to take on these tasks, enabling her to assert her leadership presence.

Executive coaching also emphasised setting boundaries and redefining perceptions of their roles. Participants learned to shift focus to strategic contributions, with one leader noting that coaching helped her to prepare data-driven insights and to position her ideas within organisational objectives, ultimately establishing her as a key decisionmaker. Many leaders expressed frustration at being excluded from strategic discussions owing to perceptions of their being less capable than men counterparts. Coaching empowered these leaders to challenge these biases by strongly advocating their ideas, building organisational allies, and asserting influence by, for instance, deliberately taking a seat at the table and leading discussions.

Culturally sensitive coaching further enabled leaders to navigate gender biases effectively. By fostering relationships with male colleagues who could promote their contributions, participants challenged assumptions about their capabilities and enhanced their credibility in male-dominated environments.

4.3.1.2 Patriarchal societal norms

Women leaders in East Africa faced deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that shaped both organisational cultures and societal expectations, often limiting their professional advancement. These norms often cast women in caregiving roles, creating barriers to leadership.

Coaching emerged as a critical tool in helping leaders to navigate these cultural constraints. Participants brought to light the societal perception of women leadership often lacking the assertiveness required in professional settings. Leaders in hierarchical organisations had to balance cultural expectations with asserting their authority, as assertiveness was often viewed as a challenge to tradition. Coaching encouraged them to focus on their strengths and lead authentically rather than conforming to restrictive norms. Participants consistently faced the double bind dilemma, where demonstrating too much assertiveness placed them at the risk of being perceived as ‘overstepping’, while exhibiting empathetic or collaborative leadership styles and asking for help placed them at the risk of being seen as weak. This tension was exacerbated by societal norms that expected women to prioritise relational harmony and caregiving responsibilities. Coaching interventions proved instrumental in helping leaders to navigate this dynamic by fostering self-awareness and encouraging authentic leadership practices.

One coach stated:

“I’ve seen how by improving her confidence in her ability to speak in public, helping her manage her communication skills, helping her get the balance right between empathy and caring, plus toughness and holding people to account, she’s been able to get her team to complete cycles of action and get things done as a result of coaching, without having to become a male.”

Culturally adapted coaching was key to success. Participants valued working with coaches familiar with East African dynamics, as this cultural awareness made coaching more impactful. Executive coaches guided them in adopting leadership strategies that respected societal norms while empowering them to lead effectively and authentically, helping them manage relationships without facing resistance. Structural biases also penalised women for deviating from traditional caregiving roles, translating into workplace challenges where they were held to higher standards than men. Coaching equipped leaders with strategies to challenge these biases while maintaining cultural harmony. It also helped them to reframe barriers as growth opportunities, fostering resilience and adaptability in male-dominated sectors.

4.3.1.3 Balancing personal and professional life

Women leaders in East Africa faced significant challenges in balancing professional and personal responsibilities owing to traditional gender roles. Executive coaching played a transformative role, equipping women leaders with strategies to maintain high performance while safeguarding their well-being.

A key focus was prioritisation and boundary-setting. Coaching helped leaders to reassess workloads, identify high-impact tasks, and delegate effectively, reducing stress and improving time management. Participants gained a clearer understanding of their priorities, allowing for a more sustainable and fulfilling balance. The double burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, deeply rooted in cultural norms, created added strain. Women were expected to be primary caregivers regardless of their professional achievements, leading to feelings of inadequacy and limiting opportunities for growth.

Coaching emphasised delegation as a critical strategy. Leaders learned to empower their teams and domestic support systems without compromising credibility. One participant commented:

“I have a great support system, but I only got a great support system after coaching. I was the lady who would run home, who would try and navigate and go for all the meetings. I think

those are the small things that really help. Just the support system that will help you feel balanced because, indeed, it's not possible for you to do everything for everyone and everything at the same time. Yeah, but I only got that after coaching.”

Coaching also addressed the emotional toll of this burden, providing tools for resilience and stress management. One leader said:

“I remember there's a time I think I even lost hair because I was trying, like my hair practically started to fall off because of stress levels, you know, and it was as basic as you're doing too much, like slow down, get help and accept help.”

Cultural sensitivity in coaching was crucial. Coaches who understood East African societal norms helped participants navigate challenges while respecting their cultural identities. Coaching strategies that balanced traditional family expectations with empowerment enabled women to sustain both professional and personal growth. In addition, there was the intersection of age and hormonal changes for women leaders. Two coaches stressed the unique challenges faced by women leaders who were navigating menopause while advancing into senior roles. Participants noted that symptoms like fatigue, hot flushes, and mood swings compounded the pressures of leadership, especially in male-dominated environments where women had to continually prove their worth. It was therefore not just about proving they, as women, belonged at the table; it was about managing their bodies while managing the boardroom.

Menopause, usually unmentioned in workplace settings, intensified the scrutiny placed on women leaders. One coach explained:

“By the time they become leaders, they are probably in their 40s or getting to early 50s and, unfortunately, that's when also menopause or pre-menopause starts. And I know it's probably a difficult subject to deal with, but what does it do? It creates a hormonal imbalance. So, I'll give you an example. You are sitting in the boardroom, and you've got a 50-year-old woman chairing the meeting, and she gets through what I call a tropical summer, and she suddenly starts to sweat. Now, how does she react?”

The reluctance to openly discuss menopause in organisations further contributed to its invisibility. Many women felt the need to ‘soldier on’ to avoid being perceived as weak. This, once again, demonstrates a workplace culture that fails to acknowledge the physiological realities of women leaders. Executive coaching provided crucial support, offering a safe space to discuss these challenges and to develop strategies for managing hormonal changes while maintaining leadership effectiveness. Stress management techniques and awareness-building helped women navigate this phase without compromising their performance. These findings underscored the need to normalise conversations about age and hormonal health in leadership spaces.

4.3.1.4 Imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome among woman leaders in East Africa is shaped by both individual psychology and systemic organisational biases. While globally recognised, it is amplified in this region by cultural expectations and structural barriers, reinforcing the need for tailored coaching interventions. Imposter syndrome thrives in environments where societal norms and institutional biases converge, and the East African context is no exception. Societal expectations that prioritise women’s roles as caregivers perpetuate their internalised doubts about their suitability for leadership. Eagly and Karau (2002)’s role congruity theory offers a useful framework for understanding this dynamic, as it highlights the mismatch between traditional communal expectations for women and the agentic qualities often associated with leadership. This supposed incompatibility fosters a persistent need for women to prove their worth, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Women leaders frequently described the heightened scrutiny they endured, not only of their professional capabilities but also of their perceived deviation from traditional gender roles. Women who displayed assertiveness or ambition were often labelled as overstepping, thus reinforcing internalised narratives of unworthiness. Younger women leaders reported a dual burden: navigating the stigma of inexperience while also contending with the systemic undervaluation of women in leadership. In African cultures, where respect and age are deeply intertwined, younger leaders often need

to deal with the expectation to defer to their older counterparts, particularly male peers, as a sign of respect. One leader noted:

“... this is also in African culture; age is equal to experience. I know more than you and so respect comes in almost by default. Being the youngest in the room, there is always going to be that these are feeling.”

This cultural norm requires a careful balancing act, as young women leaders must assert their authority and challenge established norms without appearing disrespectful. This dynamic not only intensifies feelings of self-doubt but also creates significant barriers to confidence and self-assurance. For many young women, confronting older male colleagues in leadership settings requires navigating a fine line between demonstrating competence and maintaining cultural expectations of deference, further complicating their ability to assert their voices and establish credibility.

Executive coaching emerged as a powerful intervention for addressing the psychological dimensions of imposter syndrome, offering a structured space for participants to disentangle internalised self-doubt from external biases. Coaching fostered self-awareness by enabling leaders to critically examine the narratives that undermined their confidence and replace them with evidence-based reflections on their achievements. For many participants, executive coaching provided their first opportunity to reframe failure as a natural part of growth rather than as evidence of inadequacy. This perspective shift was particularly impactful for leaders operating in high-stakes environments, where mistakes were often disproportionately magnified. By equipping participants with tools to manage self-doubt constructively, coaching facilitated a transition from reactive self-criticism to proactive self-assurance.

While global studies often link imposter syndrome to traits like perfectionism or fear of failure, the East African context presents distinct challenges by placing additional pressure on women to excel simultaneously as professionals and primary caregivers. Unlike in many Western contexts, where societal norms around caregiving may be more evenly distributed or outsourced (not always an available and affordable option to mothers in East Africa), East African cultural expectations often position women as

the central figures in family and community care. This dual expectation intensifies the burden on women leaders, as they must navigate not only the professional demands of leadership but also the deeply ingrained cultural norms that hold them accountable for domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

Imposter syndrome has broader implications for organisational performance and inclusivity. Leaders burdened by self-doubt are less likely to take risks, promote innovative solutions or challenge entrenched norms. This hesitancy limits their potential contributions and perpetuates leadership gaps in organisations. In addition, systemic undervaluation of women's contributions hinders efforts to build diverse and resilient leadership pipelines.

While coaching played an instrumental role in fostering self-awareness and confidence among participants, its impact was often constrained by resistant organisational cultures. Some participants described feeling empowered during coaching sessions but disheartened when returning to work environments that remained unchanged. This disconnect indicates the need for systemic reform alongside individual coaching interventions.

4.3.2 Impact of Executive Coaching

The second research objective achieved in this study was to assess the impact of executive coaching on the development of strategic thinking, decision-making, and communication skills in women leaders of East Africa. Participants' responses were categorised into three subthemes: *building strategic thinking skills and enhancing decision-making*; *achieving effective communication and stakeholder management*; and *bringing about transformation and growth*. Each subtheme is discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.3.2.1 Building strategic thinking skills and enhancing decision-making

Coaching significantly enhanced women leaders' strategic thinking and decision-making skills. It provided practical tools to approach challenges, evaluate

perspectives, and align decisions with long-term goals. Leaders reported improved ability to navigate complexity, particularly in East Africa's dynamic, hierarchical financial sector, where agility is key to success. Executive coaching helped leaders to shift from immediate pressures to a broader, strategic perspective. Participants noted that coaching allowed them to 'zoom out' from daily operations, focus on long-term priorities, and align actions with organisational goals. One leader said the following:

"So, for me, the biggest win that I have seen is that to be able to connect in a way that will help me influence what I think is the right direction, even from a strategy execution point of view."

Coaching fostered a structured approach for leaders to make decisions, develop frameworks to assess risks, evaluate options, and anticipate outcomes. This increased their confidence and ability to navigate high-stakes situations with poise.

Executive coaching reinforced the need to align leadership practices with organisational goals, balancing immediate demands with long-term growth. Participants confirmed that coaching helped them to navigate competing priorities with both practical focus and strategic vision. This was especially crucial in male-dominated environments, where women leaders faced added pressure to demonstrate their strategic acumen. Coaching empowered them to handle these challenges with confidence, enhancing both their leadership impact and organisational adaptability.

4.3.2.2 Achieving effective communication and stakeholder management

Coaching strengthened communication and stakeholder management skills, enabling women leaders to build trust, foster collaboration, and influence key stakeholders. It provided tools to refine communication styles, particularly in hierarchical, male-dominated environments, enhancing credibility and leadership effectiveness.

Coaching helped participants to develop core interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability. Leaders noted that coaching taught them to pay closer attention to how their messages were received, not just what was said. This shift allowed them to adapt their communication styles to better connect with diverse

audiences, including their teams, senior management, and external stakeholders. One leader reflected that they became more mindful of tailoring their messaging to resonate with different groups, which was instrumental in fostering collaboration and trust. Coaching empowered leaders to handle challenging conversations strategically, thus ensuring alignment with organisational goals and fostering consensus. Participants used tailored communication strategies to bridge differences in diverse teams and between external stakeholders. Executive coaches helped them understand stakeholder expectations and develop approaches to effectively manage these relationships, strengthening their leadership impact. Leaders reported that this guidance increased their confidence when engaging with senior leaders and other influential figures in their organisations. Some participants noted that they became more assertive in articulating their ideas, gaining respect and influencing decisions effectively.

The improvements in communication and stakeholder management had a tangible impact on organisational success. Leaders observed that their enhanced ability to manage stakeholder dynamics positioned them to drive projects, resolve conflicts, and secure necessary support for their initiatives. Effective communication fostered smoother project execution, improved team collaboration, and stronger organisational outcomes. Leaders also noted that clear communication and trust-building created more aligned and motivated teams.

Coaching helped participants to navigate culturally sensitive situations by fostering an understanding of the emotions and motivations behind the words and actions of others. This insight was critical in environments with diverse cultural expectations, where effective communication was essential for building trust and fostering productive relationships. Participants reflected that coaching encouraged them to adopt culturally sensitive approaches to communication, enhancing their ability to lead in such contexts.

4.3.2.3 Bringing about transformation and growth

The findings indicated that executive coaching was both an empowerment tool for women leaders and a catalyst for organisational change in East Africa's complex sociocultural landscape. Coaching helped leaders to navigate restrictive gender norms, hierarchical structures, and systemic biases, making transformation essential for leadership success.

For many leaders, coaching became the first space where they could critically assess the limitations imposed by traditional cultural expectations and begin to dismantle internalised beliefs about their leadership potential. This aligns with transformational leadership theory, which emphasises the leader's role in inspiring change, fostering innovation, and aligning personal goals with organisational objectives. Executive coaching enabled participants to harness these traits, but in a context shaped by East Africa's unique sociocultural dynamics. Cultural expectations and systemic barriers intersected to shape leadership experiences. Gender norms often restricted women's authority, reinforcing social role theory, which highlights conflicts between societal expectations and leadership traits. In addition, East Africa's age-based hierarchies forced younger women leaders to balance professional competence with cultural deference, limiting their decision-making influence.

While the findings of this study align with global leadership research, they reveal gaps in applying Western theories to non-Western contexts. Western frameworks focus on individual agency but often overlook the collective cultural norms and systemic barriers in East Africa. Coaching bridges this gap by linking personal empowerment with organisational transformation. Participants noted that coaching helped them to align personal values with strategic goals, enhancing their impact in their organisations. One leader commented:

"So, for me, the biggest win that I have seen is that to be able to connect in a way that will help me influence what I think is the right direction, even from a strategy execution point of view."

Leaders who benefited from coaching often championed its adoption. This contributed to leadership pipelines and succession planning in their organisations. The findings also revealed the importance of institutionalising coaching in East African

organisations. To fully realise its potential, coaching should be integrated with systemic reforms that address structural and cultural barriers. One coach said:

"I think coaching is imperative for female leaders in East Africa because of the isolation and the need to understand that systemic system. They're not going to find the space or connection to explore that without a coach... especially senior female leader transitions in East Africa, it has to be because of the systemic uniqueness of the region. I think that's number one."

4.3.3 Contribution to Organisational Goals

The third research objective of this study was to explore how women leaders in East African organisations perceived the impact of coaching-driven leadership development on their ability to contribute to organisational financial and innovation goals. Participants responses were categorised into three subthemes: *fostering innovation and financial performance*; *increasing inclusivity and cultural intelligence*; and *enhancing leadership presence*. Each subtheme is discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.3.3.1 Fostering innovation and financial performance

Executive coaching has been instrumental in helping women leaders in East Africa drive innovation and financial performance. Study participants highlighted how coaching enhanced their strategic thinking, aligning personal and organisational goals.

In the banking sector, coaching was noted as pivotal in building leaders' resilience in volatile markets. Coaching played a crucial role in equipping leaders with the tools to maintain composure and resilience in dynamic environments. This enabled women leaders to make strategic decisions and focus on innovation while navigating immediate challenges. One leader shared:

"Executive coaching is meant to assist you in manoeuvring the complexities of being a leader. It's not about whether you have the technical competencies or if you can do the job; those boxes are already ticked by the time you're at this stage. It's more about dealing with the unstructured nuances that come in many formats. The ability to give to the people you lead a

persona that inspires them to be better, despite what's going on around them, is crucial. If you are a leader who, despite everything falling around them, can maintain a composed presence, your team will not only be inspired but also stay focused on innovation and strategic decision-making in the face of immediate challenges.”

Moreover, executive coaches helped participants to identify and leverage their strengths, enabling them to drive impactful change in their organisations. One executive coach noted how financial institutions were integrating coaching into their frameworks to achieve business goals and foster innovation, particularly as organisations adapt to digital transformation and global competition.

4.3.3.2 Increasing inclusivity and cultural intelligence

Inclusivity and cultural intelligence emerged as critical outcomes of executive coaching in the East African context. Women leaders consistently pointed to coaching as a tool for navigating and addressing deeply entrenched cultural and gender biases. One coach commented:

“I think one of the important things is for them to find a resonant network. If one looks at Richard Boyatzis’s work on positive, resonant leadership networks, I think that it’s particularly important to find safe terminals, safe people to talk to. I think that’s very important and that might be outside their existing organisation. So, there might be networks in industry, there might be cross-industry networks, and then obviously networks within the organisation itself.”

The coaching process also encouraged leaders to adopt culturally sensitive approaches in stakeholder engagement. This cultural intelligence enabled leaders to bridge gaps between diverse organisational stakeholders, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect. Executive coaches also worked with leaders to challenge traditional narratives about women’s roles in the workplace. Participants noted that coaching not only bolstered their confidence but also encouraged them to mentor and uplift other women – in this way contributing to a more inclusive workplace culture. By equipping leaders to handle complex, multi-stakeholder relationships, coaching fostered environments that valued diverse perspectives. This is vital for addressing the demands of increasingly globalised markets.

4.3.3.3 Enhancing leadership presence

Coaching played a transformative role in enhancing leadership presence among women leaders in East Africa. An executive coach commented:

“How do you command a room without necessarily trying to show off? There are certain tools that you use around this. How do you walk into a room and the first thing you do is go and make coffee for someone you know? I know it's a proper maternal instinct, depending on how you're socialised, but do you want to be the one making coffee? Why can't you go and sit down and someone else makes *you* coffee? ... So how do we get that kind of stereotyping taken away from women so that you create that presence that you lack?”

Participants reported that coaching helped them to refine their communication skills, enabling clearer and more impactful messaging across organisational levels. For instance, a woman leader reflected on the value of coaching in that it improved her engagement with senior leaders and ensured that her contributions were acknowledged and respected in boardroom discussions. This alignment of communication with strategic objectives was critical in establishing a credible and authoritative leadership presence. Furthermore, executive coaching encouraged leaders to embrace their authenticity, an essential component of leadership presence. By focusing on personal strengths and values, coaching empowered participants to challenge stereotyping while maintaining cultural harmony. This approach allowed leaders to balance assertiveness with approachability, thus ensuring they could lead effectively without alienating stakeholders.

4.3.4 Accelerating Career Progression

The fourth research objective of this study was to explore the potential for executive coaching to accelerate the career progression of women leaders in East Africa. Participants' responses were categorised into three subthemes: *mentorship and sponsorship*; *networking opportunities*; and *access to strategic resources*. Each subtheme is discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.3.4.1 Mentorship and sponsorship

Mentorship and sponsorship were key drivers of women's career progression. Participants stressed the value of experienced mentors who provided guidance, opened up opportunities, and helped navigate organisational complexities. One executive coach highlighted industry mentorship programmes that not only built technical skills but also fostered confidence and resilience. Coaching complemented mentorship by enhancing self-awareness and emotional intelligence, thus ensuring that leaders maximised these relationships.

Sponsorship, distinct from mentorship, played a crucial role in career advancement. Women leaders explained how sponsors – of both sexes – advocated their inclusion in decision-making and leadership roles. One participant credited sponsorship with increasing her visibility and securing opportunities in a male-dominated environment. However, such support relied on structured organisational initiatives, as many women lacked equal access to sponsors. Coaching helped leaders to leverage sponsorships by building confidence, refining strategic communication, and demonstrating value. Coaches also guided leaders in identifying and cultivating sponsor relationships to accelerate career growth.

4.3.4.2 Networking opportunities

Networking was both a challenge and an opportunity for women leaders in East Africa. The entrenched 'boys' club' culture often excluded women from informal professional networks, limiting access to career-advancing opportunities. Many participants expressed frustration over being left out of key networking events, such as golf outings and after-hours gatherings, which were traditionally male-dominated.

Executive coaching helped women reframe networking as relationship-building rather than a transactional activity. Several leaders credited coaching as empowering them to create their own networking spaces, such as sector-specific breakfast meetings and virtual forums, fostering collaboration and support among women professionals. These initiatives provided an alternative to exclusive traditional networks,

strengthening women's visibility and influence. Both executive coaches and women leaders emphasised the importance of male allies in addressing networking barriers. Coaching played a crucial role in helping women identify and build relationships with male colleagues who could support them and facilitate their inclusion in influential circles, thus helping to challenge the exclusivity of existing structures.

In addition, one coach noted that at social or work-related events, men and women often gravitate toward their own gender groups. Women in these settings tend to engage in personal or non-work-related discussions, while men frequently 'talk shop' and use these opportunities to build professional networks. These dynamics limit women's opportunities to cultivate meaningful professional connections and access critical career opportunities. A conscious effort is needed for women to shift their focus in these settings to engaging in professional dialogue and leveraging these gatherings to build their networks.

4.3.4.3 Access to strategic resources

Access to strategic resources was a key factor in career progression. Women leaders credited coaching with helping them to identify and leverage growth opportunities such as training, rotational assignments, and leadership forums.

However, systemic barriers often restricted women's access to executive coaching, which was frequently reserved for men in senior leadership positions. While organisations had made progress with inclusivity, coaching and leadership programmes remained unevenly distributed, with women, especially those in mid-career roles, underrepresented candidates. The high cost of external coaching further limited access for those not yet in senior positions. When referring to executive coaching, one leader commented:

"It's not easily accessible or common or, you know, being able to engage as often as you'd like to engage in it."

Participants advocated the reform of organisations to ensure equitable access to development resources, including transparent allocation of budgets and targeted

support for women in middle management. Coaching was seen as a vital tool to empower women to insist on opportunities and navigate organisational politics to advance their careers.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the way in which executive coaching supports women leadership development in East Africa, using thematic analysis and participants' lived experiences to bring key challenges and opportunities to the fore.

Despite diverse organisational and geographical contexts, participants faced common barriers embedded in cultural norms, systemic gender biases, and organisational structures. Coaching provided a reflective space for leaders to evaluate their roles, align personal values with organisational goals, and develop appropriate leadership strategies. The need for culturally sensitive coaching practices was emphasised to bridge the gap between traditional norms and progressive leadership. The chapter also examined the systemic impact of coaching on inclusivity, innovation, and leadership presence. Executive coaching equipped women leaders to navigate cultural and structural barriers, accelerating career progression by improving access to mentorship, sponsorship, networking, and strategic resources.

Ultimately, coaching emerged as both a tool for individual empowerment and a driver of systemic change. Participants' experiences illustrated how coaching fosters personal growth while addressing broader organisational and cultural challenges, offering valuable insights into the intersection of gender, culture, and leadership in East Africa.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This qualitative study explores the influence of executive coaching on women leaders in East Africa and its impact on organisational success. In this chapter the key findings are discussed in relation to the literature on executive coaching, women leadership, and East African business dynamics. Section 5.2 examines findings in relation to the literature review. Section 5.3 explores the expansion of executive coaching research and concludes the chapter.

5.2 Findings: Objective 1

Reflecting on the discussions in chapter 4, this notion of breaking barriers while building women leaders examines how executive coaching empowers women leaders in East Africa to overcome systemic and cultural challenges while fostering transformational leadership. This concept is explored through four key themes: (1) navigating gendered leadership expectations; (2) balancing personal and professional identities; (3) building transformational leadership skills; and (4) driving organisational and cultural change.

The abovementioned notion emerged as a unifying framework, positioning executive coaching as key to empowering women leaders to navigate patriarchal norms, gender biases, and societal expectations. Coaching enabled them to "break barriers" by confronting stereotyping, limited representation, and cultural constraints, while also "building leaders" through skills development in strategic thinking, decision-making, communication, and transformational leadership. The themes presented below guided the analysis of the study and were used to address the specific research objectives. Each theme reflects a dynamic interaction between participants' experiences, their organisational contexts, and the broader cultural landscape of East Africa.

5.2.1 Navigating Gendered Leadership Expectations

The study reveals that gendered leadership expectations remain a major challenge for women leaders in East Africa. Participants described how entrenched societal norms and organisational culture define leadership through a male lens, reinforcing stereotyping that undermines women's authority. Women leaders faced stereotyping that undermined their authority, which included the expectation to adopt caregiving roles. This aligns with Eagly and Karau (2002), who demonstrated how the conflict between societal expectations of women as nurturers and the assertive traits associated with leadership created barriers to their advancement.

One recurring example given by participants was the 'boardroom wife' stereotype, where middle-to-senior women leaders were expected to manage logistics or maintain harmony rather than apply their strategic insights. This stereotyping not only marginalised their contributions but also reinforced the perception that women are less capable of handling high-stakes leadership responsibilities. Social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012) provided a lens for understanding these dynamics, as it posits that societal norms prescribe specific roles for men and women, often confining women to subordinate or supportive roles even in professional settings. These restrictive gender norms were especially pronounced in the hierarchical, traditional and male-dominated financial industry, where participants found that their leadership decisions were second-guessed or disregarded entirely.

Culturally sensitive executive coaching was crucial to helping participants to navigate gender biases. It enabled participants to identify and challenge unconscious behaviours, such as instinctively taking on supportive roles in meetings. By fostering self-awareness and confidence, coaching empowered women leaders to assert their authority more effectively. This aligns with the findings of Gotsis and Grimani (2016) on inclusive leadership, which emphasised empowering diverse leaders to challenge biases and assert their strengths. Their research showed how leadership styles, such as authentic, servant, and ethical leadership, foster equitable organisational cultures, balancing individual empowerment with team cohesion to combat unconscious biases and gender stereotypes.

The framework of Gotsis and Grimani (2016) underscored the relevance of culturally sensitive executive coaching in fostering self-awareness and challenging ingrained

behaviours. Their emphasis on inclusive leadership aligns with the role of coaching in transforming leaders' mindsets. A participant who shifted from a reactive caregiving role to one of contributing proactive and strategic acumen exemplified how coaching can help women to break from stereotypical conformity. This transformation supports the assertion that inclusive frameworks empower individuals to assert their value while challenging traditional norms.

The research of Gotsis and Grimani (2016) emphasised the need for organisational environments that support diverse leadership styles. Culturally sensitive executive coaching complements this by equipping leaders to navigate these spaces, fostering both individual empowerment and systemic change. It encourages inclusive leadership and diversity advocacy, reinforcing the role of coaching as a catalyst for cultural transformation, particularly in patriarchal or hierarchical settings.

Eagly and Chin (2010) described the double bind as a key challenge for women in leadership, where they must balance conflicting expectations. They are expected to be assertive and agentic, yet societal norms demand that they remain communal and nurturing. This creates a narrow range of acceptable behaviour where assertiveness may be seen as abrasive, while collaboration can be perceived as weakness. Eagly and Chin (2010) pointed out the need for leadership frameworks that blend assertiveness with collaboration. Culturally sensitive coaching supported this by equipping participants with strategies to navigate these complexities. Krause and Hartney (2021) stressed the importance of diverse networks and allies in overcoming systemic barriers and fostering inclusive leadership. Their research showed that professional networks help underrepresented leaders, especially women, to access resources and opportunities often withheld from them by traditional power structures. This aligns with the strategies of participants who saw the building of networks and the cultivation of allies as essential to their leadership growth.

In male-dominated environments, building allies was crucial to women for overcoming biases and enhancing credibility. Executive coaching equipped women leaders with strategies for purposeful relationship-building and advocacy. Participants were encouraged to seek mentors and sponsors to amplify their contributions and promote their inclusion in key decisions. This aligns with the view of Krause and Hartney (2021)

that diverse networks of allies are essential for dismantling barriers and elevating diverse voices in leadership. Krause and Hartney (2021) pointed at sponsorship as key to addressing structural barriers to women's advancement. Unlike mentors, sponsors actively promote their protégés, using their influence to create career opportunities. Coaching helped participants to distinguish between mentorship and sponsorship, guiding them to cultivate relationships with champions for their growth. This strategic networking enhanced their credibility and expanded access to leadership opportunities. Coaching helped participants to build allies in environments where women were often excluded, such as in boys' clubs. By reframing networking as a chance to build authentic connections and demonstrate value, coaching empowered women leaders to assert their presence in spaces in which they were underrepresented. This aligns with the findings of Krause and Hartney (2021) and underscores the role of coaching in fostering inclusive leadership.

Patriarchal norms in East Africa increased pressure on women leaders to conform to traditional expectations outside work, forcing them to balance ambition with perceptions of familial neglect. Ritter-Hayashi et al. (2019) drew attention to the way in which cultural expectations, particularly for women to provide care, reinforced structural barriers and limited women's leadership opportunities. These entrenched norms created additional complexities for women striving for professional advancement in male-dominated environments. While findings showed that coaching provided significant support, it was clear that there was a need for systemic reforms to address the structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate gendered leadership expectations. Organisations need to go beyond individual interventions and actively challenge discriminatory practices, implement policies that promote gender equity and foster cultures of inclusion. This echoes the call of Eagly and Karau (2002) for organisational frameworks that support diverse leadership styles and dismantle the biases embedded in traditional leadership paradigms.

5.2.2 Balancing Personal and Professional Identities

Okunade et al. (2023) investigated how high power-distance influences women leadership in East Africa, where hierarchical structures reinforce traditional gender

roles and discourage challenges to authority. This dynamic, embedded in both family and workplace settings, creates additional barriers for women striving to assert themselves as leaders. In high-power distance cultures, conformity is prioritised, making it harder for women to challenge authority or assert themselves. Executive coaching proved essential in addressing these challenges by fostering self-awareness and equipping leaders with strategies to align professional ambitions with societal expectations. Coaches with expertise in high-power distance contexts were particularly effective, helping participants to navigate these environments with tact and cultural sensitivity.

Okunade et al. (2023) showed how high power-distance cultures discourage women from challenging men's authority, making self-advocacy difficult. Coaching helped participants to navigate this by framing contributions around team or organisational goals rather than personal ambition. This approach enabled participants to assert their value while maintaining cultural harmony.

Participants frequently noted that male colleagues did not face the same societal and domestic responsibilities, allowing them to focus solely on their careers. In cultures where caregiving is considered 'women's work', this imbalance gave men a career advantage while reinforcing perceptions that women were less committed professionals. Women leaders expressed frustration that these expectations not only slowed their career progression down but also placed an additional mental and physical burden on them. These findings aligned with Ritter-Hayashi et al. (2019) who demonstrated how traditional gender norms in developing regions create systemic barriers by disproportionately assigning domestic responsibilities to women, making their leadership success even more challenging.

Executive coaching helped participants to navigate challenges by providing strategies to manage competing demands, set boundaries, and prioritise well-being without sacrificing career goals. Leaders concurred that coaching encouraged them to delegate tasks at work and home, challenging the notion that they must handle everything alone. This aligns with Skinner (2014), who maintained that coaching helped women leaders to overcome internalised gender expectations and redefined success on their own terms.

Bachkirova et al. (2020) introduced 'coaching for change', highlighting its role in fostering a forward-thinking mindset. This aligned with participants' experiences, particularly in developing prioritisation skills. Coaching helped them shift focus from immediate demands to long-term strategic goals, benefiting both personal growth and organisational success. Participants consistently noted that coaching enabled them to reassess workloads and concentrate on high-impact responsibilities. This supported the view of Bachkirova et al. (2020) that coaching enhances leadership effectiveness by aligning tasks with participants strengths and organisational objectives.

Beyond assisting with solving existing problems, coaching for change equips leaders with tools to *anticipate* challenges and craft *proactive* solutions – which are critical competencies in dynamic environments. Women leaders explained how coaching helped them to 'zoom out' from daily pressures in order to gain greater clarity and to align problem-solving efforts with broader organisational strategies. This not only improved women's leadership effectiveness but also positioned them as forward-thinking decisionmakers. Cultural sensitivity in coaching was particularly impactful in the East African context. Participants felt that coaches who understood the local cultural dynamics helped them to navigate traditional family expectations without alienating their communities. This aligned with the culturally grounded perspective of Stuhlhofer (2022), which suggests that leadership development programmes in Africa must consider societal roles and relationships when supporting women leaders.

Hawkins and Turner (2019) broadened the focus of coaching beyond technical skills to include the emotional and psychological aspects of leadership. Their holistic approach, integrating well-being with professional growth, aligns with the findings of this study. Women leaders described how coaching helped them to manage the emotional burden of balancing personal and professional identities, with the aim of sustaining their long-term effectiveness in both areas. Women leaders often struggled with the 'superwoman' expectation – the pressure to excel in both career and caregiving roles. The framework of Hawkins and Turner (2019) aligns with coaching strategies that address these emotional challenges.

Coaching fostered self-awareness and self-compassion, helping participants to manage guilt, stress, and inadequacy. One leader related how her coach reframed self-care as a leadership strength, enabling her to set boundaries and prioritise well-being without compromising career goals. This reflects the view of Hawkins and Turner (2019) that effective coaching integrates resilience and emotional health into leadership development.

Hawkins and Turner (2019) conveyed the importance of emotional intelligence in managing complex professional and personal dynamics. Participants explained how coaching helped them to regulate emotions, stay composed under pressure, and balance competing demands. This improved decision-making and leadership presence. One leader noted that coaching enabled her to handle emotionally charged situations with clarity and empathy, which strengthened relationships at work and home.

5.3 Findings: Objective 2

This study highlights the pivotal role of executive coaching in developing transformational leadership skills in women leaders in East Africa. Coaching provided participants with tools to strengthen strategic thinking, decision-making, and communication – core competencies necessary for leadership effectiveness in dynamic environments. These findings align with transformational leadership theory, which emphasises inspiring change, fostering innovation, and aligning personal and organisational objectives.

A key outcome of coaching was to shift the focus of participants from operational tasks to strategic thinking. Leaders described how coaching helped them ‘zoom out’ from daily pressures, adopt a broader perspective, anticipate challenges, and align their decisions with long-term goals. This shift enhanced their ability to drive the proactive solving of problems in their teams – a crucial skill in East Africa’s volatile financial sector, where leaders need to navigate market instability and resource constraints. This perspective aligns with the concept of systemic coaching (Hawkins & Turner,

2019), which equips leaders to think holistically and address organisational challenges with greater intentionality.

Coaching also played a critical role in refining decision-making frameworks, enabling participants to assess risks, compare multiple perspectives, and make informed choices under pressure. Leaders described how coaching provided structured methodologies to transition from reactive problem-solving to more deliberate, forward-looking decision-making. This resonates with Bachkirova et al. (2020) who argued that coaching cultivates a solution-oriented mindset, equipping leaders with the tools to address uncertainty and drive sustainable results. Participants explained how coaching enhanced their communication and stakeholder management skills, particularly in hierarchical, male-dominated environments. Coaching helped leaders to articulate their ideas more clearly, build trust, and influence key stakeholders, and thus reinforcing the emphasis placed by Gotsis and Grimaldi (2016) on inclusive leadership. Women leaders further described how coaching equipped them with techniques to adapt their communication styles for diverse audiences – an essential skill in culturally varied East African business contexts.

Coaching also strengthened leadership presence and confidence, helping participants assert themselves in high-stakes situations. Leaders related how coaching provided strategies to project authority, navigate difficult conversations, and champion their ideas effectively. One participant noted that coaching helped her reframe self-doubt as an opportunity for growth, allowing her to step into her leadership role with greater confidence. This aligns with the findings of Skinner (2014), which emphasised the role of coaching in fostering a strong leadership identity that balances authenticity with strategic influence.

A recurring theme was the impact of coaching on fostering innovation and adaptability – two hallmarks of transformational leadership. Participants described how coaching helped them to embrace change, enabling them to lead teams through uncertain times and drive creative problem-solving. This adaptability was particularly critical in this sector which is undergoing rapid technological advancement and market shifts. These findings align with Ritter-Hayashi et al. (2019), who asserted that leadership diversity

fosters innovation, particularly when leaders are equipped with the tools to navigate complex and evolving environments.

Cultural sensitivity also played a significant role in leadership development. Participants described how coaching helped them to navigate the sociocultural dynamics of East Africa, where leadership is often shaped by hierarchical traditions and gendered expectations. One leader explained how her coach guided her to integrate organisational cultural values while implementing progressive leadership practices that fostered inclusivity and innovation. This reflects the insights of Stuhlhofer (2022), which stress the need for leadership development programmes in Africa to incorporate cultural awareness to address regional nuances effectively.

Through a combination of strategic skill-building, communication refinement, and cultural adaptation, executive coaching empowered women leaders to navigate systemic challenges while positioning themselves as transformational change agents in their organisations.

5.4 Findings: Objective 3

This study shows how executive coaching empowered women leaders in East Africa to drive organisational and cultural transformation. Coaching equipped them with the confidence, strategic skills, and tools to challenge entrenched norms, foster inclusivity, and champion innovation, thus extending their impact beyond individual leadership growth.

A key theme was the role of coaching in promoting inclusivity in male-dominated organisations. Participants described resistance to change because of hierarchical structures and patriarchal norms. Coaching enabled them to initiate discussions on gender equity, diversity-focused hiring, and mentorship programmes for women. Many leaders credited coaching with their new-found confidence to challenge exclusivity in decision-making spaces. This reinforced the findings of Gotsis and Grimani (2016) that inclusive leadership frameworks drive cultural transformation.

Coaching also played a pivotal role in fostering innovation. According to participants, coaching encouraged them to lead with creativity and adaptability, particularly in the financial industry which faces rapid technological and market shifts. One leader described how coaching gave her the confidence to spearhead a digital transformation project, despite initial resistance from senior male colleagues. These findings align with Ritter-Hayashi et al. (2019), who emphasised how gender-diverse leadership enhances innovation when leaders feel empowered to challenge the status quo. Coaching further helped participants to build resilience, enabling them to push forward ideas despite institutional resistance.

Beyond individual leadership, coaching helped to address systemic workplace barriers. Participants reported that women's contributions were often undervalued, gender biases persisted, and leadership forums remained male-dominated. Coaching equipped them with advocacy skills to push for structural reforms such as transparent promotion pathways, flexible work policies, and equitable access to leadership development. These findings supported the assertion of Eagly and Chin (2010) that systemic changes must accompany leadership development to dismantle entrenched discrimination and promote inclusivity.

5.5 Findings: Objective 4

Sustaining organisational change required the building of leadership pipelines. Coaching encouraged women leaders to mentor and sponsor other women, helping them to navigate professional barriers and increasing the representation of women in senior roles. Participants pointed out how these efforts challenged boys' club networks and fostered a more inclusive leadership culture. This aligns with the argument of Krause and Hartney (2021) that mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for advancing underrepresented groups and driving long-term organisational change.

The intersection of cultural and organisational barriers was another challenge that coaching helped participants to navigate. In East Africa's high power-distance cultures, leadership is traditionally male-dominated, making it difficult for women to assert authority. Coaching fostered cultural intelligence, equipping leaders with

strategies to gain credibility in hierarchical settings. One participant described how her coach guided her to use storytelling – a culturally valued communication tool in East Africa – to engage stakeholders and gain buy-in for initiatives. This reflects the argument of Stuhlhofer (2022) that leadership development in Africa must incorporate sociocultural dynamics to achieve meaningful and lasting change.

5.6 Expanding the Boundaries of Executive Coaching Research

This study provides insights into executive coaching and leadership development by examining its role in East Africa's unique cultural, societal and organisational contexts. Moving beyond Western-centric research, it uncovers how gendered cultural norms, systemic barriers, and leadership development intersect. The study makes three key contributions: contextualising coaching in East Africa, demonstrating its role in systemic change, and highlighting its impact on the emotional dimensions of leadership.

Existing coaching literature, such as Gotsis and Grimani (2016) and Eagly and Chin (2010), focuses on individual growth and diversity management in Western corporate settings. This study addresses a critical gap by revealing how patriarchal norms, high power-distance cultures, and traditional gender roles shape women's leadership experiences in East Africa. Participants described challenges like the 'boardroom wife' stereotype and the double burden of simultaneous caregiving and professional responsibilities – issues rarely discussed in broader coaching research. The study shows how culturally sensitive coaching helps women leaders to navigate these challenges by aligning leadership styles with local norms while fostering inclusivity and innovation. For instance, storytelling, an effective and culturally valued communication strategy, helped leaders to engage stakeholders and gain buy-in for progressive initiatives. These findings support social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012) by providing context-specific strategies for overcoming leadership incongruities.

While much of the literature focuses on coaching for individual transformation, this study focuses on its role in driving systemic organisational change. Coached leaders developed strategic, decision-making, and leadership skills while also advocating

workplace reforms. They became change agents, challenging biases, dismantling patriarchal structures, and building leadership pipelines. This systemic impact builds on the call of Eagly and Chin (2010) for equity-driven organisational frameworks by positioning coaching as a tool to enable structural transformation.

Another key contribution is the study's focus on the emotional and relational aspects of leadership. Unlike research that prioritises technical skill development, this study examines how coaching helps leaders to navigate imposter syndrome, caregiving guilt, and societal pressures. It emphasises the importance of psychological resilience and emotional intelligence in high-pressure leadership environments. The study also explores relational leadership, including ally-building, fostering inclusivity, and stakeholder management, in East Africa's cultural context. This extends the systemic coaching model of Hawkins and Turner (2019) by integrating emotional and cultural factors that shape leadership journeys in this region.

The study reveals how women leaders in traditionally male-dominated sectors use coaching to foster innovation. Unlike the common assumption in global literature of a standard application of coaching, this research demonstrates the need for culturally appropriate and industry-specific strategies. Participants leveraged coaching to drive digital transformation and challenge entrenched organisational practices despite resistance. Culturally sensitive coaching emerged as a key enabler of change. Coaching interventions that acknowledged the intersection of gender and cultural norms proved particularly effective in helping leaders to balance tradition with innovation. These findings expand the limited body of research on coaching in non-Western contexts, such as Stuhlhofer (2022), by demonstrating the necessity of aligning coaching with sociocultural realities.

By integrating individual, organisational, and cultural dimensions, this study positions coaching as a tool for both personal empowerment and systemic change. Situating coaching in East Africa's sociocultural and economic landscape expands the applicability of leadership theories and coaching frameworks to under-researched contexts. The study therefore contributes to a more inclusive understanding of executive coaching worldwide.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Executive coaching holds transformative potential for women leaders in East Africa by addressing deeply entrenched gender and cultural barriers while fostering personal and organisational growth. This study explores the way in which coaching enables women to navigate societal expectations, patriarchal norms, and professional challenges, and provides a qualitative account of their lived experiences. In so doing, the study demonstrates the role of coaching in empowerment, systemic change, and organisational success.

The findings reveal the dual impact of coaching – both individual and organisational. Coaching equips women with confidence, skills, and strategies to challenge stereotyping, balance personal and professional roles, and lead with authenticity. Simultaneously, it empowers women to drive cultural and organisational transformation by championing inclusivity, innovation, and equity. This research brings to the fore the unique contributions of women leaders to organisational success in East Africa's sociocultural and economic landscape.

This chapter synthesises the key contributions of the study, positioning them in broader leadership and coaching discourse. It begins with an overview of the research; then explores theoretical advancements, practical implications, and lessons for women leaders, executive coaches, and organisations. Recommendations for future research and practice address existing gaps and opportunities for further exploration. While acknowledging certain study limitations, the chapter affirms the significance of the study in shaping leadership development and organisational strategies in East Africa and beyond. By critically engaging with the findings, this chapter not only situates the research in existing literature but also articulates its new contributions to the field. The conclusions and recommendations presented aim to inform the design of culturally tailored, gender-sensitive, and transformative coaching interventions – all essential for fostering inclusive leadership in a rapidly evolving region.

6.2 Overview of the Study

Executive coaching has become a powerful tool for leadership development, as it equips leaders with the skills and resilience needed to navigate complex organisational environments. While most research focuses on coaching in Western contexts, this study examined its impact in East Africa, with a specific emphasis on how it helps women leaders to overcome systemic barriers, navigate patriarchal norms, and contribute to organisational success.

Using a qualitative approach, the study explored the lived experiences of five women leaders and five executive coaches from banking and financial services across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, and South Sudan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded with consent, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis.

The study aimed to explore how executive coaching empowers women leaders to address challenges, maximise their potential, and drive organisational growth. It focused on four key objectives:

1. To examine the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women leaders in the East African business context
2. To assess the impact of executive coaching on the development of strategic thinking, decision-making, and communication skills in East African women leaders
3. To explore how women leaders perceive the relationship between coaching-driven leadership development and their ability to contribute to organisational financial and innovation goals
4. To examine the potential for executive coaching to accelerate the career progression of women leaders in East Africa

The study was driven by the underrepresentation of women in East African leadership due to systemic gender biases, societal norms, and rigid organisational structures. Women face entrenched patriarchal expectations, the double burden of career and domestic responsibilities, and stereotyping, which undermine their authority. In

addition, high power-distance cultures create rigid hierarchies that further challenge women's leadership advancement.

The findings of the study were presented through four key themes, reflecting the intricate interplay between individual growth, cultural norms, and systemic barriers: (1) navigating gendered leadership expectations; (2) balancing personal and professional identities; (3) building transformational leadership skills; and (4) driving organisational and cultural change. Each theme encapsulates critical insights into the ways in which executive coaching helps women leaders to develop the self-awareness, confidence, and strategic acumen required to overcome challenges, assert their authority, and inspire meaningful change in their organisations. The study supported the contention that executive coaching is a crucial tool to help women leaders to navigate the 'double bind' of leadership expectations while staying authentic to their values. Coaching also equipped them with strategies to balance professional and personal responsibilities, particularly in cultures that emphasise caregiving roles for women.

A key contribution of this research is its focus on how culturally sensitive coaching addresses the unique challenges faced by women leaders in East Africa. By tailoring leadership development to regional sociocultural and organisational dynamics, the study offers useful insights for organisations, coaches, and policymakers striving to foster inclusive leadership and advance women in the business landscape.

6.3 Contributions of the Research

This research advances the academic and practical understanding of executive coaching in East Africa, offering theoretical insights, practical applications, and targeted recommendations. It explores how coaching helps women leaders to overcome systemic and cultural barriers, with contributions categorised into five areas: theoretical insights, practical implications, and specific recommendations for women, executive coaches and organisations.

6.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study fills a critical gap by contextualising executive coaching in East Africa's sociocultural and organisational landscape. While most research focuses on Western contexts, this study reveals how patriarchal norms, high power-distance cultures, and entrenched societal expectations shape women leaders in the region. Findings identify systemic barriers like the 'boardroom wife' stereotype and the double burden of balancing professional and domestic roles. By examining their intersection with organisational structures, the study deepens the understanding of how coaching can empower women in hierarchical, gendered environments. Furthermore, this research contributes to culturally sensitive coaching by emphasising the need for interventions that align with local norms. Strategies such as storytelling and relational leadership approaches expand existing frameworks, offering new ways to support leaders in diverse and complex cultural settings.

6.3.2 Practical Implications

This study offers actionable insights for leadership development, organisational policies, and coaching practices. Executive coaching equips women leaders to navigate biases, challenge systemic barriers, and assert authority in male-dominated environments. Coaching also fosters key leadership skills – strategic thinking, decision-making, and stakeholder management – enhancing both individual effectiveness and organisational outcomes, including financial performance, innovation, and cultural transformation. This underscores the dual impact of coaching as a tool for personal and organisational growth, making it a valuable investment for companies building inclusive leadership pipelines. In addition, the study brings to light the need to integrate coaching into organisational structures to advance gender equity. Addressing barriers like limited leadership development access and a lack of mentorship opportunities can create more equitable career pathways for women.

6.3.3 Implications for Women

For women leaders, the research confirms the transformative potential of executive coaching in navigating the unique challenges they face in East Africa. Participants reported that coaching provided a safe and supportive space to develop self-

awareness, build confidence, and align their leadership goals with personal values. These insights resonate with existing literature on the psychological benefits of coaching but extend its application by addressing the specific cultural and systemic barriers faced by women in this region. The study also demonstrates how coaching helps women to redefine success on their own terms, challenging societal expectations that prioritise caregiving roles and undervalue professional ambition. By equipping women leaders with strategies to balance personal and professional identities, coaching fosters resilience and empowerment, enabling women to thrive in both spheres. Furthermore, the findings emphasise the importance of mentorship and networking in leadership success. Coaching that prioritises relationship-building and advocacy helps women to access leadership opportunities and navigate male-dominated environments.

6.3.4 Implications for Executive Coaches

This study draws attention to the need for culturally sensitive coaching that considers East Africa's unique sociocultural and organisational dynamics. Coaching is most effective when it aligns with local norms and addresses the intersection of gender, culture, and power structures. Participants in the study valued coaches who provided tailored strategies for navigating patriarchal norms and high power-distance environments. The findings also emphasise the importance of fostering emotional intelligence and psychological resilience as women leaders. By addressing challenges like imposter syndrome and guilt, coaches help women leaders to overcome self-doubt and navigate complex organisational landscapes with confidence. Moreover, the research emphasises the role of executive coaches as catalysts for systemic change. By equipping women leaders to advocate inclusive policies, champion diversity initiatives, and mentor other women, coaches contribute not only to individual growth but also to broader organisational and cultural transformation.

6.3.5 Implications for Organisations

The research provides critical insights for organisations seeking to foster inclusive leadership and promote gender equity. The findings demonstrate that executive

coaching can be a powerful tool for building leadership capacity and driving organisational success, particularly when integrated with systemic reforms. Organisations are encouraged to prioritise equitable access to coaching and leadership development programmes, to ensure that women leaders, particularly those in mid-level roles, are not excluded from critical opportunities for growth. The study also highlights the importance of creating supportive workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements and transparent promotion pathways, to address the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement. In addition, the findings indicate the need for organisations to actively challenge discriminatory practices and foster cultures of inclusion. This includes creating mentorship and sponsorship programmes that connect women leaders with influential leaders and providing platforms for women to share their experiences and insights. By embedding these practices into organisational structures, companies can create environments where diverse leadership styles are valued and women are empowered to reach their full potential.

6.4 Recommendations

This section offers actionable recommendations for women leaders, executive coaches, organisations, and future researchers. Grounded in the findings of the study, these recommendations address the cultural, societal, and organisational dynamics shaping women in leadership roles in East Africa. Their implementation can foster inclusive leadership, support women's professional growth, and help dismantle systemic barriers to women's advancement.

6.4.1 Recommendations for Women Leaders

Women leaders are strongly encouraged to invest in executive coaching as a transformative tool for developing core leadership competencies. Executive coaching offers a tailored and reflective environment where women can identify and harness their unique leadership strengths while addressing specific challenges such as navigating patriarchal norms or male-dominated environments. Additionally, coaching can help women to align their professional goals with personal values.

While mentorship and sponsorship are critical for career advancement, executive coaching helps women leaders to cultivate these relationships effectively. Coaches provide strategies for identifying and engaging mentors and sponsors, strengthening advocacy skills, and building credibility in professional networks. In addition, coaching enhances visibility by refining communication and self-promotion skills, enabling women to establish presence in male-dominated spaces. Engaging in professional associations, mentorship circles, and peer coaching groups further expands these opportunities. Women leaders should leverage executive coaching to drive cultural change by developing transformational leadership skills, challenging systemic barriers, and promoting diversity. Coaching equips women to model inclusive leadership and create opportunities for other women in high-stakes roles, fostering organisational cultures that value diverse leadership. It also strengthens authenticity and collaboration, positioning women as change agents.

Work–life integration remains a challenge for women leaders, and executive coaching provides strategies to manage responsibilities, set boundaries, and reframe traditional caregiving expectations. Coaching promotes self-care as a leadership strength, helping women sustain performance while maintaining balance. By leading by example and fostering workplace cultures that value well-being, women leaders can create a more sustainable leadership model for future generations.

Executive coaching helps women leaders to build support networks in male-dominated environments where traditional networking often excludes them. Coaching can empower women to create their own networking opportunities, such as industry-specific forums, mentorship circles, and leadership summits. Women leaders should actively connect with and uplift other women by sharing insights, opportunities, and strategies for success. By building these networks, women leaders not only strengthen their collective impact but also model the importance of collaboration and shared growth in navigating leadership challenges.

6.4.2 Recommendations for Executive Coaches

Executive coaches must prioritise cultural competence, and tailor their approach to the unique norms and values of countries such as East Africa. Culturally relevant tools like storytelling – a respected communication method – can foster trust, bridge generational gaps, and contextualise leadership challenges. Grounding coaching in cultural traditions helps women leaders to navigate traditional environments while maintaining authenticity.

Coaches should also address patriarchal norms and high power-distance cultures that shape women's leadership experiences. Coaching strategies, such as role-playing for hierarchical decision-making or frameworks for asserting ideas in male-dominated spaces, can help women to build credibility while preserving cultural harmony. Executive coaches have a unique opportunity to position themselves as allies in dismantling systemic barriers and promoting gender equity in organisations. Beyond fostering individual growth, coaching should also empower women leaders to become catalysts for change in their workplaces.

A critical aspect of coaching as an ally is fostering cultural awareness and challenging unconscious biases that may hinder women's progression. Coaches should work with women leaders to unpack and address biases embedded in organisational practices. They can also help women leaders to reframe challenges, turning systemic obstacles into opportunities for advocacy and innovation. Coaches must also engage in continuous learning about regional power dynamics and gendered expectations to provide culturally sensitive guidance. By positioning themselves as allies, coaches contribute to broader organisational transformation, fostering inclusive cultures that value diversity, drive performance, and sustain gender equity efforts.

6.4.3 Recommendations for Organisations

Organisations should integrate executive coaching into leadership development programmes tailored for women, to address issues pertaining to gender biases, career progression, and work–life balance. Coaching provides a structured, reflective space for women to develop skills in strategic thinking, decision-making, and stakeholder management.

Beyond one-off interventions, coaching should be embedded in organisational culture, thus ensuring continuous development. Offering coaching during onboarding, leadership transitions, and succession planning can equip women leaders with the skills to navigate hierarchical workplaces and male-dominated environments. Institutionalising executive coaching also signals a commitment to inclusivity, helping attract and retain top female talent. Executive coaching should be strategically positioned to help women shatter the 'glass ceiling' in their industries. Coaches can guide women leaders in addressing common barriers to advancement, such as limited access to high-stakes projects, lack of sponsorship, and exclusion from informal networks.

Organisations should complement one-on-one coaching with group coaching for women leaders. Group sessions foster peer learning, networking, and confidence-building while providing a platform to address systemic workplace challenges. Combining both approaches enhances coaching impact and strengthens solidarity among women leaders. Coaching should also prepare women for leadership transitions, including promotions, international assignments, and board-level roles. Linking coaching to succession planning ensures a steady pipeline of capable women leaders ready to take on senior positions. Organisations should view executive coaching as a long-term investment rather than a cost. Research consistently shows that diverse leadership drives innovation, enhances decision-making, and improves financial performance. Tracking coaching outcomes, such as increased representation of women in senior roles and improvements in leadership effectiveness, will reinforce its strategic value and long-term benefits.

6.4.4 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides insights into the role of executive coaching in empowering women leaders in East Africa, further research is needed to deepen understanding and refine coaching practices.

First, longitudinal studies should examine the long-term impact of coaching on women's career progression, organisational success, and cultural transformation. This would provide a clearer picture of how coaching influences leadership development over time. Second, comparative research across different East African contexts is essential to identify best practices for adapting coaching interventions to specific sociocultural environments. Understanding regional variations can enhance the effectiveness of coaching strategies.

Third, future research should incorporate perspectives from men in leadership roles, human resources professionals and policymakers to gain a more holistic view of the systemic factors influencing women's leadership advancement. Their insights can inform more integrated and impactful leadership development initiatives. Finally, exploring innovative coaching models such as group, peer and digital coaching could provide scalable solutions to support women leaders. Investigating these approaches can help to expand access to coaching, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

6.5 Limitations

While this study offers useful insights into executive coaching for women leaders in East Africa, it has limitations. Factors such as time constraints, selection of participants with possible bias, limited geographical scope and sectoral focus may affect the generalisability of findings. These limitations are acknowledged for the sake of transparency and to guide future research.

6.5.1 Time Constraints

A key limitation was the time constraints imposed by the structured framework of the academic programme, which restricted the scope of data collection and analysis. While a larger sample could have provided a broader range of perspectives, the available timeframe required a more focused participant pool.

In addition, the depth of interviews was affected by participants' limited availability. Despite efforts to ensure meaningful discussions, time constraints may have left some areas underexplored. A longer timeline could have allowed for follow-up interviews, offering deeper insights and a more comprehensive understanding of key themes.

6.5.2 Selection of Participants with Possible Bias

Another limitation was the researcher's prior professional relationships with some participants. While these connections facilitated access to experienced leaders and coaches, they may have influenced responses, with participants moderating or withholding insights to maintain a professional image. Although efforts were made to create a neutral environment, these pre-existing relationships may have affected data depth. Future research could mitigate this bias by recruiting participants with no prior connection to the researcher. This could enhance data authenticity and reliability.

6.5.3 Limited Geographical Scope

This study focused on women leaders in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, and Zambia, selected based on participant accessibility and the researcher's network. However, this limited scope may not fully represent the diverse cultural, economic, and political contexts across East Africa. Future research should include a broader range of countries for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of executive coaching on women leaders in the region.

6.5.4 Sectoral Focus

This study focused solely on the financial services sector, a traditionally male-dominated industry, providing useful insights but limiting applicability to other sectors. Unique industry characteristics may not reflect the experiences of women leaders in fields like healthcare, education, and agriculture, where challenges and opportunities may differ.

Future research should include multiple industries to offer a broader perspective on the impact of executive coaching across diverse professional landscapes. A comparative approach could also identify sector-specific barriers and enablers, informing more tailored coaching interventions.

6.5.5 Sampling and Participant Diversity

This study used purposive sampling to recruit five women leaders and five executive coaches, and generated rich qualitative data. However, generalisability was limited owing to the small sample size. A larger, more diverse sample could have revealed additional perspectives. Furthermore, the focus on mid- to senior-level leaders excluded early-career women and non-managerial role-players, who may also benefit from coaching. Future research should include participants across various career stages and organisational levels for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of coaching on women leadership development.

6.6 Conclusion

The study highlights executive coaching as a transformative tool for empowering women leaders in East Africa's financial sector. By addressing gendered leadership expectations, work–life balance, and transformational leadership skills, coaching helps women to navigate patriarchal and high power-distance cultures. Beyond individual growth, coaching fosters systemic advocacy, enabling women leaders to challenge stereotyping, drive organisational change, and promote inclusivity.

Extending social role theory and transformational leadership theory to East Africa's sociocultural context, this research fills a gap in leadership literature, which is largely Western-focused. It demonstrates how culturally sensitive coaching aligns leadership styles with local norms while equipping women to break systemic barriers and lead change in their organisations and communities. However, the study acknowledges its limitations, including its focus on select East African countries, a small sample size, and its concentration on the financial sector. Future research should explore diverse industries, wider geographic scope, and intersectional leadership experiences. In

addition, systemic reforms are needed to ensure equitable access to coaching and to amplify its impact.

Ultimately, executive coaching is more than a leadership development tool – it is a catalyst for organisational and societal transformation. By fostering inclusive, culturally attuned leadership, coaching unlocks the potential of women leaders, drives innovation, and strengthens organisational success in East Africa. This study calls on organisations, policymakers, and coaching practitioners to prioritise coaching as a strategic imperative in shaping the future of leadership.

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