The Triple Threat to Women's Leadership Development in Events: A Gendered Organization Perspective

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Article

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Abstract

This paper explores the hidden ways in which event organizations are gendered and how this affects the development of women's leadership careers, using a qualitative, feminist approach. Data was collected through a Delphi study with panelists from the United Kingdom and Australia. Through this research, we contribute to the development of Gendered Organizations theory in the fields of Human Resources and Organizational Behavior by providing empirical evidence for the gendered nature of an industry, addressing criticisms of this approach for its 'taken for granted' application in prior research. By foregrounding the voices of women working in events, we propose a new model of the factors that influence the development of women's leadership careers in a women-majority, yet still neosexist setting. Women are discriminated against based on the gendered perceptions of women in the event industry, the gendered perception of some event work as women's work, and the hidden concept of the impossible to embody 'perfect age' to work in events.

Keywords

events industry, leadership, gender, gendered organizations, neosexism

Introduction

Researchers in hospitality and tourism have explored factors that impact on career advancement for women (Calinaud et al., 2021; Im et al., 2025; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2021), yet comparable research in events has been slower to emerge (Dashper, 2018). This is despite women comprising 75-80% of the events workforce (IBTM, 2022). In the United Kingdom (UK) 90% of students who enroll in undergraduate and postgraduate Event Management degrees are women (Thomas, 2017). Yet, in the UK events sector, only between 16% and 27% of CEO, director or managing director level roles are filled by women (BCDME, 2018; IBTM, 2022).

The gender imbalance in leadership roles within event organizations is problematic for two reasons. First, it is an indicator of the persistence of gender inequality issues despite decades of work in this area across the broader fields of hospitality and tourism, within which most events businesses operate. Second, the absence of women at the top may prevent other women from achieving their full potential - when women are in senior positions, the gender wage gap is lower, and other issues of gender discrimination are reduced (Acker, 2009). Previous studies in events have investigated the impacts of gender on, for example, conference attendance (Lopez-Bonilla et al., 2023), preferences for event activities (Moss et al., 2009) and volunteering (Kim et al., 2024), but research into the relationships between gender and the management and leadership of events has been more limited to date. As well as addressing this lacuna in events research, this study extends previous research in the field of tourism and hospitality through the critical application of Gendered Organization theory in an allied field, providing new empirical insights into its future use, and through our use of qualitative feminist methods (Pritchard, 2018).

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Using Gendered Organization theory (Acker, 1990, 2009) and qualitative methods that capture the lived experiences of women, this research examines women's perspectives on the barriers to accessing leadership roles, and the development of women's leadership capabilities. Although Acker's theory of gendered organizations has become widely applied in management and organization studies, this widspread application has been critiqued, suggesting that it has been used to create a priori arguments that all organizations are gendered, rather than empirically testing whether this is the case (Bates, 2022). We aim to address this gap through an exploratory study of the event industry as a work setting, which also responds to Dashper and Finkel's (2021) call for more gender-aware research in events. Previous studies on this topic have highlighted similar issues facing women in developing their careers in male-dominated industries (Block et al., 2011; Cohen et al., 2023; Cruz and Nagy, 2024; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016). Crucially, this study now provides evidence of the persistence of gendered discrimination in female-dominated workplaces. In doing this, we aim to show not just that the events industry *is* gendered, but *how* the industry is gendered in specific ways, and how this is experienced by women developing their careers.

Literature review

Women in event leadership

Dashper and Finkel (2021) have argued that the application of critical gender theory could challenge dominant perspectives in event studies, following Thomas' (2017) call for events researchers to recognize gender inequalities in the industry and in their own studies, and to take appropriate action. Within critical gender theory, we have seen the development of feminist organizational theory, as scholars have developed their analysis of organizational behaviour from a gender perspective, and this study contribute to this stream of research through a critical engagement with Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, which seeks to explain the persistence and mechanisms of gendered discrimination in the workplace. Women make up 76.9% of the events workforce, but the number of women who hold senior roles decreases with levels of seniority (IBTM, 2022). As Platt and Finkel argue 'It is imperative that policymakers and organizations in the planned events sector consider how gender, equality, and diversity are managed as a legal and moral imperative. We, as social scientists, have a responsibility to inform such thinking and contribute to positive social change' (2018: 113).

Leadership is complex and, because the concept is socially constructed, it is open to interpretation, as people interact with a variety of leaders, undertaking a variety of leadership roles, in a variety of contexts. We therefore take Abson (2021)'s position on leadership in events, discussing it in the broad sense as an influence process, that resides in relationships and can shift and change over time. Leaders in the event industry must be able to adapt quickly and respond to urgent, creative and complex working environments while leading a wide range of people, teams and organisations, many of whom are not permanent staff, and often not even in the same building (Bladen et al., 2023).

There is also little research that focuses on the dynamics of leadership in events, despite the implicit agreement throughout the literature that leadership is essential to the industry (Abson and Schofield, 2022). Given the managerial, organizational and social challenges faced by events following the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum et al., 2023), leadership has never been more important – finding ways to deliver events in a cost-effective way, whilst also providing experiences that are memorable and meaningful, requires more focus on leadership than ever before. In the next section, we analyze common structural, societal, and cultural barriers to women's progression into leadership roles, through the lens of feminist organizational theory.

A gendered organization perspective

Following the performative turn in gender studies initiated by Butler (1990), feminist scholarship has increasingly moved away from considering gender as a fixed notion, linked to physical characteristics and instead viewing it as social construction constituted from individual performative acts that create the illusion of a stable identity. One implication of this perspective for research has been that it has suggested new agendas that critique the role of power dynamics and unequal power structures, not solely in relation to women, but also regarding sexuality, identity and discrimination (Cai et al., 2024). Perceptions of gender vary between societies, but they are always linked to hierarchies in the social order and produce inequalities that are linked to social, cultural, and historical formations as well as everyday social interactions (Carvalho et al., 2019). These views of gender, and those offered by other feminist scholars, have gradually gained influence in policy circles, with the World Health Organization (2020), for example, now defining gender as socially constructed and related to the norms, behaviors and roles that are associated with women, men, girls, and boys. Gendered Organization theory builds on this by arguing that the structure of organizations, and organizational practices promoting inequalities are institutionalized in line with socio-cultural gender norms, creating systemic disparities in practices such as

recruitment, decision-making, promotion, goal setting, rewards, and benefits (Acker, 1990). This perspective has developed along with the turn in gender research in organizational behaviour from individual identities to the systems and practices of the workplaces that are inherently gendered (Mooney, 2020). When workplaces are structured by men, for men, and are still often dominated by men, women are subject to significant disadvantages.

Acker's explanation of gendered organizations is particularly helpful in considering female-dominated workplaces, as it provides an explanation for how identities at work are social constructions that are brought into the workplace, where organizational structures and standards then, in turn, reinforce gender identities in line with broader social norms. There are specific factors too, that are experienced by women working in the events industry as barriers to developing their careers, including the assumed flexibility of workers to work unsociable hours at short notice and for often for long periods; travel away from home; low pay; temporary contracts and high pressure environments with often unclear divisions of labour (Abson, 2021; Bladen et al., 2023).

Issues such as the lack of role models and a lack of representation of women in roles that are seen as traditionally masculine create a lack of representation in work, in language, in ideology and in the media that continues to produce gendered social structures that are replicated in the workplace. Acker identifies some of these effects as, for example, women feeling as though they need to be more aggressive, to power dress, to manage 'like a man', and women in leadership roles being told to be more assertive.

Gendered Organization theory focuses on the structures and impacts of hidden gender discrimination, and understanding organizations from this perspective can help to dissect the reasons for women's underrepresentation at senior levels and thus shine a light on both the enablers and barriers to leadership progression for women in events. The theory identifies the existence of beliefs that reinforce social constructed gender norms in organizations. These beliefs may be unexamined, hidden, or exposed, but play a significant role within organizational cultures that are constructions of images, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and values (Acker, 2012). These become evident in organizational denials of inequalities, and in cultures of invisibility in which beliefs that reinforce inequalities are 'hidden' so that employees believe that organizations are egalitarian. To achieve this, organizations frequently hide behind a smokescreen of gender neutrality or gender-positive discourse to validate their acceptance of problematic workplace behaviors (Sayce, 2019).

From the gendered organization perspective, inequalities are manifested in multiple areas. Table 1 presents a summary of the features of gendered organizations. Although the presence and extent of these features will vary, men are almost always in the highest positions of organizational power and decision making. This is paradoxically particularly the case in service sectors, where most jobs are often seen as feminine (Costa et al., 2017). Dashper (2013) noted that event work is deeply gendered, with the assumption that service work is 'female' work because it is deemed to be empathetic and caring.

Women's career progression in gendered organizations

Research highlights several systematic challenges to women's career progression, created and sustained by gendered organizations. Examples include areas such as maternity leave, caring commitments, and flexible and part-time working. Women start to fall behind men in their career trajectories from the age of 22, with a sharp decline from their thirties (Close the Gap, 2022). This coincides with the age many women have children, indicating that workplaces continue to struggle to retain and progress women after maternity leave. One option for women is part-time work - 65% of all part-time roles in hospitality and tourism are filled by women, rising to 82% in contract food and service management and 72% in hotels (People 1st, 2016). However, part-time, or flexible work is often perceived as being for those who

Table 1. Features of gendered organizations.

Organising processes	Inequalities are built into job design, wage determination, decision making, physical design of the workplace and rules for behaviour at work
Organisation culture	Beliefs about gender differences and equality/inequality
Interactions on the job	Interactions between colleagues and between those at different levels of power produce and reproduce the gendered substructure
Gendered identities	Individual gendered identities that are constructed in the workplace and that individuals bring into the organisation
Gendered subtexts	Less visible parts of organisationally processes and structures such as policies, schemes, documentation

are less committed to the organization and less value is placed on these roles (Jykninen and McKie, 2012). Women engaged in this type of work are then disadvantaged when it comes to promotional opportunities.

In higher-level roles in the service industries, masculine norms are often implicit – the managerial demands and working cultures of the event industry can discourage women who may find those ways of working and living exclude or subordinate them (Dashper, 2013). Research into recruitment adverts for event manager roles found that many advertisements stated candidates needed to work long, unsociable hours and that they must be willing to travel. Gustafson (2006) shows that managers' gendered perceptions of employees often lead them to assume that women will not want or will not be able to travel, and women are therefore often excluded from the chance to interview. Equally, long hours may be a barrier to women with young children, because of the societal expectations that women will be responsible for the majority of the childcare (Schultheiss, 2021) This can result in women event managers having to juggle family care alongside long, unsociable and unpredictable hours, whilst their male counterparts mostly do not (Dashper, 2013). Finally, women suffer from a specific intersection of gender, age and looks, with women risking becoming 'too old', unattractive, emotional, or menopausal (Granleese and Sayer, 2006). Men, on the other hand, are typically perceived by co-workers to gain in status within organizations as they grow older (Kelley et al., 2017).

Job interactions between genders involve patterns that enact both indirect and direct discrimination. This relates to issues such as sexual harassment, relegating women of childbearing age to non-managerial posts and 'lookism' (Jones et al., 2024). Whilst much overt sexism has disappeared from workplaces, covert or unrecognized sexism persists – contemporary terms for this include everyday sexism and mansplaining, and the denial of the impacts of these less direct forms of discrimination has been described as 'neosexism' (Baretto and Ellemers, 2015). Neosexist behaviors have been highlighted as manifestations of more covert sexist attitudes, that can be hidden by adherence to imposed workplace regulations or superficial commitments to normative forms of gender equality (Gomes et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2010). These practices make the consequences of gender inequalities less visible and more persistent. For example, Jykinen and McKie (2012) note that women must fight hard to have their opinions heard by men, particularly when they are young. Other studies have found that women are perceived to be more emotional than men, and that – in some industries – there are widespread expectations that women are less competent than men (Carvalho et al., 2019). Finally, gendered inequalities are often attributed to failures by the women themselves, because they have made a 'choice' to not combine family and career or because they have failed to stand up for what they want (Dashper et al., 2024).

There are criticisms of the feminist theory of gendered organizations, which we have aimed to address through this study. Bates (2022) suggests that this perspective has become ubiquitous within management and organization studies and is frequently used to legitimize the notion that organizations are gendered, rather than testing whether they are. Bates suggests that few studies use the theory empirically and more often use it to theorize about gender in organizations. On the other hand, Mooney (2020: 1871) recommends that "gender researchers use a paradigm as a lens to organize data, otherwise it is too difficult to tease out visible and invisible effects on organizational practices". This exploratory study bridges the gap between these criticisms through an exploration of women's lived experiences that exposes the extent to which the events industry is gendered, and what impact this has on women's leadership progression.

Methodology

To address Bates (2022) and Mooney's (2020) critique of the ways in which Gendered Organization theory has been applied in organizational research, we adopted an interpretive, qualitative approach to this exploratory study. We take as the basis for the study the notion that gender is socially constructed, and we applied the feminist theory of Gendered Organizations to guide our research design. As Mooney argues, using a guiding paradigm helps to demonstrate that our study meets '…the complex credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability criteria that denote trustworthy qualitative research' (2020:1871).

Delphi studies are useful to identify clear perspective on complex issues that are the subject of contemporary debate (Han et al., 2024). When discussing these issues could be sensitive for some participants, as in the case of gender and career progression, the anonymity offered by the technique can help to remove power dynamics that could affect interviews or focus groups (Kennell and Powell, 2020). Using a qualitative Delphi study was judged to be appropriate for capturing rich textual information to allow women to tell their own stories. Using qualitative methods in this way responds to Pritchard's (2018) argument for the use of qualitative feminist methods to challenge traditional approaches to researching topics affecting groups who are marginalized or discriminated against. Feminist methodologies have been described as involving 'reflexivity, methodological diversity and innovation, the prioritization of

feminist political goals over procedural, epistemological and disciplinary orthodoxy, and, more recently, 'a turn to difference' and concepts and frameworks like intersectionality' (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 13). In this study we developed an approach to using the Delphi study technique that created space for reflection for our participants, and facilitated a critical interaction between researchers and participants in an attempt to capture the richness and diversity of women's voices on this topic.

In a qualitative Delphi study, panel participants are recruited to give their individual responses to multiple, iterative question rounds, which are written in progressively specific ways to probe disagreement and agreement between participants. In some cases, consensus will emerge, but unlike traditional quantitative Delphi studies that focus on statistical tests of agreement between respondents, qualitative Delphi approaches help to also identify areas of dissensus or ambiguity that are fruitful for further analysis (Brady, 2015). For this study, three rounds of questions took place, which is typical for a study of this nature. Google Forms was used to collect data for ease of access, and familiarity for the participants.

Panelists were selected through purposive sampling, to ensure that they could contribute meaningfully to the research (Campbell et al., 2020) and recruited through the researchers' professional social media accounts. Criteria for inclusion were that participants should self-define as women, should have at least 5 years of experience in the events industry, and that they occupied leadership roles within the industry, at any level of seniority. A final sample of 33 panelists was recruited, which is a relatively large number for a qualitative Delphi panel (Sekayi and Kennedy, 2017), where a sample of 15 participants ore more has been judged to be sufficient in comparable studies (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2019; Jamal, 2016; Silvert et al., 2024). We exceeded this number to capture a greater diversity of views across two different national events industry contexts, and to reflect the diversity of the industry itself, which contains many sub-sectors.

Panelists from the United Kingdom and Australia were recruited to enable a theoretically informative comparison across two mature, globally influential event markets with broadly comparable industry structures (e.g., diverse portfolios, strong SME presence, and recent hallmark/mega-event hosting) (Tourism Research Australia, 2024; UKEVENTS, 2024). Both countries operate within anglophone, common-law systems and maintain formal bilateral commitments to gender equality in economic and workplace contexts, including dedicated cooperation under the Australia–UK Free Trade Agreement (A-UKFTA) and joint government dialogues on gender equality (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2023; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office [FCDO], 2025). At the same time, cultural and policy contexts meaningfully diverge in ways salient to gendered leadership: cross-cultural work indicates both countries are highly individualist with low power distance but differ on other dimensions relevant to workplace norms (e.g., competitiveness/masculinity, uncertainty avoidance), cautioning against treating them as culturally equivalent (Hofstede Insights, n.d). These normative differences however, have not led to radically different legislative approaches to workplace gender issues. For example, the UK has mandatory gender pay gap reporting implemented via the Equality Act 2010 regulations, and Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 reporting regime also offers compliance incentives and mandates transparency mechanisms, both shaping organizational practices around women's advancement (Glennie, 2021).

An anonymized description of the panelists is given in Table 2.

To ensure that the research design followed the principles of feminist methods by creating space for our panelists to shape the direction of the research, the first round of questions was the most open in the study, asking broad questions about career progression and leadership. These questions were informed by Gendered Organization theory but were sufficiently open to create space for women to suggest additional areas of interest. In each round of questions, panelists were not limited in the length or focus of their responses, and additional free-text contributions were also encouraged, creating space for panelists to provide insights and observations that were not constrained by the focus of the researchers. Following this first round, and for each following rounds, two teams of researchers worked independently to analyze the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis technique - familiarization; initial code generation; building codes into initial themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing a final analysis, and then collaboratively to increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic Analysis was chosen as an analytical technique because of its flexibility in adapting to the priorities of participants, as a 'fluid and recursive' (Braun and Clarke, 2019) approach that fitted well with the iterative, probing nature of a qualitative Delphi study.

Following the development of themes from each round, a detailed summary of the responses was produced and circulated to all panelists, to encourage them to reflect on the research process, and the insights that they had collectively generated. These reports highlighted differences of opinions, and areas where the

Table 2. Panelists for the study.

United Kingdom		Australia	
Role	Event sector	Role	Event sector
Sales and marketing executive	Multiple	Event manager	Business events
Senior events officer	Business and third sector events	Client and events specialist	Business events
Consultant	Corporate events and sustainability	Head of events	Third sector events
Head of events	Business events	Product development executive	Business/Corporate events
Commercial event manager	Venue management	Director of event management	Business events and venue management
Head of marketing	Multiple	Business owner	Multiple sectors
Academic manager/event producer	Events education	Planning coordinator	Business and media events
Account manager	Business events	Strategic event manager	Business and cultural events
Head of events	Multiple sectors	Program coordinator	Business events
Head of sponsorship & events	Business events	Audio visual sales manager	Business events
Global chief operating officer	Business and cultural events	Director	Business and third sector events
Director	Business events	Events and partnerships manager	Multiple sectors
Freelance project manager	Business events	Managing director	Business events
Senior events officer	Third sector and cultural events	Festivals officer	Cultural and third sector events
Head of people & leaning development	Business events	CEO	Business events
Chief executive officer	Business events	Community experience manager	Sports and private events
Senior project manager	Business events		

researchers felt that they would like to hear more from panelists to help them in their analysis. A follow-up set of questions were then distributed. These questions were used to further engage with the themes from the previous round, to investigate areas of consensus and dissensus, but also to deepen the researchers' critical engagement with the theoretical framework, by applying concepts from it to further the analysis (the questions that were used for each round are supplied as supplementary files for this manuscript). The following section presents our analysis of these themes, under three headings: Gendered perceptions of women in events, gendered perceptions of events work, and the 'perfect age' for women working in events. These are then brought together in a more holistic discussion in which we present a model of the 'triple threat' to women's leadership progression in events.

Findings

Our analysis revealed that event organizations are not gender-neutral in their organizing processes, their culture, or their view of women in the workplace, and in this section, we include many illustrative quotations (in italics throughout) from our participants to demonstrate this. We found that event organizations are gendered organizations, structured by men, for men:

> I think historically some areas of the event business (like AV) were inherently male dominated (many still are) which means that they were built around male roles and some have not yet evolved.

We found that the gendered substructures (Acker, 2009) of event organizations are manifested through organizing processes such as job design, operational working hours, dress codes, design of workplace and workplace rules, and supervisory power. For example, the time-bound nature of events as projects (Abson et al., 2024) frequently creates a pressure on event workers to work late into the night, or to work without breaks, in order to deliver events with inflexible deadlines. This undermines workers' ability to plan their work-life balance, an issue that is particularly pertinent to female employees. Taken together, these 'subtle' forms of discrimination are evidence of the neosexist

(Baretto and Ellemers, 2015) character of contemporary event industry workplaces. To examine the influence of this on women's careers, we turn first to perceptions of women in event workplaces.

Gendered perceptions of women in event workplaces

When it comes to work-life balance, women working in events told us that they faced a series of what seemed like impossible trade-offs to make between developing their own leadership careers and maintaining their social and family commitments. Because organizational processes in events involve unsocial hours and working away from home, coupled with organizational cultures of long hours and overwork, women felt that they had to choose between a leadership career and their personal lives:

> The thought of progressing in this industry and having a family at the same time feels impossible. I barely have time for myself let alone a tiny human.

Gendered substructures are manifested through the organization of work and internalized by the women they impact on. For the women in our study these were seen as a barrier to leadership progression in the events industry, in particular. Whilst we had expected to find work-life balance to be a key challenge based on the findings of similar studies in other industries, we were surprised by the starkness of the results for women working in events, particularly for those with a young family, or those considering starting one. As Dashper et al. (2024: 255) noted, falling behind in leadership careers appears to have become an 'inevitable consequence of gendered organizations that fail to account for the needs of having and raising children as an integral aspect of employees' realities'.

There also seems to be a culture of over-work in the industry, which creates further issues for women with caring responsibilities.

> I remember being told that it was just how it was. When I was being paid for 4 days (didn't work 5th day so I could be with my young child) but working 5, then it was just how it was. Those being paid for 5 days were likely working 6.

These issues were compounded by additional hidden structural and societal barriers related to the perceptions of women as still being the primary caregivers in families, meaning that their leadership careers stalled:

> I have been criticized and judged for having to move meetings or delegate workload so I can look after my son, go to doctor appointments, or respond to an emergency for my parents. Needing to fulfil these roles has led to missing on promotions and contracts.

Following these disappointments, women often felt that they had to rebuild their careers, rather than re-entering at the same level, or progressing into more senior leadership roles.

> I stepped out of work to raise children and when I re-entered, I had to come back in at a lesser role in order to rebuild networks and knowledge.

Research in hospitality has shown that institutional-level factors, such as organizational misconceptions of women, stereotypes and cultural factors are the main barriers to women's access to top management positions (Segovia-Perez et al., 2021). Our research shows that women working in the event industry face the same barriers. There are invisible barriers to women's advancement, leading to them advancing slowly up the leadership ladder, if at all.

Organizing processes and organizational cultures within events are gendered. Inflexibility coupled with stereotypical views of women in the workplace, creates invisible barriers to career advancement. These barriers unstick women from their leadership career path. Mistry et al. (2024) suggested that perceptions of glass ceilings are a significant barrier to women developing leadership careers in events. We suggest however, that they also have 'sticky floors' (Said et al., 2022), where many women are stuck in jobs with low pay and limited possibilities for advancement.

Our participants also identified gendered aspects of organizational processes related to fertility, periods and menopause, though the later was not hugely present in women's responses, which may reflect the time of life that most of our respondents were at, with most of them looking towards family/domestic responsibilities and not looking beyond that to ageing and menopause. This, however, reflects a core finding of this study – many women in events find juggling childcare and event work impossible and they step away from the industry, leading to a lack of women in more senior roles, but also a lack of older women in the industry altogether, which we discuss in our final theme.

Gendered perceptions of event work

Organizational processes in events businesses present barriers to women developing their full leadership potential, but these were not the only challenge facing the women in our study. In rounds two and three of our data collection, we sought to analyze other themes in the data. From this, we were able to identify that there remains a widely held perception of much (but not all)

event work as "women's work". We found that traditional views of gender roles influence norms in events businesses, reinforcing the theoretical insight that gendered identities constructed in society can be brought into the workplace (Acker, 1990).

> I have definitely found that people expect technical and digital roles to be for males and expect that a women wouldn't 'understand'. I have personally experienced males not wanting to speak to me about technical elements of an event and specifically ask for my manager - despite me being the technical lead on the event!

We asked our panelists if they felt that, in the event industry, divisions of labor can be gendered, and received a strong agreement back on this point. There is still an expectation that women take on the roles that are perceived to be caring or nurturing - for example hospitality work and client-facing roles. These roles when cast as 'feminine' or 'women's work' are often less valued and less rewarded (Baum et al., 2023). This occurs regularly in the events industry, where 'caring' elements of the job such as organizing social events for staff, and team building, are often seen as feminine, and carried out in unpaid ways by women.

At the same time, women's male counterparts lead on the more strategic and technical roles, often referred to as heavy lifting roles, figuratively and literally. A common theme here was that, not only were the women asked to do the jobs that were perceived to be 'women's work', but their expertise and skill was often disregarded at the same time:

> I was often treated as a glorified waitress, the one who would order the catering and move the chairs around rather than any strategic value. I found this very frustrating, and I had to invite myself to have a seat at the strategic table - if I couldn't make it happen for myself then it felt unlikely I would be handed the opportunity, especially in a male-dominated environment.

Being given work that is less valued, or being treated as though you have less knowledge or experience, places you outside the norms of success, and further away from leadership positions. These perceptions of some types of event work as being gendered is like the concept of the 'glass slipper' (Dashper et al., 2024) which suggests that some job roles have perceived inherent characteristics that make them a natural fit for some, and a stretch – or impossibility – for others. Occupational identities in events workplaces have become aligned with gendered social identities and this leads to systematic discrimination against women in their quest to develop leadership careers. By listening to the voices of women and engaging them in our research in a reflexive way, we have uncovered some of the hidden aspects of this systemic discrimination.

The "perfect" age

Further evidence that gendered identities are impacting on leadership careers for women came when participants discussed the issue of age. Dashper et al. (2024) showed that the glass slipper metaphor relates to women's bodies too – society attaches meaning to bodies based on gender and other intersectional issues and these meanings can imply that some individuals are not as suitable as others to leadership roles. In our study it became clear that sexist or misogynistic judgements on women's identities and bodies produce another invisible barrier to leadership progression in the events industry. Whilst participants told us that much of the overt sexism has disappeared from event workplaces, covert or unrecognized sexism persists, and these practices make the consequences of gender inequalities both less visible and more persistent (Sayce, 2012).

This neosexism (Baretto and Ellemers, 2015) is often exercised through age discrimination, which diminishes women's ability to accomplish tasks perceived to be too demanding for older women, such as leadership (Tresh et al., 2019). We noted in early rounds of our questions that age was a recurring motif in women's responses. Some of our respondents argued that the way younger women were treated was related to aesthetics – younger women 'fit' the event industry's image better than those that have aged.

> The younger the woman, the more the company wants to show her off and become 'the face of the business… whilst women with kids or who are a little bit older are brushed to the side and more required to work 'behind the scenes'.

In the third round, we asked some direct questions about this. From the responses, we developed the theme of the unattainable 'perfect age' the women who participated in our study explained that they feel that they are always either too old, or too young, to work in the event industry. This was an area of strong agreement between our participants. First, and most explicitly, younger women are not taken seriously. Although they are valued for their youthful aesthetic, this is not the case for their talent, knowledge, or skills. This results in gendered interactions between men and women that often enact both dominance and submission.

> …[this] applied more to me as a young woman in the industry. It was difficult to be taken seriously, having to deal with sexist remarks from contractors, exhibitors, speakers etc.

Often, this relates to neosexist microaggressions such as interruptions, turn-taking, everyday sexism, and mansplaining. Gendered microaggressions reinforce women's sense that their opinions or contributions at work are not as valued as the men in their organization. If these microaggressions are repeatedly encountered, they impact women's confidence (Smith and Griffiths, 2022).

> I am often interrupted and talked over by them during meetings. I feel that this hinders my development as a leader because I feel like I lose confidence in myself and also the respect of my other colleagues.

Some participants felt confident in identifying a life stage when women might be at the 'perfect age' for event work: a brief period for many women before the challenges of juggling family, ageing parents or a busier personal life start to arise. However, it was clear from their responses that this was a fleeting moment that was an example of what Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) have called the 'impossible worker', an unattainable normative framing of the ideal employee. These conditions affecting women have also been noted in the wider hospitality industry, where there is a tension between being valuable 'young talent' businesses and being a threat to businesses because of the perceived inevitability of maternity leave (Jykinen and McKie, 2012).

> As a woman of 34, almost 35, I am being aged out of the industry…people see me as a walking maternity leave and not as a potential senior leader with 20 years' experience. It is incredibly insulting and frustrating and the same does not apply to men in the slightest.

The prevailing view was that men and women were treated differently because of their age, reflecting the underlying gendered perception that men at the same life stage would have someone else – a woman – to take on these additional domestic responsibilities on their behalf (Schultheiss, 2021).

There was a third view, expressed by some of the women, that the industry itself is physically and mentally demanding and that you naturally reach an age where it is too much, you don't have the energy for high pressure event delivery work or just no longer want to commit, mentally and physically, to that working culture. Older women in our study told us that they were now frequently viewed as too old for a youthful industry, a mirror of the discrimination facing younger women entering the industry who were seen as a good aesthetic 'fit' for the image the event industry projects. Our findings suggest that this aesthetic fit is often related to age – and when women age, they no longer fit the embodied attributes that employers are looking for. This chimes with the findings of Granleese and Sayer (2006), who identified how women become at risk of becoming too old, unattractive, and emotional at a certain point in their career. The women in our study did not attribute this to what might be seen as reasonable perception of some older women's ability to undertake physically demanding event roles, but to the extent to which they were heard, respected, and listened to by colleagues.

When our participants entered the industry as young women, they were often viewed as being too young and were not taken seriously. For those that continued into motherhood, they became viewed as a risk to employers, and for those who maintained their careers into their fifties, there came a point when the women felt they were viewed as being too old to succeed in events, and crucially that their age became a barrier to leadership, in a way that it wasn't for men:

> I think that age is attached to position of authority, and that's where the ageism and sexism cross. Men can be leaders in events at any age, and well into their 70's. Women are only seen as leaders as they mature to 40+ and by 60 they're seen as unemployable in events.

The triple threat of a gendered industry to women's leadership careers

Women working in neosexist event workplaces suffer from triple threat of gendered inequalities in their organizations –they are discriminated against based on the gendered perceptions of women in work, the gendered perception of event work as women's work, and the hidden concept of the perfect age to work in events. In Figure 1 we present a representation of this triple threat model, developed from our research. In this section, we reflect on how women saw these issues as having impacted their careers in a more holistic way, and on the kind of leadership that they had been able to achieve despite this.

Respondents felt that they do a lot of leadership, but that it is not always recognized formally as this, especially by those that matter, those responsible for offering promotions.

> My job title and job description hasn't accurately describe my level of responsibilities. I current manage a large events programme with two direct reports and I don't even have a manager in my job title.

This was often because of the type of leadership they were undertaking – for example, leading a team of junior staff members, or leading on the hospitality side of the business. These 'feminine' roles were not

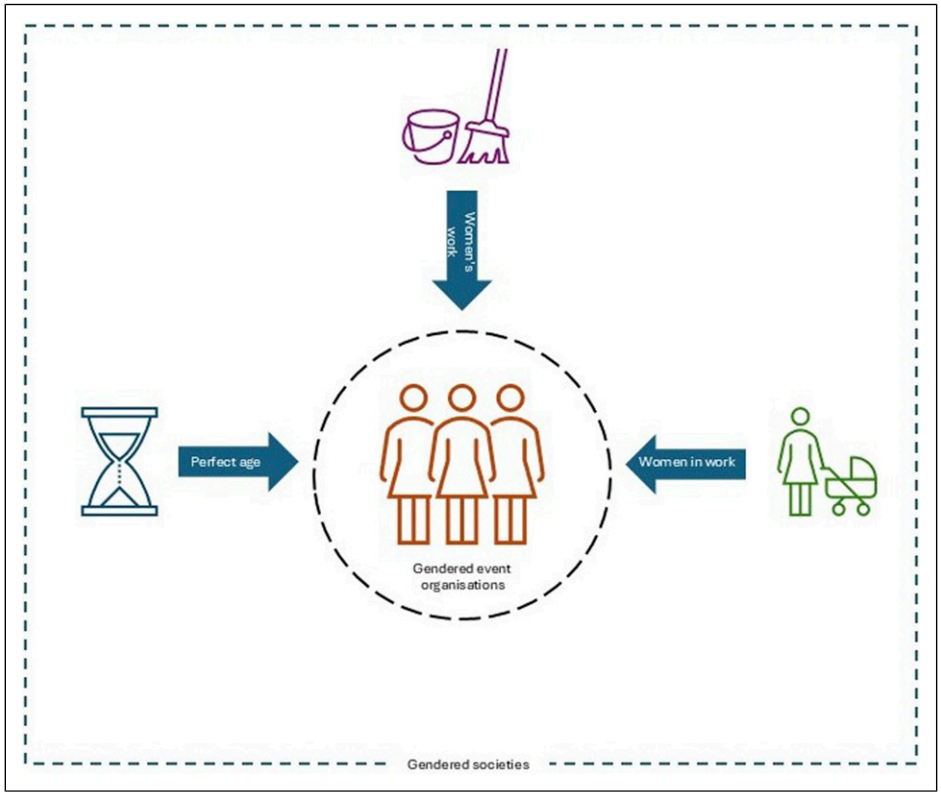

Figure 1. The triple threat model.

recognized as high level leadership skills, and women felt that the lack of recognition for the variety of leadership they did was a barrier to their success. Other issues that came across strongly were the lack of clear pathways to leadership progression, the lack of opportunities and the lack of formal event leadership training.

Applying Gendered Organization theory in our analysis allows us to show that whilst our participants felt that men just seem to know how to get promoted, or to undertake leadership roles in the 'right way', it is actually gendered substructures which make it easier for men and harder for women.

Another indicator of gendered event organizations creating barriers for women is that it takes women much longer to attain leadership positions than men.

> I noticed men, typically in sales roles, moving quickly up into event director roles, even considering they had no background in actually managing events. For myself, it took over 5 years of managing events to move up into a more senior role.

Women find the lack of obvious linear leadership pathways harder than men in many cases, because they often step off the career pathway or pause it, and then must navigate their way back. Women in our study felt that they had to take more ownership of their professional development and had to be very self-reliant – success in leadership does not come easily for women.

The many gendered inequalities our participants had encountered led us to consider if Acker's concept of the ideal worker (2006, 2012), which has been applied productively in hospitality and tourism (Costa et al., 2017; Mooney et al., 2016), is a useful one for the event industry to consider. These 'ideal workers' start working in early adulthood and continue, uninterrupted, to retirement. Crucially, they are unencumbered and able to keep their non-work-related responsibilities hidden or out of sight in the workplace, leaving them free to focus on work. We suggest that in events, many women are constrained by their perceived role as care givers, their age and the perceptions of event work being women's work and therefore attaining the status of an idealized 'impossible' worker (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016) is difficult, making leadership progression impossible.

> There is currently nowhere for someone like me to go, particularly with keeping in mind my biological clock and the several times I've burnt out in my career…I just don't see how it's possible do have work life balance, a successful career in events, whilst growing your career and potentially starting a family.

Conclusions

The event industry has a problem with gender. There is a gulf between the number of women working in the industry, and the number of women in senior leadership roles and there is a similar issue with the gaps in our understanding of the relationships between gender, event work and event organizations, which is much less apparent in studies of the hospitality and tourism industries.

Adding to previous studies of the impact of the glass ceiling in events (Mistry et al., 2024), we found that women are more likely to encounter a sticky floor (Said et al., 2022) – stuck in less senior roles, with no opportunities to move upwards. Few of the women involved in our study had made it to where they wanted to be in their careers and pregnancy, maternity, childcare and other care commitments were without doubt the biggest barrier to women's progression into leadership. Many of the women had either 'stepped out' when the time came to have children, or they were planning to, and few of these had plans to return to the industry that one described as 'cutthroat' for women.

Theoretical implications

Our analysis demonstrates that traditional views of women as care givers and nurturers are reflected in the event sector, with women often being expected to take on the hospitality or client serving tasks, whilst their male counterparts lead on the more strategic and technical roles. Although overt sexist discrimination was generally considered by our participants to be a thing of the past, it became clear through these women's recounting of many personal incidents of microagressions and covert discrimination, which we explained through the lens of gendered substructures (Acker, 2009), that the events industry is a neosexist setting.

Through the introduction of the 'triple threat' model of the ways in which gendered event organizations impact on women's leadership careers, we illustrate these relationships, including a novel insight that requires further research - the theme of the 'perfect age'. This indicates that there is a problem with ageism in the industry – women are either too young or too old. We also note that age and sexism are interrelated - age, in combination with, gender is the key barrier to women's leadership development because age determines when a women will take on different caring roles. This combination creates a situation where only a hypothetically 'impossible worker' (Ibarra and Petrglieri, 2016) can progress, a 'glass slipper' that fits men better than women.

Through our research, we address criticisms of previous applications of Acker's framework (Bates, 2022; Mooney 2020). Our approach has allowed us to identify specific ways in which event organizations are gendered, and that the gendered substructures present in many event workplaces create barriers to women's leadership career development, even in workplaces that are numerically dominated by women. These insights have been developed through a qualitative, feminist approach that has allowed the voices of women to drive our analysis. Many of the organizations our participants had worked for had an organizational logic that was gendered; a set of unspoken agreements about jobs and working behaviors, which centered around the inability to flex working hours, or operational needs, in order to accommodate women's personal lives and the unspoken belief within organizations that women are more suited to specific types of roles. In our study, the stories that women told us about their leadership careers revealed the gendered logic of their workplaces; from their perspective, the substructures of work made leadership careers more possible and attractive to men. Through our anlaysis, we have responded to Pritchard's (2018) call for the greater application of qualitative feminist methods to challenge traditional approaches to research on discrimination, and we have provided new empirical evidence to strengthen future applications of Acker's framework in organizational studies.

Practical implications

Addressing the imbalances in leadership roles within events should be a key concern for all involved in event management - in an industry dominated by women, creating a balanced, and equal, workforce will be a strategic decision which is likely to lead to more retention, loyalty and satisfaction among employees.

The findings of this study therefore have implications for those responsible for the human resource in events, leadership teams and for those leading on diversity, inclusion, and equality initiatives, including in industry bodies and educational institutions and associations. We have identified barriers to women's successful leadership careers and shone a light on the ways in which event organizations fail to support women. We note, as Ryan and Morgenroth (2024) conclude, that women are not the problem and initiatives that try to fix women are likely to fail. Instead, event organizations must recognize the ways in which their operational, organizational, and cultural processes create barriers for women. Whilst event organizations continue to ignore or fail to acknowledge these barriers, they will remain unsurmountable.

Limitations and future research

Our study provides a broad view of the challenges women face in developing leadership careers within

events. However, our study is limited by the number of women who responded, the breadth of their age and the types of organizations they work for. Additionally, our participants drew our attention to sector specific differences, such as the experience of working in audio-visual roles, or those who work in some corporate positions that did not necessarily require long hours. Women's experiences in different sectors of the event industry need further investigation, including through quantitative studies that build on our findings.

One clear and obvious limitation to our study is the lack of male voices – this was intentional. But now that we have begun to hear the voices of women, we must also bring men into the conversation – their views on the structural changes that need to be made, and the shift in organizational processes and culture are vital to any significant, long term, changes in the way we ensure women can develop their leadership careers. We would also highlight that the ideal worker is often a white man. Our panelists did not present us with information about the intersection of their gendered and other identities. Although the panels were recruited to include a diversity of women's voices, intersectional issues that affect women's career progression, such as disability, sexuality, ethnicity and class, should be analyzed in future research.

We were intrigued by the idea that the 'ideal worker' may play a large part in holding women back from leadership careers, but we were unable to explore this further within the scope of this study. Future research in events could investigate the extent of the truth of this. Is there an ideal worker in events? And if so, is that ideal part of the reason for some of the recruitment challenges facing the industry, especially post-COVID?

Finally, some women told us about their positive experiences of working in events and a minority strongly disagreed with some assertions that the event industry was gendered. Listening to these women's stories, this positivity was driven by cultural change in the organizations they have worked for, where organizations had worked hard to change perceptions of gender, caregiving, and leadership. Another type of success story was from women who had become 'disruptors' (for example setting up their own organizations or going freelance) to solve the issues of structural inequalities, regarding operational challenges, in the workplace. For some respondents, this was seen as the only way to break the self-perpetuating cycle of men occupying leadership roles. We would encourage others to explore the impact of positive cultural change on women's leadership careers.

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Ethical considerations

The University Research Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University approved our study (approval: ER 44950040) in October 2022.

Consent to participate

Respondents gave written consent for their participation before the study commenced and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

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