

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Women and Leadership in the Creative Industries

# When Leadership Is Denied: A Phenomenological Study of Women's Lived Experiences of Promotion Rejection in the Pakistani Fashion Industry

Atif Bilal<sup>1</sup>  | Faiza Majid<sup>2</sup> | Shumaila Zeb<sup>2</sup> | Saqlain Raza<sup>3</sup> | Aliya Abdul Hayee<sup>2</sup>  | Wali Ur Rehman<sup>4</sup> <sup>1</sup>Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK | <sup>2</sup>SZABIST University, Islamabad, Pakistan | <sup>3</sup>Plymouth Business School, Plymouth, UK | <sup>4</sup>Essex Business School, University of Essex, Colchester, UKCorrespondence: Atif Bilal ([atifbilal@live.com](mailto:atifbilal@live.com))

Received: 5 May 2025 | Revised: 26 May 2026 | Accepted: 1 July 2026

Keywords: fashion industry | interpretive phenomenological analysis | leadership | rejection sensitivity theory

## ABSTRACT

Despite the growing presence of women in creative and leadership roles within the fashion industry, many continue to face barriers to leadership progression. Leadership rejection remains a critical yet underexplored experience that can significantly affect women's professional identity and aspirations. The research aims to explore the lived experiences of women in the fashion industry who perceive being rejected from leadership positions due to discrimination. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women in the fashion industry of Pakistan. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis guided data collection and analysis, allowing for a rich exploration of meaning-making processes. The study revealed that women's experiences of promotion rejection in the fashion industry led to profound psychological and professional transformations. Rejection often triggered an identity crisis, shaking their confidence and prompting a painful re-evaluation of their leadership identity. Yet, it also became a catalyst for change, as participants reconceptualized leadership beyond hierarchy, embracing relational, informal influence, while exposing the ambivalent nature of such roles through emotional labor and invisibility. Despite challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, channeling the emotional toll of rejection into motivation and growth. This process nurtured a redefined and empowered sense of leadership, challenging narrow, traditionally masculine and hierarchical conceptions of leadership within the fashion industry.

## 1 | Introduction

Leadership roles and career progression are often regarded as universal aspirations among employees, with upward mobility representing both a personal ambition and a pathway to professional recognition and rewards (Abga and Bello 2023). However, several career theorists argue that this assumption does not fully capture the diversity of career experiences, particularly among women, whose careers are often shaped by subjective, self-defined goals and non-linear trajectories (Cabrera 2007; O'Neil et al. 2008). As Kucharvy (2014) posits, career

advancement is not merely an individual goal, but one that is deeply intertwined with organizational structures and the opportunities they present. Leadership positions within an organization typically come with increased status, influence, and financial incentives, making career progression a coveted outcome for many workers (Bagdadli et al. 2006; Lam and Schaubroeck 2000). However, with the evolving landscape of professional training, education, and a competitive, pyramid-shaped organizational structure, the competition for leadership position has become fiercer (Cascio 2002; Vyas 2022). As the number of applicants for leadership positions grows, the

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availability of such roles remains limited, resulting in inevitable rejections for leadership positions (Bhaskar et al. 2023).

The intensified competition for promotion to leadership positions has led organizations to adopt more objective and sophisticated criteria for selecting candidates, aiming to ensure fairness and meritocracy. However, despite these formal measures, the risk of discrimination and favoritism persists, particularly in contexts where leadership positions are scarce or organizational biases remain entrenched (Bhaskar et al. 2023; Vyas 2022). Although rejection is an expected outcome in any competitive environment, prior research suggests that women, in particular, face greater vulnerability to discrimination in selection and promotion decisions. Studies have consistently shown that despite women comprising nearly half of the global population and 41.9% of the workforce, they occupy only 32% of senior leadership positions (Ericson 2023). This disparity is even more pronounced in patriarchal societies and developing countries, where gender inequities are more deeply entrenched. In Pakistan, for example, as of 2023, women make up only 22% of the employed workforce, one of the lowest participation rates globally (Firstpost 2023).

Although evidence demonstrates that women and men possess comparable capabilities and qualifications for leadership roles, women continue to be underrepresented in senior positions. Several factors contribute to this disparity, including gender stereotypes (Schein 2007), unconscious bias (Eagly and Carli 2007), lack of mentorship and sponsorship (Richards 2023), disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, and unsupportive workplace policies (Hideg and Wilson 2020). Women also face exclusion from informal networks and non-inclusive organizational cultures, alongside the pervasive challenges of the “glass ceiling” and “glass cliff” phenomena (Bruckmüller et al. 2014). Furthermore, women's own self-perceptions and confidence gaps, often influenced by societal expectations, also play a crucial role in limiting their career progression (Sandberg and Scovell 2014). These factors collectively illustrate how qualified women are disproportionately rejected from leadership roles, often more so than their male counterparts.

Leadership can be understood in terms of formal authority and informal influence, each with distinct theoretical and practical implications. Formal leadership refers to roles officially recognized within an organization, conferring decision-making power, vision-setting, control over resources, and accountability (Hassan et al. 2013). In contrast, informal leadership arises from personal influence, expertise, or social relationships, allowing individuals to guide, mentor, or shape opinions without holding formal authority (Day 2000). Empirical studies indicate that women often face barriers to accessing formal leadership positions due to structural biases and role incongruity, even when they demonstrate strong informal influence (Eagly and Carli 2007; Ibarra et al. 2013). Eagly and Karau (2002) explains how societal perceptions of women's suitability for leadership contribute to promotion rejection, highlighting a misalignment between formal authority and perceived gender roles. Although informal leadership can enhance recognition and career progression, it does not provide the same organizational power or decision-making capacity as formal leadership.

In this study, we focus specifically on women's experiences of applying for and being rejected from leadership positions. Although the terms “leadership” and “management” are sometimes used interchangeably in organizational research, we adopt the distinction proposed by Kotter (1990), who argue that management is primarily concerned with planning, organizing, and administering processes, whereas leadership entails vision-setting, influence, and driving strategic change. Accordingly, our analysis addresses leadership rejection rather than general managerial career setbacks.

Although extensive scholarship exists on women's underrepresentation in leadership (Eagly and Carli 2007; Hideg and Wilson 2020), much of this literature has historically focused on structural and institutional barriers, such as the “glass ceiling” (Cotter et al. 2001) or implicit bias in promotion practices (Rudman and Glick 2001). The prevailing research tends to generalize women's leadership experiences, while paying limited attention to variations across industries and the diverse ways in which women experience leadership rejection (Ely et al. 2011). It often assumes that all women face the same barriers and respond in similar ways, thereby underestimating the diversity of strategies, aspirations, and turning points in women's careers. As a result, rejection is frequently treated as a peripheral event rather than a significant moment that can shape professional identity. Therefore, understanding the subjective experiences of women who have faced leadership rejection is particularly important in industries such as fashion, where careers are built on visibility, reputation, and creative credibility. In such settings, leadership rejection can carry consequences that extend beyond lost opportunities, influencing women's professional identities, creative trajectories, and sense of belonging within the industry.

This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of promotion rejection among women in the creative industry, offering a more nuanced and psychological portrait of its impact through the lens of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith 2017). Existing gender and organization scholarship has extensively explored women's leadership experiences, workplace inequality, identity regulation, and emotional labor in organizational settings (Acker 1990; Eagly and Carli 2007; Ely and Meyerson 2000). Similarly, feminist organizational scholars have examined how gendered power structures shape women's professional advancement and experiences of exclusion, particularly within leadership trajectories and precarious industries (Lewis and Simpson 2012; Gill and Orgad 2018). However, comparatively limited attention has been given to how women subjectively experience and interpret promotion rejection, particularly within creative industries and non-Western contexts such as Pakistan, where patriarchal expectations and socio-cultural norms may intensify the psychological consequences of career stagnation or exclusion (Dodd 2012; Carr and Van Raalte 2025).

Methodologically, the use of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) constitutes a critical innovation in this area of research. IPA's focus on the idiographic, subjective meaning-making process (Smith 2011) allows for a textured and empathetic exploration of how women interpret and respond to rejection. Unlike large-scale quantitative surveys that risk

flattening nuance, IPA foregrounds participants' unique narratives and emotional landscapes, revealing the complex interplay of societal expectations, internalized gender norms, and personal resilience. This methodological choice enables the research to capture not only *what* happened to the women, but *how* they made sense of it—a perspective that has been explored in broader gender and organizational scholarship but remains underexamined in relation to promotion rejection within creative industries and non-Western organizational contexts. Consequently, the study contributes not only to theoretical debates but also to methodological and contextual enrichment in feminist organizational research (Gill and Orgad 2018; Johnson et al. 2018).

## 1.1 | Women in Creative Industry

Women continue to face significant underrepresentation in leadership roles within the global cultural and creative sectors. UNESCO's 2021 report, *Gender & Creativity: Progress on the Precipice*, highlights this persistent gender gap, revealing that women hold a disproportionately low number of leadership positions in cultural and creative industries worldwide. This inequality is sustained by the very structure of these sectors. The global fashion industry, for instance, is characterized by a paradoxical economy where immense prestige masks systemic exploitation and precarious labor. As Giulia Mensitieri's ethnography of the French fashion industry reveals, this sector operates on a "dream" of creativity that normalizes precarity and frames career outcomes as a matter of individual "luck" rather than systemic injustice (Mensitieri 2018, as cited in Murphy 2019).

The situation in Pakistan mirrors the global trends, with women encountering formidable barriers to leadership in the country's creative sectors. In the broader business sector, a 2021 survey by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Pakistan Business Council found that over half of the companies surveyed employed fewer than 15% women, with 63% having < 5% women in senior leadership roles. Additionally, 60% of these companies had either no female board members or only one. Comparable patterns are also evident in Pakistan's creative industries. For example, only about 14% of the IT workforce—considered part of the wider creative and digital sector—comprises women, whereas in rural creative industries such as handicrafts and design, women are more active as entrepreneurs but rarely progress to formal leadership or decision-making roles (Pakistan Software Houses Association [P@SHA] 2012). This data highlights the broader issue of gender inequality in leadership across various sectors in Pakistan, which also extends to the fashion industry.

The fashion industry, which encompasses diverse segments such as small and medium-sized enterprises (Barsh et al. 2000), luxury brands (Ko and Megehee 2012), and digital retail platforms (Yeung and Ang 2016), presents an interesting case for gendered leadership. Women are pivotal in Pakistan's fashion industry not only because of their creativity and entrepreneurship but also due to structural gender dynamics in production. At the lower levels of garment and textile manufacturing, women dominate the workforce performing low-skilled, labor-intensive tasks that require docility, patience,

and compliance—traits socially associated with femininity (Zahid and Kamarudin 2019). In contrast, men are more likely to occupy leadership, supervisory, and ownership positions (Ayaz et al. 2019). This gendered division of labor reinforces hierarchical inequalities, meaning that whereas women are essential to the industry's operations, their presence in formal leadership or strategic decision-making roles remains limited.

Studies indicate that women-led businesses constitute a small fraction of Pakistan's formal private sector, and women remain notably under-represented in leadership roles within large retail and manufacturing firms (International Labour Organization 2020). Although a select few female designers have achieved international recognition, systemic barriers such as limited access to funding, cultural biases, and gender-based discrimination continue to impede the advancement of women into leadership positions. The rise of digital entrepreneurship—particularly through social media-based boutiques and homegrown brands—has opened new avenues for women in Pakistan's fashion industry to bypass traditional barriers and achieve greater visibility and success (Diehl and Dzubinski 2023). However, these digital platforms have not fully dismantled entrenched structural and cultural obstacles that hinder women's access to formal leadership roles within established fashion institutions. Persistent gendered expectations, patriarchal norms, and implicit biases continue to shape and often limit women's professional trajectories in the sector. It is within this complex context of emerging opportunities and enduring constraints that this study is situated. Therefore, the investigation seeks to understand the complex meaning-making processes through which women attribute leadership rejection.

## 1.2 | Theoretical and Contextual Framework

Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Feldman and Downey 1994) explains the individual-level psychological consequences of exclusion. Originally conceptualized in interpersonal contexts, rejection sensitivity describes a cognitive-affective tendency to "anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection" (Downey and Feldman 1996, 1327). Recent scholarship extends this theory to professional settings, showing that repeated career setbacks can trigger maladaptive coping mechanisms, including self-silencing (Spivey et al. 2024) and career disengagement (London et al. 2007).

For women in image-conscious industries such as fashion, leadership rejection carries dual psychological burdens: professional devaluation and public identity threats (Gill and Orgad 2018). The industry's emphasis on visibility and esthetic performance means rejection often feels like a public indictment of worth (Taylor 2012). Women with high rejection sensitivity may internalize these experiences as personal failures, contributing to the experience of the imposter phenomenon—a psychological pattern characterized by self-doubt and a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite evident success (Walker and Saklofske 2023) or withdrawal from leadership aspirations (Brescoll 2011). Conversely, those with lower rejection sensitivity may reinterpret rejection as systemic bias, fostering resilient resistance (Meyerson and Scully 1995). This dichotomy calls for the need to examine how psychological predispositions interact with structural inequities to shape career trajectories.

Importantly, the use of Rejection Sensitivity Theory (RST) in this study is not intended to individualize or psychologize women's experiences of exclusion. Rather, RST is employed as a complementary interpretive lens for understanding how leadership rejection is emotionally anticipated, subjectively experienced, and psychologically negotiated within contexts already shaped by gendered organizational inequalities. The theory therefore helps illuminate the affective and cognitive consequences of exclusion without suggesting that women's "sensitivity" is the cause of discriminatory outcomes. In this sense, RST complements feminist and intersectional analyses of organizational power by foregrounding how structural inequalities become internally experienced, embodied, and emotionally lived (Acker 1990; Eagly and Carli 2007; Gill and Orgad 2018). Therefore, Rejection Sensitivity Theory (RST) provides a valuable psychological lens for understanding women's experiences of leadership rejection under conditions of systemic inequality by revealing the underlying processes through which rejection is anticipated, experienced, and interpreted. This positioning allows for a distinction between the *production of rejection*, which is rooted in patriarchal and organizational power relations, and the *experience of rejection*, which is shaped by psychological processes of vigilance, self-doubt, and emotional regulation under conditions of inequality.

In Pakistan's socio-cultural context, marital status profoundly shapes how women internally process and make sense of leadership rejection. Marriage operates not only as a social institution but also as a psychological anchor of identity and legitimacy, offering women a sense of stability, belonging, and moral affirmation within a collectivist cultural framework (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Shaheed 2010). Consequently, rejection is interpreted through the lens of one's marital position: for married women, it may evoke frustration or disappointment yet remain buffered by social validation and familial support; for unmarried, divorced, or widowed women, it can trigger deeper emotional dissonance—heightened self-doubt, shame, or a sense of moral delegitimization (Zia 2018; Rehman and Roomi 2012). Research on women's work and identity in South Asian societies similarly highlights that social expectations around marriage and respectability shape women's self-evaluations, influencing whether professional exclusion is viewed as a situational event or as an indictment of one's personal and social worth (Syed et al. 2005; Jamali 2009). Thus, marital status may function as a psychological filter through which women interpret leadership rejection.

Similarly, career stage, age and professional experience influence how rejection is understood. Seniority does not necessarily confer legitimacy in Pakistan's male-dominated hierarchies (Ali and Syed 2017). Experienced women may interpret rejection as confirmation of systemic exclusion, whereas early-career women may internalize it as personal inadequacy. Thus, leadership rejection acquires distinct meanings across life and career stages—ranging from developmental disappointment to symbolic invalidation. Although these socio-cultural dimensions did not emerge as primary themes, they were identified through contextual analyses as important factors that deepen the understanding of how women interpret and internalize leadership rejection within the Pakistani fashion industry.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap in existing research by examining how women subjectively experience and interpret leadership rejection within the fashion industry's unique context, where aesthetic capital and cultural norms significantly influence career advancement (McRobbie 2018). Although studies on rejection sensitivity have primarily focused on STEM and corporate environments (Bian and Wang 2019), few investigations explore how women navigate the psychological aftermath of leadership rejection. In Pakistani context this oversight is particularly pronounced in creative industries such as fashion, where professional setbacks often carry additional weight due to their connection to embodied identity and personal expression (N. Entwistle 2015). Therefore, the pressing need to understand these complex dynamics motivates our central research question:

How do women who perceive being rejected from leadership roles due to discrimination make sense of and cope with this experience?

## 2 | Method

This study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodological framework (Smith et al. 2021). IPA is well-suited for exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to specific phenomena within particular contexts (Eatough and Smith 2017). Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, IPA enables researchers to engage deeply with participants' subjective experiences, uncovering nuanced interpretations shaped by social, cultural, and personal dimensions. Given the study's aim to explore women's experiences of leadership rejection in Pakistan's fashion industry, IPA offered an effective lens through which to capture and analyze the participants' sense-making processes and coping strategies in the aftermath of such professional setbacks. Consistent with IPA's epistemological orientation, the study adopts a double hermeneutic stance, whereby participants seek to make sense of their experiences, and the researchers, in turn, interpret this sense-making process. This necessitates careful attention to both participants' accounts and the researchers' role in shaping interpretation.

### 2.1 | Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

In accordance with IPA's commitment to ideography and depth of inquiry, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. The focus was to recruit individuals who shared a homogeneous experiential profile—women who had applied for and were subsequently rejected from leadership positions within the fashion industry in Pakistan. Thirteen participants were recruited for the final sample (Eatough and Smith 2017). This sample size aligns with IPA's recommendation for small, focused samples that allow for in-depth, idiographic analysis while also permitting cross-case comparison to identify converging and diverging experiential themes.

The participants in this study were women who had applied for formal leadership appointments within their organizations.

These positions were advertised and recognized as leadership roles with responsibility for shaping vision, strategy, and organizational direction, rather than being solely administrative or managerial posts (Kotter 1990). The leadership positions for which participants applied are summarized in Table 1.

Potential participants were initially identified and contacted through the university's Alumni System. Following this, a snowball sampling technique was employed, whereby initial participants referred other individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Upon expression of interest, they were provided with a participant information sheet and consent form. Only those who voluntarily consented to participate were included in the study.

## 2.2 | Sample Description

The sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. The participants comprised 13 women, aged between 28 and 38 years, with professional experience ranging from 5 to 9 years. Their roles spanned various sub-sectors of the fashion industry, including fashion design, textile design, marketing, merchandising, branding, styling, and fashion technology. Senior roles reported

included Assistant Creative Director, Brand Manager, Senior Designer, and Marketing Manager, whereas mid-level positions encompassed Junior Designer, Fashion Stylist, Product Developer, and Marketing Executive. The sample reflected a diversity of educational and social backgrounds. Most participants held undergraduate degrees in fashion-related disciplines, with some also possessing postgraduate qualifications (e.g., MA or MBA). Marital status varied across the group—ranging from single to married, divorced, and widowed—offering rich contextual insights into how personal and professional identities intersect. To protect the confidentiality of participants, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

## 2.3 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the authors' institutional ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were fully briefed about the nature and aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any point before data anonymization, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. All interview data were anonymized, and

**TABLE 1** | Characteristics of the study sample.

| Pseudonym | Age | Exp. | Fashion sub-field          | Marital status | Education                   | Leadership exp. | Current position            | Leadership position applied for |
|-----------|-----|------|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Ayesha    | 32  | 6    | Fashion Design             | Married        | BA in Fashion Design        | No              | Junior Designer             | Design Team Lead                |
| Fatima    | 33  | 7    | Fashion Management         | Single         | MA in Fashion Management    | No              | Assistant Designer          | Design Manager                  |
| Nida      | 29  | 6    | Textile Design             | Married        | BA in Textile Design        | No              | Product Developer           | Product Developer/Team Lead     |
| Sana      | 34  | 8    | Fashion Design             | Divorced       | BA in Fashion Design        | Yes             | Assistant Creative Director | Creative Director               |
| Maria     | 35  | 9    | Fashion Merchandising      | Married        | BA in Fashion Merchandising | No              | Fashion Merchandiser        | Merchandising Department Head   |
| Sara      | 31  | 7    | Fashion Design             | Single         | BA in Fashion Design        | No              | Fashion Designer            | Senior Designer                 |
| Nazia     | 38  | 9    | Fashion Branding/Marketing | Widowed        | MBA                         | Yes             | Brand Manager               | Head of Branding                |
| Rehana    | 30  | 6    | Fashion Marketing          | Married        | BA in Fashion Design        | No              | Marketing Executive         | Department Head Marketing       |
| Bushra    | 28  | 5    | Fashion Styling            | Single         | BA in Fashion Merchandising | No              | Fashion Stylist             | Styling Team Lead               |
| Kiran     | 33  | 8    | Fashion Marketing          | Divorced       | MA in Fashion Marketing     | Yes             | Marketing Manager           | Director Marketing              |
| Sobia     | 35  | 7    | Textile Design             | Married        | BA in Fashion Design        | No              | Textile Designer            | Creative Director               |
| Amna      | 32  | 6    | Fashion Design             | Married        | BA in Fashion Design        | No              | Senior Designer             | Creative Director               |
| Uzma      | 36  | 9    | Fashion Technology         | Married        | MA in Fashion Technology    | Yes             | Design Consultant           | Lead Consultant                 |

Abbreviations: BA, bachelors; Exp., experience; MA, masters.

pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting of findings. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for the purposes of this study.

## 2.4 | Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through face to face semi-structured, in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 50–80 min. The interviews followed a flexible schedule, allowing for the natural unfolding of participants' narratives, in line with IPA's emphasis on participant-led dialog. The interview protocol began with informal rapport-building, followed by open-ended questions that prompted participants to reflect on their experiences of being rejected from leadership roles (Henriksen et al. 2022).

Key areas of exploration included the emotional and psychological impact of the rejection, the meanings attributed to the experience, and the coping strategies employed. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on broader socio-cultural dynamics and workplace structures that may have influenced their experiences. Importantly, these reflections were treated as participants' interpretations and perceptions of their organizational contexts rather than definitive accounts of structural processes.

The data were analyzed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith et al. (2021). This approach is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, aiming to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. In keeping with these philosophical underpinnings, the analysis sought to develop a rich, interpretative account of how participants experienced and interpreted leadership rejection, while attending closely to their personal contexts.

Each interview was carefully transcribed, and the analysis process began with immersive reading and re-reading of each transcript to facilitate familiarity with the narrative flow, emotional tone, and linguistic features. Initial notes were made in the margins, capturing descriptive observations (what was said), linguistic patterns (how it was said), and conceptual insights (preliminary interpretations). The coding process proceeded in a systematic, multi-stage manner. First, detailed exploratory comments were generated line-by-line. Second, these comments were condensed into emergent codes that remained closely grounded in participants' language. Third, related codes were clustered into preliminary themes within each individual case. This exploratory phase enabled the researchers to engage deeply with the text while actively bracketing personal assumptions and interpretations to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices (Baksh 2018; Chan et al. 2013).

An idiographic commitment was upheld throughout the early stages, with each case analyzed independently before any attempt at comparison. Emergent themes were developed for each transcript by synthesizing exploratory notes into concise thematic statements that captured both the essence of participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretative insights. These emergent themes were then examined for connections, with related ideas clustered into superordinate categories. This interpretative process was iterative, involving movement back

and forth between the parts of the text and the whole—a process known as the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al. 2021).

Once all individual cases were analyzed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. The goal was not to generalize, but to explore shared meanings and nuanced differences across participants' experiences. Particular attention was paid to the symbolic and emotional dimensions of the narratives, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived realities while also offering a psychologically informed interpretation, as recommended by Larkin et al. (2006). Given the idiographic nature of IPA, emphasis was placed on depth and richness of interpretation rather than breadth or representativeness.

In line with IPA's emphasis on depth, a total of 13 interviews were analyzed, which falls within the recommended range for such studies (Smith et al. 2009). Analytic adequacy was assessed through the recurrence and refinement of experiential patterns across cases. By the later interviews, no substantially new experiential themes emerged; instead, subsequent accounts elaborated and deepened existing interpretations. This was taken to indicate sufficient analytic depth and thematic completeness rather than formal saturation (Guest et al. 2006).

Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained a reflexive stance. Bracketing was not limited to the initial stages but was sustained throughout via reflective journaling and memo writing. The researchers' positionality—including familiarity with gendered organizational dynamics and cultural context—was critically examined to assess how it might shape interpretation. Reflexive memos were used to document evolving assumptions, interpretive decisions, and potential biases, thereby enhancing analytic transparency. Rather than eliminating subjectivity, reflexivity was used to make the interpretative process visible and accountable. These reflexive practices allowed the researchers to remain vigilant to the influence of personal assumptions and positionalities, ensuring that interpretations were shaped primarily by the data rather than by preconceived frameworks (Finlay 2013).

NVivo 12 software was used to support data management and facilitate systematic coding. However, manual coding remained central to the process, ensuring that the interpretative depth and subtlety characteristic of IPA were retained. Themes that were redundant or lacked conceptual clarity were reviewed and refined. To enhance transparency, themes were continuously checked against the original transcripts, ensuring a clear audit trail between raw data, codes, and final thematic structure. Interpretative claims were supported by illustrative quotations, maintaining a close connection between participants' accounts and analytic interpretations. Final themes were validated by returning to the original transcripts to ensure consistency and transparency in the analytic claims (Freeman and Sullivan 2019).

This rigorous and reflexive approach enabled the development of an interpretative narrative that was both grounded in participants' experiences and attuned to the broader contexts in which those experiences were situated. Table 2 presents the data supporting the identified themes and subthemes, whereas

**TABLE 2** | Themes and sub themes.

| Themes                                                    | Sub themes                       | Participant quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Identity crisis and self-doubt                            | Shattered confidence             | When I didn't get the position, I started questioning myself<br>Maybe I wasn't meant to be in that leadership role after all<br>It's strange how one moment of rejection can undo years of confidence<br>That one failure made me question everything I believed about my abilities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                                           | Re-evaluation of self-worth      | I thought I was prepared and ready, but the rejection made me feel like maybe I didn't have what it takes<br>After reading the email of rejection, I started to wonder if I really belonged here at all<br>I didn't expect to feel so lost. I thought I knew who I was and what I could do                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                                                           | Crisis of leadership identity    | I had always thought of myself as someone who could lead. But this experience made me wonder if I was wrong about myself<br>It's like my sense of identity and confidence as a leader just crumbled in that moment<br>I used to feel proud calling myself a leader, but now that word feels distant—almost foreign                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Rejection as a catalyst for reconstructing leadership     | Reconceptualizing leadership     | The rejection actually made me think more deeply about what leadership means<br>I now understand that leadership can be about creating positive change, regardless of whether you have a title or not<br>I used to think leadership was about being in charge, but now I see it's more about influence and impact, and YES, not being a woman<br>I don't need to wait for someone to give me permission to lead, I can create change right where I am                                                                                                                                |
|                                                           | Leadership beyond the hierarchy  | Instead of striving for that big leadership role, I started focusing on how I could lead from where I am, using my skills to inspire others around me<br>I may not sit at the head of the table, but I still lead through how I show up and support others                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                                                           | Empowerment through redefinition | Now I believe leadership isn't always about having a formal role<br>It's about who you influence and how you make others feel empowered                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Struggle with gendered expectations and internalized bias | Gendered frustration             | Every time I was passed over for a leadership role, it felt like they chose someone else just because they were a man. It's frustrating<br>It felt like no matter how much I proved myself; I was still invisible in a room full of men<br>I wasn't just overlooked—I was dismissed. As if being a woman meant I could never be “leader enough”<br>There's a silent wall that keeps rising every time I try to move forward—and it has gender written all over it<br>I felt the anger building up, but I had no space to express it. If I did, I'd be called emotional or aggressive |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

| Themes                                                        | Sub themes                        | Participant quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Coping and transformation: Finding strength through rejection | Battle with societal expectations | <p>Sometimes I felt like I was up against societal expectations of what women should do—be quiet, stay behind the scenes</p> <p>Even when I wanted to speak up, a voice inside whispered, “don’t be too loud, don’t be too much”</p> <p>It’s exhausting carrying the weight of “being a good woman” while trying to lead boldly</p> <p>There’s this constant push to shrink myself—to not intimidate, not challenge, not lead too loudly</p> <p>I often wondered: Am I leading wrong, or are they just uncomfortable seeing a woman lead differently?</p>                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                                               | Feeling of injustice              | <p>I thought I had the skills, but the rejection made me realize how much gender plays a role in these decisions. It’s like women are always expected to be less than I gave it my all, but it wasn’t enough—because I wasn’t the “right kind” of leader: I wasn’t male</p> <p>It wasn’t just disappointment—it was rage, sadness, and disbelief wrapped together</p> <p>I realized I wasn’t being judged for my work, but for my gender. That truth cut deep</p> <p>The system isn’t just biased—it’s broken. And we’re the ones bleeding from it, silently</p>                                                                                                                                            |
|                                                               | Acceptance of setbacks            | <p>The rejection wasn’t easy, but over time I realized it wasn’t personal. It was just part of the process of growth</p> <p>It hurt at first, but I began to understand that setbacks are stepping stones, not signs of failure</p> <p>Rejection was a tough pill to swallow, but I eventually learned to see it as an opportunity to reassess and improve</p> <p>I had to let go of the bitterness and accept that no path is ever without obstacles. It’s how we rise from them that counts</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                                                               | Channeling pain into motivation   | <p>At first, I felt like it was the end of the road, but then I saw it as just a detour leading me to something greater</p> <p>At first, I wanted to give up, but then I used that pain as a reason to work harder, to show that I am capable of leading.</p> <p>I was angry, hurt, and defeated—but then I realized that this pain could be the fuel that pushes me forward</p> <p>Every tear, every frustration became the spark I needed to go after my dreams with even more determination</p> <p>Rejection tried to knock me down, but it only made me more hungry to prove I could rise higher</p> <p>Instead of letting rejection define me, I decided to define myself by how I responded to it</p> |
|                                                               | Resilience through rejection      | <p>I took a step back to heal, but when I returned, I was more focused than ever on what I wanted for my future. Rejection didn’t defeat me, it transformed me</p> <p>The setback gave me the space to reflect and regroup, and now I’m stronger, more determined, and clearer about my purpose</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

| Themes | Sub themes | Participant quotes                                                                                                        |
|--------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|        |            | Rejection broke me for a moment, but it was also the very thing that forced me to rebuild myself with more strength       |
|        |            | It wasn't the rejection that mattered; it was how I chose to bounce back from it—and I came back more resilient than ever |
|        |            | After the fall, I stood taller. Rejection didn't tear me down; it gave me the courage to keep pushing forward             |

TABLE 3 | Key themes arising from participant narratives.

| Themes & codes                                                | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | P13 | SUM |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Identity crisis and self-doubt                                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |
| Shattered confidence                                          | •  |    | •  |    | •  | •  | •  |    |    |     | •   | •   |     | 7   |
| Re-evaluation of self-worth                                   | •  |    |    | •  | •  | •  | •  | •  | •  |     | •   |     | •   | 9   |
| Crisis of leadership identity                                 | •  | •  | •  |    | •  | •  | •  |    | •  | •   |     |     |     | 8   |
| Rejection as a catalyst for reconstructing leadership         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |
| Reconceptualizing leadership                                  |    | •  | •  | •  |    | •  | •  |    | •  |     | •   | •   | •   | 9   |
| Leadership beyond the hierarchy                               | •  |    | •  | •  |    | •  | •  |    |    | •   |     |     | •   | 7   |
| Empowerment through redefinition                              |    |    | •  | •  |    | •  | •  | •  |    | •   |     | •   | •   | 8   |
| Struggle with gendered expectations & internalized bias       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |
| Gendered frustration                                          |    | •  | •  | •  | •  | •  | •  |    |    | •   |     |     | •   | 8   |
| Battle with societal expectations                             |    | •  | •  |    | •  | •  |    |    |    | •   |     | •   |     | 6   |
| Feeling of injustice                                          | •  | •  | •  |    | •  | •  |    | •  | •  |     | •   |     | •   | 9   |
| Coping and transformation: Finding strength through rejection |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |
| Acceptance of setbacks                                        | •  | •  | •  | •  |    | •  |    | •  | •  |     |     | •   | •   | 9   |
| Channeling pain into motivation                               |    |    | •  | •  | •  |    |    | •  |    | •   |     | •   | •   | 7   |
| Resilience through rejection                                  | •  | •  |    |    | •  |    | •  | •  |    |     | •   |     | •   | 7   |
| SUM                                                           | 7  | 7  | 10 | 7  | 8  | 10 | 8  | 6  | 5  | 6   | 5   | 6   | 9   | 94  |

Abbreviations: P1, Ayesha; P2, Fatima; P3, Nida; P4, Sana; P5, Maria; P6, Sara; P7, Nazia; P8, Rehana; P9, Bushra; P10, Kiran; P11, Sobia; P12, Amna; P13, Uzma.

Table 3 outlines the key themes emerging from participant narratives.

### 3 | Results and Findings

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interview data revealed a complex and emotionally nuanced landscape of experiences surrounding leadership rejection. Participants shared deeply personal narratives that illuminated the psychological, social, and perceived organizational dimensions of this phenomenon. Although each participant's story was unique, patterns of meaning emerged that highlighted both individual struggles and shared experiential tendencies. In keeping with IPA's interpretative focus, the findings prioritize participants' sense-making processes rather than making definitive claims about objective organizational structures. The findings are presented thematically to honor the idiographic commitment of IPA while also offering interpretative insights into the shared essence of participants' lived experiences. Four overarching themes were identified: Identity Crisis and Self-Doubt, Rejection as a Catalyst for Reconstructing Leadership, Struggle with

Gendered Expectations and Internalised Bias, and Finding Strength Through Rejection. Each theme comprises sub-themes, supported by verbatim quotations that capture the emotional depth and meaning-making processes described by participants (see Table 2).

#### 3.1 | Identity Crisis and Self-Doubt

This overarching theme of Identity Crisis and Self-Doubt was reflected in three interrelated sub-themes: Shattered Confidence, Re-evaluation of Self-Worth, and Crisis of Leadership Identity. Rejection in leadership roles was experienced by participants as profoundly disruptive, often leading to a questioning of their capabilities and professional identity. Rather than representing an objective transformation, this disruption is interpreted here as a perceived rupture in participants' sense of self. This was not just an emotional reaction, but a profound fracture in their lived world, where a single moment shattered a previously stable sense of future. Several participants described the emotional impact of rejection as profound, often linking it to disruptions in their sense of self and leadership identity. Ayesha

(32, Junior Designer, No Leadership Experience), internalized rejection as a personal failure:

When I didn't get the position, it hit me harder than I expected. I kept replaying everything in my head—what I said in the interview, how I presented myself, even the smallest things like the tone of my voice. I started thinking, maybe I'm not leadership material. Maybe people don't see me that way, and maybe they're right. It just made me question my whole journey—like, have I been fooling myself this whole time? I always thought I had what it takes, but that one “no” made me doubt everything. It felt like I was standing at a door I thought I had the key to, only to realize the key doesn't even fit.

Her account suggests the visceral shock of the experience, a physical blow that left her mentally trapped in the past, replaying the moment of failure. Similar narratives across participants indicate that such reactions were not isolated, although they should not be read as universal. This pattern appeared more prominently among younger professionals (late 20s to early 30s) with no prior leadership experience, suggesting that lack of validation may exacerbate self-doubt. For many, rejection triggered a painful re-evaluation of self-worth, with participants reassessing their qualifications and place in the industry. Maria (35, Fashion Merchandiser, No Leadership Experience), questioned her competence:

I went in thinking, “Yeah, I've done the work, I know my stuff, I'm ready for this.” But when they turned me down, it was like the ground slipped out from under me. Suddenly, all that confidence I'd built up just crumbled. I started second-guessing everything—maybe I wasn't as good as I thought, maybe I'd just been lucky before. It's a horrible feeling, you know? To feel like you've done everything right, and still be told, “Not good enough.” It messes with your head. I even started thinking, maybe I'm just pretending to be someone I'm not ... maybe I'm not cut out for this after all.

This internalized imposter phenomenon was more commonly experienced by women in mid-level roles without leadership titles. The participants' accounts suggest that perceived structural barriers—such as limited mentorship or unclear promotion criteria—may be associated with heightened self-doubt. Even participants with prior leadership experience reported disruptions to their identity. Nazia (38, Brand Manager) described a sense of dissonance between how she saw herself and how she believed she was perceived by others.

I've always seen myself as a leader—ever since uni, people used to come to me for help, for advice. I liked being the one people could rely on. But after this, I genuinely started to doubt that image of myself. I kept

thinking, what if I've been wrong all this time? What if the way I see myself isn't how others see me? It really messed with my sense of identity. It's like... I was looking in the mirror and not recognising the person staring back. I didn't feel like the confident, capable person I thought I was. I felt small, unsure, like a part of me had been peeled away.

This reflects what can be interpreted, within an RST-informed lens, as heightened sensitivity to evaluative cues, where rejection becomes a pivotal moment shaping self-perception and identity. This also reflects a profound temporal shift, where a lifetime of self-perception was suddenly thrown into question, creating a disconnect between her past and present self. Participants recounted immediate emotional reactions to setbacks, particularly experiences of rejection, which led to a significant decline in their confidence. For some, these moments triggered a sudden unraveling of their previously held beliefs about their competence. Maria shared:

After reading the email of rejection, I started to wonder if I really belonged here at all.

This illustrates how a single moment of perceived failure initiated a spiral of self-doubt, making participants question their rightful place in their roles or institutions. Another participant (Amna) reflected,

That one failure made me question everything I believed about my abilities....

The above response highlights the fragility of confidence and how easily it could be disrupted by external validation—or lack thereof. Beyond the immediate blow to confidence, participants began to internally question their value and capability. The rejection became not just a professional setback but a personal affront to their sense of worth. Ayesha expressed:

I thought I was prepared and ready, but the rejection made me feel like maybe I didn't have what it takes.

This marks a transition from a specific event to a lingering, pervasive feeling of inadequacy that colored her entire being. This introspective turn reveals how professional experiences can catalyze a more profound existential questioning, causing participants to reevaluate not only their readiness but their intrinsic adequacy. For many participants, their identity as leaders was not only a professional role but a source of pride and personal meaning. When challenged, this identity was experienced as becoming unstable. As Kiran admitted:

I used to feel proud calling myself a leader, but now that word feels distant—almost foreign.

The physical distance she feels from the word “leader” shows how an identity once worn comfortably now feels alien and unembodied. Overall, it suggests a disconnection from the

leadership role, as participants struggle to reconcile their self-perception with the external feedback received. This reveals that leadership identity is not static but constantly negotiated, vulnerable to disruption when external validation is withheld. The existential weight of these experiences underscores a tension between participants' aspirational selves (who they believed they could be) and their rejected selves (how the system perceived them). This dissonance was particularly acute for women without leadership experience, who lacked a "counter-narrative" to affirm their potential, leaving them more susceptible to internalized inadequacy. The findings suggest that rejection operates as a critical moment of identity negotiation, where participants attempt to reconcile their self-concept with perceived external evaluations, rather than as a definitive confirmation of ability or inability.

These findings can be understood through Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey and Feldman 1996), which explains how individuals who are highly sensitive to rejection are likely to experience heightened emotional reactivity, self-doubt, and vigilance to evaluative cues. In this study, participants' narratives suggest that leadership rejection was not experienced as a neutral career event but as an emotionally intensified moment that shaped their self-perceptions and professional identity. The anticipatory and affective dimensions highlighted in RST help to illuminate how rejection was internalized and psychologically processed in ways that disrupted participants' sense of competence and belonging.

### 3.2 | Rejection as a Catalyst for Reconstructing Leadership

Rather than merely causing disillusionment, rejection served as a transformative experience for several participants. It prompted critical reflection, deeper self-awareness, and a redefinition of what leadership truly means to them. This theme—Rejection as a Catalyst for Reconstructing Leadership—emerged strongly in the narratives, illustrating a shift from traditional, hierarchical understandings of leadership to more inclusive, empowering, and self-defined models. This broader theme is supported by three interconnected sub-themes: Reconceptualizing Leadership, Leadership Beyond the Hierarchy, and Empowerment through Redefinition.

Many participants renegotiated their understanding of leadership, shifting from positional authority to relational impact. This theme illustrates post-traumatic growth, where rejection became a transformative lens for redefining success. For some, the experience led to a fundamental reconceptualization of leadership—one that moved beyond formal titles. Sana (34, Assistant Creative Director, Leadership Experience) articulated this shift:

At first, the rejection felt like a full stop. Like, that's it—dream over. But once the sting wore off, I found myself sitting with the question: "What does leadership really mean to me?" And honestly, that was the first time I'd ever really unpacked it. I used to think leadership was all about the position, the title, the

recognition. But not getting that role made me realize—it's so much more than that. It's about impact, about being someone who can spark change, even if no one calls you a "leader." That shift in thinking came slowly, but it changed everything. I started noticing how small actions—listening to someone, offering support, standing up for something—those things are leadership too.

This reinterpretation can be understood as a form of meaning-making through which participants preserve a sense of agency in the face of perceived exclusion. Her narrative suggests a journey through pain to a new, more embodied understanding, where leadership became felt in everyday actions rather than a title. This agentic reframing was most evident among mid-career professionals (30–35 years), who had enough experience to recognize systemic barriers but were not yet resigned to them. Others, like Rehana (30, Marketing Executive, No Leadership Experience), embraced "quiet leadership"—representing a pivotal temporal shift from a deferred future to an active, empowered present.

Before, I had tunnel vision—I thought I had to climb the ladder to make a difference. I was always chasing that next step, that official title. But after being rejected, I started asking myself, "What can I do right here, right now?" And that changed the game for me. I stopped waiting for someone to give me permission to lead. I began using what I had—my ability to connect with people, to motivate, to listen. I realised I could be a leader in my own space, in everyday conversations, in how I support my family.

This adaptive resilience suggests that participants may develop alternative pathways to agency when formal routes to leadership are perceived as limited. However, this form of leadership also remained largely informal and organizationally invisible, relying heavily on emotional and relational labor that was rarely accompanied by formal authority, recognition, or career progression.

For some, rejection sparked a radical reimagining of power itself. Uzma (36, Design Consultant, Leadership Experience) reframed leadership as collective empowerment rather than individual authority:

If you'd asked me a year ago, I would've said leadership means being in charge—calling the shots, making big decisions. But after everything that happened, I see it so differently now. Leadership, for me, is about presence. It's about showing up for people, about how you make them feel seen and heard. You don't need a title for that. I've started noticing the small things—like how I encourage a colleague who's struggling, or how I bring a team together during a tough project. That's leadership too. It's not flashy, but it's powerful.

Participants shared that rejection compelled them to interrogate their previously internalized notions of leadership. For many, this marked the beginning of a shift from viewing leadership as a position of authority to seeing it as a process of influence and positive change. Nida and Sobia elaborated:

The rejection actually made me think more deeply about what leadership means.

I now understand that leadership can be about creating positive change, regardless of whether you have a title or not.

These statements are pointing to a newfound appreciation for informal, everyday acts of leadership. The reframing also included a critical gendered reflection, as Bushra stated:

I used to think leadership was about being in charge, but now I see it's more about influence and impact, and YES, not being a woman.

This suggests how the rejection provoked both structural and identity-level questioning, leading to a re-evaluation of leadership free from traditional biases. This reimagining of leadership extended to a rejection of traditional hierarchies. Participants began to value the leadership they exercised in everyday contexts, independent of rank or formal designation. As Nazia and Nida shared:

Instead of striving for that big leadership role, I started focusing on how I could lead from where I am, using my skills to inspire others around me.

I may not sit at the head of the table, but I still lead through how I show up and support others.

This suggested that leadership is as much about presence and interpersonal impact as it is about status or position. Crucially, this process of redefinition was not passive—it was empowering. Participants emerged from the experience of rejection with a stronger sense of agency. Rehana said:

I don't need to wait for someone to give me permission to lead, I can create change right where I am. I believe leadership isn't always about having a formal role. It's about who you influence and how you make others feel empowered.

This newfound agency was felt as a physical and psychological liberation from waiting for a future that might never come. This evolution in thinking reflects a more relational and emotionally intelligent understanding of leadership—rooted in connection, empowerment, and authenticity.

This perspective was more common among older participants (35+), implying that repeated rejections and accumulated

experience foster a more nuanced, less ego-driven view of leadership. This theme reveals a phenomenological shift—from seeing leadership as something granted by external validation to something self-determined and enacted daily. The data suggests that rejection can serve as a critical juncture, forcing women to either conform to existing hierarchical structures or redefine leadership on their own terms. In doing so, many moved beyond traditional power dynamics, embracing influence, mentorship, and collaborative impact as equally valid—if not more meaningful—forms of leadership.

Although participants' reconceptualization of leadership reflected resilience and agency, these narratives also revealed a more ambivalent reality. Many women began valuing relational influence, emotional support, mentoring, and everyday acts of impact over formal organizational authority. Although this reframing enabled participants to preserve their professional identity and self-worth following rejection, it also raises critical questions regarding the gendered distribution of invisible labor within organizations. The forms of leadership participants embraced were often emotionally demanding, relationally intensive, and insufficiently recognized within formal organizational reward structures. In this sense, participants appeared to adapt to exclusion by redefining leadership in ways that remained psychologically meaningful, yet organizationally undervalued. This suggests that participants were not merely resisting dominant leadership norms but were simultaneously negotiating forms of professional survival within organizational contexts that continued to marginalize their aspirations for formal authority.

Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey and Feldman 1996) also offers a useful lens for understanding how initial emotional responses to rejection evolve over time. Although RST emphasizes heightened affective responses to perceived exclusion, the findings suggest that such emotional experiences may also become sites of reflection and meaning-making, enabling participants to re-evaluate their understanding of leadership. This process also reflects broader gendered organizational dynamics (Acker 1990), where limited access to formal leadership roles may encourage alternative forms of leadership identity formation.

### 3.3 | Struggle With Gendered Expectations and Internalized Bias

This theme captures the layered emotional and psychological challenges that women face as they navigate leadership in male-dominated environments. Participants described feelings of frustration not only with external gender biases but also with the internalized expectations that shaped how they saw themselves. The Struggle with Gendered Expectations, and Internalized Bias emerged across three interrelated sub-themes: Gendered Frustration—frustration participants experience because of gender-based expectations—Battle with Societal Expectations, and Feeling of Injustice.

Participants consistently described gender as a defining barrier in their leadership rejections, though their responses varied based on age, marital status, and prior leadership experience. This theme uncovers how deeply internalized biases, and societal scripts shape women's perceptions of rejection—and themselves.

For many, rejection was interpreted as systemic exclusion rather than personal failure. Fatima (33, Assistant Designer, No Leadership Experience) voiced this frustration explicitly:

It's hard to even describe the feeling. Every time I got overlooked for a leadership role, it was like this sharp sting, not just once, but twice. And what hurt most wasn't just the rejection—it was seeing someone else, usually a man, get picked instead. Sometimes it didn't even feel like it was about competence or capability—it felt like gender was quietly making those decisions. And that does something to you over time. It wears you down. You start wondering, "What's the point of pushing so hard if the game's rigged from the start?" It's mentally and emotionally exhausting, trying to prove your worth in a system that wasn't really designed to see you.

Her words describe a cumulative, embodied exhaustion, a heavy weight accumulated through repeated blows over time. It was observed that single or divorced women were more likely to see rejection as the result of unfair systems rather than their own shortcomings, possibly because they did not have the social support and respect that marriage often brings in conservative cultures, such as Pakistan (Qadir et al. 2013). It is important to note that these accounts reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations of organizational processes, rather than independently verified structural outcomes. However, these perceptions are central to understanding how rejection is experienced and psychologically processed.

Others, such as Nida (29, Product Developer, No Leadership Experience) for example, articulated the tension between being assertive and conforming to expectations of femininity.

It's like there's this unspoken playbook that nobody hands you, but somehow you're expected to follow. And the rules for women? Be agreeable. Don't speak too loud. Don't challenge the status quo. I could just feel it in meetings—when I spoke up, there'd be a pause, a look, like I'd crossed some invisible line. I wasn't being rude or out of place; I was just being assertive. But even that felt like too much. You start to internalize it. You think, "Maybe I should tone it down, maybe I'm being too much." And then you get caught in this tug-of-war with yourself—trying to be authentic, while also trying to be what they expect.

This suggests that leadership behaviors itself are subject to gendered scrutiny. These experiences may be interpreted as reflecting broader gendered norms that shape participants' self-perceptions and behaviors, consistent with feminist organizational scholarship on role incongruity and gendered expectations. This tension between personal aspiration and gendered conditioning was especially pronounced among younger women (late 20s to early 30s), suggesting that early-career professionals face heightened pressure to conform to traditional norms. However,

for women with more experience—particularly those who had already held leadership roles—rejection often crystallized into a sharper critique of systemic inequity. Nazia (38, Brand Manager, Leadership Experience) articulated this disillusionment:

I used to believe that if I just worked hard enough, stayed competent, stayed focused—merit would do the talking. That the right people would notice. But after the rejection, something clicked. I realised it's not always about what you bring to the table; it's about who they expect to be sitting at the head of it. And more often than not, that image doesn't look like me. It made me see things differently—not just the system, but how deeply it's shaped my own thinking too. For so long, I tried to fit into a mold that wasn't made for me. And now I'm starting to question why I ever thought I had to.

This "click" marks a pivotal moment of rupture in her worldview, a sudden and stark realization that altered her understanding of her entire career journey. This understanding was more common among widowed or divorced women and those in senior roles, suggesting that facing repeated unfair treatment, along with more experience, helped them see the system's barriers to leadership more clearly. Participants repeatedly expressed frustration at being overlooked, dismissed, or undervalued in professional settings—experiences that were often linked explicitly to their gender. Fatima stated:

Every time I was passed over for a leadership role, it felt like they chose someone else just because they were a man. It's frustrating. It felt like no matter how much I proved myself; I was still invisible in a room full of men.

These reflections reveal how women internalized exclusion not as individual failure but as systemic gender-based disregard. The pain deepened with the recognition that their womanhood itself was perceived as disqualifying:

I wasn't just overlooked—I was dismissed. As if being a woman meant I could never be "leader enough."

The emotional burden was further compounded by the pressure to suppress valid anger, as Sara explained:

I felt the anger building up, but I had no space to express it. If I did, I'd be called emotional or aggressive.

The "silent wall" described by another participant:

There's a silent wall that keeps rising every time I try to move forward—and it has gender written all over it.

Such narratives indicate how gender operates not only as an external constraint but also as an internalized framework that

shapes how participants interpret and respond to professional experiences. The “silent wall” reflects how participants made sense of barriers encountered within their professional journeys. This suggests that gender was experienced not only through organizational practices but also through participants’ perceptions of how they were expected to behave in leadership settings. In addition to institutional exclusion, women grappled with ingrained cultural narratives about how women should behave. The participants described feeling pressure that led them to self-censor. As Amna said:

Sometimes I felt like I was up against societal expectations of what women should do—be quiet, stay behind the scenes. Even when I wanted to speak up, a voice inside whispered, “don’t be too loud, don’t be too much.”

This internal whisper represents the constant, lived reality of an internalized censor, shaping her actions from within. This struggle was not only external but also internalized, as reflected in the statement. The internal conflict between the desire to lead authentically and the pressure to conform was described as exhausting. Furthermore, participants described a persistent need to downplay their strength and authority to avoid social penalty.

It’s exhausting carrying the weight of “being a good woman” while trying to lead boldly.

There’s this constant push to shrink myself—to not intimidate, not challenge, not lead too loudly.

The language of “carrying a weight” and “shrinking” is intensely physical, describing the chronic, embodied toll of this conflict. As several participants revealed:

I thought I had the skills, but the rejection made me realize how much gender plays a role in these decisions. It’s like women are always expected to be less than.

I gave it my all, but it wasn’t enough—because I wasn’t the “right kind” of leader: I wasn’t male.

I realized I wasn’t being judged for my work, but for my gender. That truth cut deep.

The system isn’t just biased—it’s broken. And we’re the ones bleeding from it, silently.

The word “cut” and the image of “bleeding silently” convey the sharp, visceral pain and the hidden, ongoing suffering inflicted by these experiences. The data reveals a spectrum of responses, from resignation to resistance. Although some women internalized gendered constraints—diminishing their own ambitions

to align with societal expectations—others developed a critical consciousness that reframed rejection as a symptom of broader inequity. This awareness often became a turning point, influencing whether participants disengaged from traditional hierarchies or sought alternative, self-defined paths to leadership. Ultimately, the theme underscores how gender operates as both an external barrier and an internalized narrative, shaping not just opportunities but women’s very interpretations of their own potential. Although these interpretations cannot be taken as direct evidence of discriminatory decision-making, they nonetheless demonstrate how participants make sense of their experiences within a broader context of perceived gender inequality.

From a Rejection Sensitivity Theory perspective (Downey and Feldman 1996), participants’ accounts demonstrate how repeated experiences of exclusion and evaluative pressure may contribute to heightened sensitivity to gendered feedback in organizational settings. The emotional anticipation of rejection, combined with lived experiences of marginalization, shaped how participants interpreted leadership environments and their own positioning within them.

### 3.4 | Coping and Transformation: Finding Strength Through Rejection

This theme captures the process through which participants moved from emotional struggle to personal growth after experiencing rejection in their leadership journey. The narratives reveal how rejection, though initially painful, eventually became a catalyst for resilience, clarity, and self-empowerment. Three distinct but interrelated sub-themes emerged: Acceptance of Setbacks, Channeling Pain into Motivation, and Resilience through Rejection.

This theme reveals how participants processed professional disappointment into personal and professional growth, demonstrating remarkable psychological agility in reframing setbacks as opportunities. For some, the path forward began with acceptance—a cognitive reframing of rejection as an inevitable part of professional development rather than a personal indictment. Rehana (30, Marketing Executive, No Leadership Experience) exemplified this adaptive perspective:

At the time, the rejection felt personal—really personal. I kept thinking, “What did I do wrong?” I went over every detail, trying to figure it out. But after some time, I started to see it differently. It wasn’t necessarily about me, or my abilities. It was just a part of the process—a painful part, yes—but one that had something to teach me. Growth isn’t always pretty or comfortable, and this was one of those moments where I had to sit with the discomfort and ask myself what I could take from it. In hindsight, I can honestly say it made me stronger. It taught me how to detach my self-worth from someone else’s decision.

Her account charts a temporal path from an immediate, personal wound to a later, more philosophical understanding, a journey of

making sense of the pain. This mindset was particularly common among women with 5–7 years of experience, suggesting that early-career setbacks, when properly contextualized, can serve as foundational resilience-building moments. Others channeled their pain into defiant motivation, using rejection as fuel for self-improvement. Uzma (36, Design Consultant, Leadership Experience) captured this transformative energy:

Right after it happened, I was done—I wanted to walk away from it all. I felt so defeated, like what's the point of trying when your efforts aren't even recognised? But after a few days of feeling sorry for myself, something shifted. That frustration turned into fuel. I said to myself, "Okay, fine. You didn't think I was good enough? Watch me." It wasn't about proving it to them anymore—it became about proving it to me. A friend was really helpful at that time.

This "shift" marks a critical turning point, a moment where the embodied energy of frustration was consciously redirected into determined action. This combative resilience appeared strongest in creative fields such as design, where struggle is often romanticized as part of the artistic journey. The most profound transformations occurred when participants emerged from rejection with renewed clarity and purpose. Amna (32, Senior Designer, Leadership Experience) articulated this evolution:

I gave myself space to feel it all—hurt, disappointment, anger. I didn't rush back into things because I knew I needed time to heal properly. And I'm so glad I did. When I came back, it wasn't just with more energy, but with a completely new perspective. The rejection didn't crush me like I thought it would—it reshaped me. It stripped away all the noise and helped me reconnect with what I actually wanted, what kind of leader I wanted to be, and what I stood for. I think, in a weird way, I needed that setback to realign myself. Now, I don't see rejection as failure anymore—I see it as a redirection.

Participants described their journey by acknowledging the emotional impact of rejection, but over time they reframed it as part of a larger developmental process. However, these narratives of resilience should be interpreted carefully. Although participants describe growth and transformation, these outcomes occur within a broader context where structural barriers may persist. Thus, resilience reflects not only individual strength but also the necessity of adapting to constrained opportunities. Maria reflected:

The rejection wasn't easy, but over time I realized it wasn't personal. It was just part of the process of growth.

Rather than interpreting failure as a final judgment of their worth, they began to see setbacks as a natural and even necessary part of leadership evolution, as Maria and Uzma said:

It hurt at first, but I began to understand that setbacks are stepping stones, not signs of failure.

At first, I felt like it was the end of the road, but then I saw it as just a detour leading me to something greater.

These reflections reflect a deepening maturity and a willingness to let go of self-blame. Once rejection was accepted, many participants found themselves transformed by the emotional energy it initially provoked. Pain, anger, and disappointment were repurposed as fuel for action. Kiran, for example, explained how she channeled her frustration into working harder to demonstrate her capability:

At first, I wanted to give up, but then I used that pain as a reason to work harder, to show that I am capable of leading.

Such responses reflect adaptive coping strategies that allow participants to maintain engagement with their professional trajectories despite setbacks. This illustrates a shift from vulnerability to agency, wherein negative emotions became a source of strength. This theme is further echoed in statements by other respondents such as:

Every tear, every frustration became the spark I needed to go after my dreams with even more determination.

Instead of letting rejection define me, I decided to define myself by how I responded to it.

These statements reveal an embodied transformation, where the physical expression of pain (tears) was transformed into a driving energy (spark).

Finally, participants described how the experience of rejection not only strengthened their resolve but fundamentally transformed their outlook. The act of "bouncing back" was not just about recovery—it was about becoming more focused, clear, and self-assured. As one woman stated:

I took a step back to heal, but when I returned, I was more focused than ever on what I wanted for my future. As I have read in a book...Rejection didn't defeat me, it transformed me.

The setback gave me the space to reflect and regroup, and now I'm stronger, more determined, and clearer about my purpose.

This process of "healing" and "coming back" shows a meaningful journey, where taking time away helped them return stronger and more focused. This post-traumatic growth was

most evident among women with prior leadership experience, suggesting that past successes may provide a psychological foundation that buffers against total self-doubt while allowing for constructive self-reflection. The coping spectrum revealed in these narratives ranges from adaptive acceptance to defiant reinvention, challenging the notion of resilience as an innate trait. Instead, the data suggests professional identity is forged through iterative struggles—each rejection serving as raw material for self-redefinition. Crucially, the transformation process wasn't linear; it involved periods of withdrawal, recalibration, and ultimately, a reclamation of agency. This theme highlights rejection's paradoxical power to both destabilize and reconstruct professional self-concepts, with the potential to ultimately strengthen leadership capacity through tested perseverance. Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey and Feldman 1996) provides a useful lens for interpreting the initial emotional intensity of leadership rejection described by participants. However, the findings also suggest that emotional responses associated with rejection sensitivity do not remain fixed; instead, they may evolve into processes of cognitive reappraisal and identity reconstruction over time.

Participants' narratives indicate that whereas rejection was initially experienced as emotionally destabilizing, it was later reinterpreted in more agentic ways, enabling forms of resilience and self-defined leadership identity. These processes also reflect the influence of gendered organizational conditions (Acker 1990), which shape the available pathways for recognition, recovery, and professional reinvention.

### 3.5 | Contextual Narratives of Leadership Rejection Experience

The analysis reveals distinct patterns in how participants experienced and processed leadership rejection, with contextual factors such as career stage, marital status, and prior leadership experience shaping their responses. Although all participants shared certain core reactions, meaningful differences emerged when examining demographic and professional backgrounds. Recognizing the socio-contextual distinctions is important in qualitative research, as experiences are embedded within broader social structures and identity positions that influence meaning-making (Smith et al. 2009; Braun and Clarke 2022). Examining these clusters therefore helps illuminate how personal interpretations of rejection are shaped by participants' intersecting social and professional contexts. These variations allow us to group participants into four key clusters, each with shared narratives and coping trajectories.

Ayesha, Nida, and Rehana—all married designers in their early 30s with approximately 6 years of experience—formed a cluster characterized by profound self-doubt and limited transformational responses. Despite their technical training in fashion or textile design, none had prior leadership experience, and their narratives revealed intense identity crises following rejection. All three described shattered confidence, and two of the three engaged in significant revaluation of self-worth. Notably, none had yet moved into creating new opportunities post-rejection, suggesting that without institutional support or mentorship, early-career professionals may remain stuck in the initial phases of rejection recovery. Their marital status

appeared to provide some emotional buffer against gendered frustration (only Nida reported strong battles with societal expectations), but it did not prevent the destabilizing effects of professional rejection on their emerging professional identities.

Fatima, Bushra, and Sara—single women in their late 20s to early 30s—shared a heightened sensitivity to gendered barriers in their rejection experiences. All three reported strong feelings of gendered frustration, and two described intense struggles with societal expectations that clashed with their professional ambitions. Unlike their married peers, these participants lacked the perceived social validation that marriage might provide in Pakistan's conservative professional culture (Shaheed 2010). Their coping mechanisms varied widely, from channeling pain into motivation (Bushra) to emotional withdrawal (Sara), suggesting that whereas single status heightened their awareness of structural inequities, it did not necessarily lead to uniform resilience strategies.

The most striking cluster consisted of Sana, Nazia, Kiran, and Uzma—all women with prior leadership experience, advanced education (three held master's degrees), and eight or more years in the industry. Their narratives stood out for their depth of post-rejection transformation. Unlike less experienced participants, these women universally reconceptualized leadership, moving beyond hierarchical definitions toward more fluid, impact-driven models. Notably, all widowed or divorced participants fell into this group, suggesting that personal life crises may compound professional rejection but ultimately contribute to greater resilience. Nazia and Uzma, for instance, articulated sophisticated critiques of systemic bias while also developing alternative leadership pathways, demonstrating how advanced career stages enable both structural analysis and adaptive reinvention.

Maria, Sobia, and Amna—married professionals in their mid-30s without formal leadership roles—exhibited a middle-ground response to rejection. Although they reported moderate levels of gendered frustration, their narratives emphasized channeling pain into motivation, with all three describing renewed determination to prove their capabilities. Maria, a merchandiser, showed less leadership reconceptualization than Sobia and Amna (both designers), hinting at potential field-specific differences in how rejection is processed. Their marital stability may have provided emotional resources that supported resilience without fully insulating them from gendered barriers.

These patterns show that women's responses to leadership rejection are closely tied to their social and professional positions. The findings indicate that women's coping responses vary according to both professional and personal contexts. Early-career designers sought guidance and reassurance, highlighting the need for mentorship within their organizations. Single mid-career professionals valued peer dialog and collective reflection as means of making sense of systemic inequities. Among experienced participants, rejection often became a source of creative renewal when workplaces allowed autonomy to reinterpret leadership on their own terms. Ultimately, the study underscores that whereas rejection is a near-universal experience for women in fashion leadership, its long-term

impact depends heavily on the interplay of personal resilience, professional stage, and social context.

## 4 | Discussion

Drawing on Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Downey and Feldman 1996), the study examines the lived experiences of women in the fashion industry who perceive being rejected from leadership positions due to discrimination. The findings do not claim that rejection was always objectively caused by discrimination; rather, they foreground how participants subjectively understood and made sense of exclusion within broader gendered organizational structures.

According to Rejection Sensitivity Theory (Feldman and Downey 1994; Downey and Feldman 1996), individuals with high rejection sensitivity are predisposed to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to social rejection, which can impair self-concept and performance. Much of the existing literature, however, has predominantly focused on the maladaptive consequences of rejection sensitivity—such as increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and withdrawal behaviors (Romero-Canyas et al. 2010; London et al. 2007)—thus offering a rather one-dimensional view of rejection outcomes. A major contribution of our findings is the expansion of this perspective by illustrating that rejection, particularly when experienced in the context of gender-based discrimination, can also catalyze positive psychological and behavioral transformations. The findings of our study not only reflect the emotional toll of leadership rejection but also underscore women's capacity for resilience, reframing, and growth. Our findings align with scholarship that positions rejection and adversity as potential triggers for empowerment, redefinition of self-concept, and motivation to challenge systemic inequalities (Ayduk et al. 2008; Williams 2020).

The findings demonstrate that leadership rejection is not only an organizational outcome but also an emotionally charged experience that shapes how women interpret and reconstruct their leadership identities. In line with rejection sensitivity theory (Downey and Feldman 1996), participants initially experienced rejection as deeply affective, often interpreting it through heightened emotional awareness that intensified feelings of exclusion, self-doubt, and diminished professional legitimacy. However, the study shows that these responses were not fixed or solely maladaptive. Instead, over time, women engaged in active meaning-making processes that allowed them to reinterpret rejection and gradually rebuild a coherent sense of professional identity.

Importantly, this psychological and emotional processing became a catalyst for rethinking leadership itself. As participants worked through the affective impact of rejection, they began to decouple leadership from formal positions and hierarchical advancement, instead valuing relational influence, emotional support, and everyday acts of impact. This shift illustrates how rejection sensitivity does not simply lead to withdrawal or defensive behavior, but can also trigger identity transformation and alternative constructions of leadership (Ibarra 1999; Hochschild 1983). In doing so, participants developed a redefined sense of leadership that subtly challenges narrow, male-dominated conceptions of leadership and success within the

fashion industry, while simultaneously highlighting the complex interplay between emotional experience and identity reconstruction in shaping women's leadership trajectories.

Our findings further illuminate the paradox of gendered labor within Pakistan's fashion industry, where women's centrality is simultaneously empowering and exploitative. The data reveal that although women constitute the backbone of the sector—particularly in garment and textile production—their roles remain concentrated in low-skilled, repetitive tasks that demand patience, dexterity, and docility, qualities culturally framed as feminine (Zahid and Kamarudin 2019). This feminized positioning sustains the creative and production machinery of fashion, yet it confines women to the margins of organizational leadership, as men predominantly occupy leadership roles (Ayaz et al. 2019). Within this structural arrangement, women's indispensability coexists with their undervaluation: they are visible as producers of esthetic and affective labor but remain invisible as potential leaders. This contradiction contextualizes the emotional and cognitive dimensions of leadership rejection identified in our analysis, showing how systemic gendered hierarchies amplify women's sensitivity to exclusion while simultaneously normalizing their compliance. Although participants' reconceptualization of leadership reflects resilience and agency, it also reveals an important ambivalence. The forms of leadership that participants increasingly came to value—mentoring, emotional support, relational influence, and everyday acts of impact—are often feminized, informal, and insufficiently recognized within formal organizational reward structures (Acker 1990; Gill and Orgad 2018). In this sense, the shift from formal to informal leadership may simultaneously function as both empowerment and constraint.

Rather than indicating a straightforward transformation of organizational power relations, this redefinition may reflect an adaptive response to exclusion, where leadership is relocated into domains that lack formal authority, visibility, and material reward. This raises a critical question for gender and organization scholarship: *does redefining leadership challenge dominant power structures, or does it risk accommodating exclusion by offering symbolic recognition in place of structural change?* By foregrounding this tension, the study highlights that participants' experiences of empowerment coexist with enduring structural inequalities, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of leadership as both identity work and situated negotiation within gendered organizational contexts.

This study also reveals that leadership rejection experiences are not monolithic. The cluster patterns highlight how women's meaning-making varies by marital status, career stage, and leadership experience. For instance, early-career married women exhibited prolonged self-doubt with limited transformation, whereas participants with leadership experience demonstrated pronounced post-rejection growth. These distinctions affirm that leadership rejection is experienced by women's social positioning within patriarchal and professional hierarchies. This nuanced insight deepens the theoretical value of Rejection Sensitivity Theory by situating it within a socio-cultural and life-course context rather than treating it as a fixed individual trait.

Early-career participants expressed strong emotional responses to rejection, often perceiving it as a validation of their inadequacy on imposter phenomenon, especially among women in male-dominated environments (Zanchetta et al. 2020). This vulnerability is further amplified in fields such as fashion, where competition, esthetic judgment, and informal networks create additional stressors for women (J. Entwistle and Wisinger 2006). In contrast, participants with substantial leadership experience exhibited lower rejection sensitivity. Rather than internalizing rejection, they attributed it to structural bias and gatekeeping. This aligns with Ibarra et al.'s (2013) findings that professional resilience is often developed through repeated encounters with exclusion and resistance. Compared to prior studies that frame rejection in individualistic or meritocratic terms (e.g., Ely et al. 2011), our participants' narratives foreground structural critique and collective awareness, especially among senior women.

These findings suggest that women's experiences of rejection cannot be disentangled from the broader gendered economy of fashion—one that rewards female labor at the base while restricting authority at the top. Our findings further suggest that rejection sensitivity functions as an indicator of career persistence, particularly in hierarchical and image-centric industries such as fashion. Although early-career women may benefit from confidence-building interventions and targeted mentorship programs, senior women—who possess structural awareness and advocacy potential—should be empowered to participate in change leadership (Kalev et al. 2006). Hence, rejection sensitivity in gendered contexts evolves dynamically, contingent upon socio-emotional capital and organizational recognition rather than stable personality predispositions.

Although prior research has robustly documented the “glass ceiling” (Cotter et al. 2001) and the underrepresentation of women in leadership (Eagly and Carli 2007), much of this literature tends to homogenize women's experiences or locate the barriers primarily within institutional structures. Our findings extend this literature by foregrounding the psychological and narrative dimensions of rejection as experienced in a hyper-visible industry such as fashion. In this context, women's pivotal yet precarious roles at the production level illuminate how economic dependence and social expectations sustain gendered hierarchies—rendering leadership rejection not merely a professional exclusion but a continuation of structural subordination. In contrast to earlier work that often emphasized either structural exclusion or individual-level shortcomings, this study presents a more dynamic interplay: women simultaneously navigate internalized self-doubt and externalized critique, with shifting balances depending on career stage, social identity, and prior experience. This hybrid perspective nuances existing theories of workplace discrimination and contributes to a more embodied understanding of rejection, resistance, and identity reconstruction.

#### 4.1 | Contributions to Theory

This study advances theoretical and empirical understanding through four key contributions. First, it extends the application of Rejection Sensitivity Theory (RST) beyond interpersonal and educational contexts (Romero-Canyas et al. 2010; London

et al. 2007) into the realm of careers and organizational life. Drawing on qualitative evidence from Pakistan's fashion industry—an underexplored context—the study demonstrates how women narrate and interpret leadership rejection through a Rejection Sensitivity lens. This culturally grounded analysis provides novel empirical insights, where women's leadership trajectories and experiences of rejection remain underrepresented in mainstream organizational scholarship. By situating psychological mechanisms such as rejection sensitivity within the socio-cultural realities of a patriarchal labor market, the study advances a more contextually situated and globally inclusive understanding of women's leadership exclusion. Second, the study refines RST by revealing its interaction with feminist and career development theories. Cluster analysis demonstrates that women's experiences of leadership rejection differ according to marital status, career stage, and prior leadership exposure. These findings challenge universalist assumptions about gendered leadership trajectories and theorize rejection as a dynamic identity process that varies across social positions. By identifying how socio-emotional capital and institutional support influence the internalization or externalization of rejection, the study extends RST toward a relational and intersectional model of sensitivity. Third, the study integrates RST with feminist leadership theory by showing how women transform the emotional energy of leadership rejection into alternative, relational forms of leadership. This theoretical synthesis advances the notion of leadership as identity work, whereby women reconfigure self-concept and agency through resilience and informal influence rather than positional authority. In doing so, the study broadens leadership theory to include emotionally informed and socially situated acts of leading, challenging the masculine and hierarchical assumptions that dominate organizational discourse (Eagly and Carli 2007; Badaracco 2002). Fourth, the study contributes to gender and leadership scholarship by highlighting the ambivalent nature of leadership redefinition. Although participants described alternative, relational forms of leadership as empowering, these practices also reflect forms of emotional and relational labor that are often feminized, undervalued, and insufficiently recognized within formal organizational structures (Eagly and Carli 2007; Acker 1990; Gill and Orgad 2018). This reveals that leadership redefinition may simultaneously represent both agency and adaptation, contributing to ongoing debates about whether such shifts challenge or reproduce existing gendered power relations. The study therefore contributes to emerging discussions on how women negotiate and reconstruct leadership identities following experiences of exclusion and rejection, particularly within creative industries and non-Western contexts.

#### 4.2 | Practical Implications

The research yields several actionable insights for organizational practice and policy development in the fashion industry and related creative sectors. The study highlights the importance of formal mentorship schemes as a buffer against the internalization of rejection, particularly among early-career women. Structured mentorship can play a crucial role in building self-efficacy and challenging internalized doubt, especially in organizational cultures where gatekeeping and informal exclusion are prevalent (Kalev et al. 2006). Moreover, a

key finding was that perceived ambiguity in promotion processes amplified rejection sensitivity and undermined trust in institutional fairness. Establishing transparent, criteria-based promotion systems can help mitigate these effects by reducing the space for perceived bias and discrimination (Castilla 2008). Additionally, recognizing and rewarding non-hierarchical forms of leadership—such as coaching, advocacy, or team facilitation—can validate diverse expressions of leadership and ensure broader inclusion. This approach is particularly relevant for those who redefine leadership on their own terms, outside conventional positional hierarchies. Finally, the study emphasizes the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all gender diversity training. Instead, organizations must adopt diversified strategies that acknowledge how gender interacts with marital status, and career stage to shape women's experiences of rejection and advancement barriers. Tailored training programs can foster more inclusive and context-sensitive organizational cultures.

### 4.3 | Limitations and Future Research

This study offers important insights into the gendered dynamics of professional rejection and leadership aspirations, but several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was skewed toward mid-career professionals, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings across the career spectrum. The voices of early-career and late-career women were comparatively underrepresented, which may have excluded distinct patterns in how rejection is perceived and processed at different career stages. Second, the research was situated within a single regional fashion industry context, which, although rich in depth, restricts the cultural generalizability of the findings. Broader, cross-cultural comparisons are needed to assess how leadership rejection and leadership redefinition manifest across different socio-cultural and industrial environments. Third, the study relied on cross-sectional qualitative data. The absence of longitudinal data limits our ability to trace how experiences of rejection evolve over time or how initial responses translate into long-term career outcomes. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal approach to capture the temporal dynamics of rejection, resilience, and leadership identity development.

## 5 | Conclusion

This study repositions leadership rejection as more than a professional setback—it is a deeply transformative experience that reshapes women's sense of self, ambition, and relationship with leadership. In the context of Pakistan's fashion industry, rejection prompted not just emotional distress but critical reflection, leading many women to challenge dominant leadership ideals and reconstruct their professional identities. Rather than simply withdrawing, women responded in varied and complex ways—some internalized the rejection, whereas others used it as a catalyst to redefine leadership on their own terms. These responses were shaped by intersecting factors such as marital status, experience and career stage, revealing how rejection is not a uniform experience but one filtered through broader social and institutional dynamics. Crucially, the study highlights how women found new forms of influence outside traditional hierarchies. By embracing leadership as collaboration, mentorship, and creative impact, they disrupted narrow definitions of leadership and success. This shows that rejection can serve not only

as a point of exclusion but also as a site of growth, resistance, and reimagined leadership. Although grounded in the fashion industry, the findings speak to wider patterns across gendered workplaces, offering valuable insights for organizations seeking to build more inclusive cultures. Recognizing and supporting alternative leadership pathways is key to transforming rejection from a barrier into an opportunity for change.

### Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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