

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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Women Adapting to an Environment They Did Not Build

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INTRODUCTION

Before attending this workshop, I always wondered why the numbers are not always balancing with women in leadership positions? And even if there continue to be efforts to uplift and empower women in those positions, the stats just never measure up. Why is that so?

Entering spaces that were not designed with us in mind has always been part of the story of women in leadership. Attending the Women in Leadership – ProInter 2025 seminar made this a very clear reality for me in a deeply personal way. With such great concepts covered, from gender equality, diversity, inclusion, even economics of gender (I never knew there was such a concept), I found myself reflecting on how we, as women, continue to navigate systems that were constructed long before we arrived, and long before our voices were ever considered.

One of the most striking concepts presented during the seminar by Gisèle Szczyglak, depicted society as an “animal park,” with women being asked to stay within its “social park.” She further went on with the presentation to say: “Women are still perceived as subversive because they keep questioning the system”. This was an eye opener for me and spoke to a greater truth; the workplace is not neutral place. It is an inherited architecture/well-crafted system built on centuries of male norms, expectations and gatekeeping (success recipes).

In this well-crafted system,

- Leadership is often equated with dominance rather than collaboration.
- Confidence is interpreted as assertiveness rather than competence.
- Gendered experiences that deeply influence women’s career journeys often missed under professional neutrality.

The pressure to adapt to this system is very exhausting. Not only must we excel in our roles, but must continuously interpret and negotiate environments that were not designed with our needs, safety, or lived realities in mind. We inherit cultures and norms shaped by men, for men and entering these spaces we must adapt quickly, learning the unspoken rules while carrying the burden of representation.

Women adapting to these environments goes beyond learning technical skills or understanding organisational processes; it often involves navigating those systematic norms (unspoken rules of trade, invisible barriers, stereotypes, and biases). Many of my fellow participants in the seminar, in their introductions and expectations of the programme, spoke about:

- balancing professional and domestic responsibilities
- overcoming imposter syndrome,
- navigating male-dominated spaces,
- the pressure to work twice as hard for the same recognition

We all wanted to understand not only our own challenges but also the experiences of women from different countries, backgrounds, and professional environments they work in. These are not hypothetical scenarios/concepts. They are actual representation of how women feel in the workplace. Emotional labour becomes an unspoken requirement; managing perceptions, managing biases, managing oneself. It becomes even greatly amplified when looking at leadership roles. As women leaders, we often carry the weight of being the “first,” or “only,” or “one of few” in strategic leadership positions. This is true in my own career: leading multi-country programmes at the African Professionalisation Initiative (API), finding myself often in spaces populated by senior men in government/professional accountancy organisations (PAO) leadership calls for continuous self-fine-tuning. I must bring technical credibility, strategic insight, and cultural sensitivity, while also ensuring that I am not dismissed, underestimated, or sidelined.

The responsibility for inclusion does not and should not rest on women alone. It is a systemic responsibility. Yet, women often become the carriers of this responsibility by default. We become the champions of equity, the voices raising concerns, the ones calling for representation. In doing so, we are simultaneously advocating for spaces to be more inclusive and adapting to spaces that resist inclusivity. Reflecting on the DEI session led by Sanet Fourie, she introduced the “four C’s” of inclusive leadership: courage, curiosity, cognizance of bias, and cultural intelligence, essential tools for transforming environments women did not build. On a personal level, these meant for me (and other women) that we can adapt without losing ourselves, challenge without being dismissed, lead without replicating harmful norms and build workplaces where future women will not have to “fit in,” but will belong from the start.

UNDP, in their programs, speak about gender mainstreaming. These are initiatives in place to help institutions become more inclusive and intentional about reversing norms coming from historic perspectives. The transformation has to begin at institutional levels, not individual women constantly moulding themselves to fit the systems. UNDP reminded us that “no policy is gender-neutral”. The same can be said of workplaces we find ourselves in: no organisational culture is gender-neutral. They went further to speaking about reframing the gender agenda (introducing the term Equanomics). This was very transformative for me. It resonated deeply with my professional background in the public sector.

Equanomics insists that:

- Gender equality is good economics.
- Gender policies drive productivity, innovation, and system resilience.

- Institutions that ignore gender disparities pay an economic price through lost talent, disengagement, and inefficiencies.

This reframing is powerful because it moves the conversation away from doing the right thing to “doing the smart thing.” For too long, gender initiatives have been dismissed as overly emotional, or driven by personal beliefs, when in fact, they are central to workforce performance, national development and fiscal sustainability.

For me, working in professionalisation across Africa, Equanomics provides a practical framework to integrate gender considerations into public sector skills development and professionalisation programmes. If gender equality strengthens institutions, and institutions strengthen service delivery, then gender equality is not optional, or a social issue. It is strategic and a priority.

This shift in framing also reduces the pressure on women to “adapt” to the system. Instead, it pushes institutions to adapt themselves to realities that promote inclusion, fairness, and efficiency.

One of my personal expectations entering this seminar was to learn how to build and sustain confidence as a woman leader. Confidence is not a static trait; it is shaped by context. Women operating in environments built by and for men often experience loss of confidence, not because of capability, but because of structural constraints like:

- limited mentorship (the few women occupying strategic leadership roles are already overloaded with the dual responsibility to lift another through mentoring and creating spaces while performing their roles),
- exclusion from informal networks (including those subtle, relationship-building spaces such as weekend golf meet-ups, private dinners/drinks meet-ups, and exclusive circles where real decisions and alliances are often formed),
- trapped in operational excellence (where women become the dependable executors but are overlooked for strategic roles because the system benefits from keeping them in “safe,” high-performance operational spaces),
- the pressure of scrutiny and tokenism (one woman’s performance is treated as the verdict on all women, amplifying fear of mistakes and heightening the emotional labour of representation)

These realities eat away on self-belief not because we lack the competence to lead, but because the system repeatedly signals that we must prove ourselves in ways our male counterparts are never asked to. Many of my fellow participants in the seminar shared similar experiences, despite coming from different countries, cultures, and professional backgrounds. Confidence, therefore, is not just personal; it is political. It is shaped by where we stand, who stands with us, and whether the system acknowledges our standing. We have to assess and extend our circle of influence to

see an impact. We will not always be able to blame the system if we are not proactive about seeing this transformation through.

Another phrase that stood out during the sessions for me was “I am a rebel, but I do it with class”. This phrase stayed with me throughout the seminar. It captures the paradox of women challenging the system: we are expected to disrupt inequity gently, to challenge constructively but not too loudly, to resist while remaining “pleasant,” to lead boldly but never appear threatening.

Women often walk a tightrope:

- If we speak too softly, we are overlooked.
- If we speak too firmly, we are labelled aggressive.
- If we assert boundaries, we are difficult.
- If we accommodate too much, we are weak

In essence, women leaders are expected to be revolutionary, but in a way that does not make anyone uncomfortable. This “rebellion with class” expectation forces women into a perpetual balancing act, performing professionalism within narrow boundaries set by others. It reminded me of my earliest years in audit at the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), where I quickly learned that technical competence alone was not enough. In meetings where you try to show how technically strong you are and how you are getting the team to do work and not only do it but perfectly; it is not always met with the right recognition or display leadership traits. One had to master diplomacy, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation far more than male peers ever needed to. It is a lived example of adapting to a world built by others, yet being judged by standards that shift depending on who is observing.

Perhaps the most important insight is that adaptation alone is no longer enough. The future of women’s leadership lies not in continuously adjusting ourselves to inherited environments, but in taking an active role in redesigning them. Giselle described leadership as a movement from within and those around us, highlighting the importance therefore of connecting and activating that energy, necessary to reshape our environments.

We must shift from:

- fitting in to standing out,
- coping to shaping,
- surviving systems to transforming systems.

In my work at API, this is a powerful insight to tap into time and again. Professionalisation programmes, when designed without a gender lens, risk reinforcing existing inequalities. But when gender is intentionally integrated through

curriculum design, leadership development and stakeholder engagement, the system itself shifts. Women leaders bring different perspectives because we have lived different realities. And those realities are necessary for building public finance systems that are equitable, effective, and people-centred.

CONCLUSION

This seminar has been more than a training; it has been a mirror. It forced me to see the systems around me, the systems within me, and the systems I am helping to build. Women adapting to an environment they did not build is a story of resilience, intelligence, and passion. But it must also become a story of transformation. As more women rise, we are not matching old norms, we are redefining them.

Women have long been viewed as rebels for questioning systems and status quo. But perhaps rebellion is not a threat to the system; it is the beginning of its renewal. And if we must rebel, we will as the slide says with class.

I have always carried with me the awareness that the structures we serve have real consequences on people's lives, especially having served in the public sector largely. This programme however added a sharper awareness: the structures within which we work also have consequences on our lives as women leaders. The workplace may not have been built with us in mind, but the future will be. Because we are building it.

REFERENCES (IF ANY)

THE FOLLOWING MATERIAL WERE CONSULTED IN THE ANALYTICAL REFLECTION ABOVE:

- **GENERAL PRESENTATION OF THE PROGRAM (VARIOUS SPEAKER QUOTES AND INSIGHTS).**
- **PRESENTATION ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING**
- **“WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP” COURSE PRESENTATION BY PROFESSOR GISÈLE SZCZYGLAK.**