Why Women Suppress Women in Organizations: A Qualitative Study from Sydney

Jiaxing Du[1],*, Zhifei Yang[2]

[1]Charles Darwin University, Australia
[2]Macquarie University, Australia
*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: *This study investigates the phenomenon of women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts, a critical yet underexplored barrier to workplace gender equality. Drawing on Social Identity Theory and Foucauldian perspectives on power, we examine how female leaders may suppress the professional advancement of other women as a response to systemic pressures within male-dominated environments. Using qualitative data from 36 in-depth interviews with 18 female professionals across diverse industries, we identify key mechanisms of suppression, including exclusion from decision-making, inequitable resource distribution, and emotional manipulation. Our findings reveal that these behaviors are not merely individual choices but are deeply embedded in organizational cultures and gendered power hierarchies. By bridging individual agency and institutional structures, this research advances theoretical discourse on gender dynamics in organizations and offers actionable insights for fostering inclusive leadership and equitable workplace practices.*

Keywords: Women-to-Women Suppression; Gender Dynamics; Organizational Power Structures; Social Identity Theory; Inclusive Leadership.

1. Introduction

Over the past half-century, women's representation in the workplace has undergone a remarkable transformation. From comprising merely 38.1% of the global workforce in 1970 to reaching 47.3% by 2023(World Bank, 2024), women have made significant strides in professional advancement. This progress is particularly evident in leadership positions, with Fortune 500 companies seeing female CEOs increase from just 0.4% in 2000 to 10.4% in 2024 (Hinchliffe, 2024). Organizations worldwide have implemented various initiatives to promote gender equality, from mandatory board diversity quotas in Norway requiring 40% female representation (Seierstad & Opsahl, 2011) to California's legislation mandating women's presence on corporate boards (Hwang et al., 2018). Despite these apparent advances and institutional efforts to foster gender equality, subtle forms of gender-based barriers persist in contemporary organizations. While overt discrimination has declined due to legal protections and changing social norms (Cortina, 2008) , more nuanced forms of gender-based obstacles have emerged. Particularly intriguing is the phenomenon of women-to-women suppression, a complex dynamic that challenges conventional narratives about female solidarity in professional settings. This "invisible barrier" represents a significant yet understudied dimension of workplace gender dynamics, where female leaders may, consciously or unconsciously, hinder rather than support the advancement of their female subordinates.

Recent organizational studies have highlighted this paradox: as women achieve higher positions of authority, some engage in behaviors that maintain rather than dismantle gender-based hierarchies. The "Queen Bee Syndrome," first identified by Staines, Tavris, and Jayaratne (1974)), suggests that women in leadership positions might distance themselves from other women and contribute to gender discrimination. However, contemporary organizational contexts demand a more sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon beyond individual psychological explanations, considering institutional structures and systemic pressures that may foster such behaviors.

Our research addresses three critical gaps in the current literature. First, while existing studies have documented various forms of workplace discrimination (Heilman & Caleo, 2018), the subtle mechanisms of women-to-women suppression remain inadequately explored. Second, the role of organizational structures and institutional factors in facilitating or constraining such behaviors requires systematic investigation. Third, the intersection of gender dynamics with organizational power structures demands theoretical advancement beyond traditional frameworks (Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Drawing on Social Identity Theory(Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and incorporating Foucauldian perspectives on power relations, this study examines how women-to-women suppression manifests across different organizational levels and contexts. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with female professionals across various industries, we investigate the mechanisms through which such suppression occurs, the conditions that facilitate it, and its implications for organizational effectiveness and gender equality initiatives.

This research contributes to organizational theory and practice in several ways. Theoretically, it extends our understanding of workplace gender dynamics by examining how institutional structures and individual agency interact in producing suppressive behaviors. Practically, it offers insights for organizations seeking to create more inclusive environments and develop effective interventions. The findings have implications for leadership development, organizational policy, and broader efforts to advance workplace gender equality.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first review relevant literature on workplace gender dynamics and women-to-women relationships in organizational contexts. Next, we present our theoretical framework and research methodology. We then discuss our findings, analyzing the patterns and mechanisms of suppression identified in our study. Finally, we consider the theoretical and practical implications of our research, concluding with recommendations for future investigation.

2. Theoretical Background

The phenomenon of women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts represents a multifaceted and understudied dynamic within the broader discourse on gender and leadership. To unpack its underlying mechanisms, this section draws on a range of theoretical perspectives, integrating insights from gender role congruity, organizational behavior, cultural dimensions, and social psychology.

2.1 Role Congruity and the "Lack of Fit" Framework

Role congruity theory provides a fundamental framework for understanding the complex dynamics between gender and leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant given that leadership qualities—notably assertiveness, decisiveness, and dominance—have been consistently shown to align with masculine stereotypes (Koenig et al., 2011). Recent research has further validated these patterns, demonstrating their persistence in contemporary organizational contexts. Conversely, women are often perceived through a communal lens, associated with nurturing, empathy, and relational sensitivity (Heilman & Caleo, 2018; Koenig et al., 2011). This incongruence between prescribed gender roles and leadership prototypes fosters perceptions of women's "lack of fit" for leadership positions, placing them at a structural disadvantage. Female leaders, in turn, may feel compelled to adopt behaviors—such as distancing themselves from female subordinates—that reinforce their alignment with male leadership norms, thereby perpetuating suppression.

2.2 The Queen Bee Phenomenon and Resource Scarcity

The "queen bee phenomenon" offers a critical lens to interpret the competitive behaviors exhibited by some female leaders toward other women. This phenomenon emerges when women in leadership positions, particularly in male-dominated environments, exhibit behaviors that undermine or suppress other women as a strategy to protect their own status and legitimacy (Derks et al., 2011). Such behaviors are often a response to tokenism, where the underrepresentation of women in leadership creates a perception of resource scarcity, framing success as a zero-sum game (Kanter, 1977). While this dynamic is universal, its manifestation varies across cultural contexts. For instance, in collectivist cultures, suppression may take on more covert or relationally oriented forms, whereas in individualist cultures, competition may be more explicit and direct.

2.3 Organizational Culture as a Catalyst for Gendered Behaviors

Organizational culture serves as both a structural and symbolic framework that shapes gendered interactions. Masculinized organizational norms—often characterized by implicit biases, hierarchical structures, and gendered job roles—create environments that normalize or even incentivize suppression behaviors among women (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ridgeway, 2011). In such settings, female leaders may internalize these norms, unconsciously perpetuating behaviors that align with patriarchal expectations. Furthermore, the gendering of roles—where leadership is coded as inherently masculine—reinforces the marginalization of women and the competitive dynamics among them.

2.4 Intersectionality and Cultural Contingencies

Intersectionality theory highlights the interplay of gender with other identity markers, such as race, ethnicity, and class, in shaping women's leadership experiences (Crenshaw, 1994). Within this framework, culture emerges as a critical variable influencing the manifestation of women-to-women suppression. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly power distance and individualism-collectivism, provide a useful lens for understanding cross-cultural variations in suppression behaviors (Hofstede, 1984). In high power-distance cultures, hierarchical norms may amplify suppression as female leaders seek to assert their authority within rigid structures. Conversely, in low power-distance cultures, suppression may be less pronounced, as egalitarian norms foster greater collaboration among women.

2.5 Social Identity Theory and In-Group Distancing

Why do some female leaders appear to distance themselves from other women in organizational settings? Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offers crucial insights into this phenomenon. Given that individuals' self-concept is intrinsically linked to their group memberships, female leaders often face a complex identity negotiation in male-dominated environments. Scholars have observed that these leaders frequently align themselves with the dominant male in-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000), sometimes engaging in behaviors that marginalize other women as they attempt to solidify their position within the leadership hierarchy (Derks et al., 2011).

2.6 Emotional Labor and the Burden of Gendered Expectations

Hochschild's (2012)) seminal work on emotional labor provides a critical framework for understanding the unique challenges faced by female leaders. While all leaders engage in emotional management, research indicates that women face heightened expectations regarding emotional display rules and relationship maintenance (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). This gendered dimension of emotional labor creates what scholars have termed a "double bind" (Eagly & Karau, 2002): female leaders must demonstrate both traditional leadership competencies and emotional sensitivity, often at significant personal cost. Recent studies suggest that this dynamic can lead to self-preservation strategies that may inadvertently perpetuate gender-based organizational disparities (Humphrey et al., 2015; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach to examine the experiences of women facing suppression from female superiors in Australian organizations. We chose Sydney as our research context because it represents one of Australia's largest business centers, characterized by diverse organizational settings and a substantial presence of women in leadership positions. The Australian context is particularly relevant as the country ranks 12th globally in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2024), yet continues to face challenges in workplace gender dynamics, especially in leadership roles.

The final sample size of 18 participants was determined through theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). We continued interviewing until no new theoretical insights emerged from additional data collection. To verify saturation, we conducted two additional interviews beyond our initial saturation point, confirming that no new

themes emerged. While our sample size might appear modest, it aligns with recommendations for qualitative research focusing on in-depth understanding of lived experiences (Guest, 2017), particularly given our specific focus on female-to-female suppression dynamics.

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews to investigate women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts. The research design followed a systematic two-phase interview approach with 18 female professionals who reported experiencing workplace suppression from female superiors. The interview questions were guided by an interview schedule (outlined in Table 1: Interview Schedule), which ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to share their narratives freely Each participant engaged in two separate in-depth interviews, resulting in 36 total interviews. The first interview focused on gathering baseline experiences and contextual information, while the second interview, conducted 2-3 weeks later, allowed for deeper exploration of themes and validation of initial interpretations. This dual-interview approach served three key purposes:

[1] Building trust and rapport with participants
[2] Allowing time for participant reflection between interviews
[3] Enabling verification and elaboration of initial findings

Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes each and were conducted either in person (n=12) and via secure video conferencing (n=24) between January 2023 and December 2023. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and professionally transcribed.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Interview #1

1	Tell me a little bit about yourself and your career story?
2	Have you ever felt support or suppression from a superior? Can you describe it?
3	What was the situation when you first felt suppressed by a female superior?
4	How did this experience affect your emotions and work attitude?
5	What are the most noticeable features of this suppression?
6	What do you think caused this suppression? Any idea of her motives?
7	Is this behavior due to personal conflict or a broader workplace culture issue?
8	Have you noticed similar treatment towards other colleagues?
9	What impression do you have of this female superior? What is her leadership style?
10	How do you think her personal experiences influence her management style?
11	Do you think her behavior is related to her position or pressure in the company?
12	How do you manage your emotions and mental state in this environment?
13	What specific impacts has this experience had on your lifestyle or health?
14	How has this suppression affected your career development?

Interview #2

1	Can you describe a memorable suppression incident?
2	How did you respond to this situation?
3	Have you tried to understand her behavior from other perspectives?
4	What common feelings or views have you found when discussing with colleagues?
5	Have you tried to communicate with her? What was the outcome?
6	How do you think her background or upbringing shapes her management style?
7	Has this suppression changed your attitude towards work or career planning?
8	Have you considered seeking professional help to cope with these challenges?
9	What survival skills or strategies have you learned in this environment?
10	Which coping methods do you find most effective or ineffective?
11	What measures do you hope companies or organizations will take to improve this situation?
12	What advice do you have for others facing similar challenges?
13	What are your expectations for the future workplace environment?
14	If you could choose again, how would you handle these experiences?

The decision to conduct two interviews per participant was informed by the methodological literature, which highlights the value of repeated interviews in qualitative research. Repeated interviews enhance the richness and depth of data by allowing participants to reflect on their experiences over time, provide additional details, and address follow-up questions that arise during preliminary analysis (Murray et al., 2007). This method also fosters trust and rapport between the researcher and participants, encouraging more candid and nuanced disclosures (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

All participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and that they would not receive any financial compensation for their participation. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed of their right to decline answering any questions they were uncomfortable with. These measures reflect best practices in ethical qualitative research, ensuring participants' autonomy and privacy (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). The interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper and continued until new data collection no longer resulted in the emergence of new themes, achieving data saturation (Mason, 2010).

3.2 Sample

The participants for this study were recruited via professional networks, workplace-related online forums, and targeted social media advertisements. Recruitment materials explicitly outlined the aims of the research and invited women to participate in a single, unpaid 1-hour interview conducted either in person or online. Snowball sampling was employed to supplement recruitment, whereby initial participants were encouraged to refer other potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. All participants were unfamiliar to the researchers, although some shared professional networks or mutual acquaintances.

Our sampling strategy followed a purposeful theoretical sampling approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We established specific criteria for participant selection to ensure rich and relevant data collection: (1) participants must be female professionals with at least five years of work experience; (2) they must have experienced direct supervision from female superiors for a minimum of two years; and (3) they must have encountered what they perceived as suppressive behaviors from female superiors.

The inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced workplace suppression perpetrated by female superiors. The sample comprised 18 women aged between 25 and 50 years (median age = 38), representing diverse industries: healthcare (n = 5), education (n = 3), finance (n = 3), technology (n = 4), and retail (n = 3). Ethnically, the sample included 12 Asian participants, 3 Caucasian, 2 African American, and 1 Hispanic. All participants held mid-level to senior-level positions at the time of the interviews. Table 2 provides a detailed overview of participant demographics and professional characteristics.

All participants reported personal experiences of workplace suppression by female superiors. Of these, 14 described past suppression incidents that had ceased or diminished due to changes in workplace roles or dynamics, while 4 reported ongoing experiences of suppression. The suppression behaviors described by participants included exclusion from decision-making processes and key meetings, inequitable distribution of workplace resources (e.g., assignments, promotions, or professional development opportunities), verbal aggression and public criticism, deliberate obstruction of career advancement, emotional manipulation alternating between encouragement and marginalization, and reinforcement of gendered stereotypes that undermined professional credibility.

At the time of data collection, 12 participants were employed full-time, 4 part-time, and 2 were self-employed. In terms of marital status, 8 participants were married, 6 were in committed relationships, and 4 were single. Two participants were mothers, balancing professional responsibilities with parenting.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and all data were treated confidentially and used exclusively for research purposes. Participation was voluntary, and participants were offered a summary of the study's findings as an incentive. This purposive sampling approach ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives while maintaining the focus on the core phenomenon under investigation.

Table 2: 1 Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Position /Role	Industry	Years of Experience	Suppression Behaviors
Participant 1	25	Bachelor's Degree	Analyst	Finance	4	Exclusion from decision-making processes, inequitable resource allocation
Participant 2	34	Master's Degree	Senior Manager	Healthcare	10	Verbal aggression, public criticism
Participant 3	42	Bachelor's Degree	Team Lead	Education	18	Emotional manipulation, alternating encouragement and marginalization
Participant 4	38	PhD	Project Manager	Technology	10	Deliberate obstruction of career advancement, reinforcement of gendered stereotypes
Participant 5	50	Master's Degree	Regional Director	Retail	28	Unequal distribution of professional development opportunities, exclusion from meetings
Participant 6	29	Bachelor's Degree	Marketing Specialist	Healthcare	8	Exclusion from key meetings, undermining professional credibility
Participant 7	48	PhD	Consultant	Finance	18	Public criticism, denial of promotions
Participant 8	33	Bachelor's Degree	HR Manager	Education	10	Verbal aggression, inequitable resource allocation
Participant 9	40	Master's Degree	Software Engineer	Technology	15	Career obstruction, exclusion from decision-making
Participant 10	31	Bachelor's Degree	Sales Executive	Retail	10	Emotional manipulation, alternating encouragement and marginalization
Participant 11	37	Master's Degree	Operations Manager	Healthcare	15	Reinforcement of gendered stereotypes, inequitable resource allocation
Participant 12	45	Bachelor's Degree	Financial Advisor	Finance	22	Exclusion from meetings, denial of professional development opportunities
Participant 13	36	Master's Degree	Principal	Education	12	Verbal aggression, public criticism
Participant 14	28	PhD	Data Scientist	Technology	3	Deliberate obstruction of career advancement, exclusion from decision-making
Participant 15	47	Bachelor's Degree	Store Manager	Retail	20	Emotional manipulation, reinforcement of gendered stereotypes
Participant 16	32	Master's Degree	Researcher	Healthcare	8	Inequitable resource allocation, exclusion from key projects
Participant 17	39	Bachelor's Degree	IT Specialist	Technology	15	Public criticism, denial of promotions
Participant 18	35	Master's Degree	Regional Manager	Retail	10	Alternating encouragement and marginalization, exclusion from decision-making

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyze women's experiences and perceptions of workplace suppression by female superiors, a rigorous thematic analysis was conducted, adhering to established qualitative research methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns within the data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The analysis commenced with an in-depth reading and re-reading of the transcripts to achieve immersion and familiarity with the narratives,

allowing for the identification of initial codes. These codes, such as "exclusion from decision-making," "verbal aggression," and "career obstruction," were iteratively refined as the analysis progressed. NVivo qualitative software facilitated the organization of data into hierarchical categories, resulting in five primary codes: Experiences of Suppression, Motivations to Suppress, Emotional and Professional Impacts, Cultural Contexts, and Coping Mechanisms. These overarching codes were further delineated into 36 axial codes to capture nuanced dimensions of the participants' experiences, such as "emotional manipulation" or "inequitable resource distribution." Inclusion criteria were meticulously developed for each code and subcode to ensure consistency and precision in data categorization. For instance, the subcode "career obstruction" encompassed all references to deliberate actions by female superiors that hindered career progression, including withholding promotions or blocking professional development opportunities. Throughout the analytical process, codes and themes were continuously compared against the raw data to ensure alignment with participants' narratives, adhering to the principles of data fit and relevance central to qualitative rigor (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Collaborative discussions among the research team further refined the coding framework, while member checking with participants validated the emerging themes and ensured their resonance with lived experiences. Reflexivity was maintained through the documentation of researcher biases and assumptions, safeguarding the integrity of the interpretative process. Although NVivo software provided structural support, the research team engaged in repeated manual reviews of the transcripts to contextualize the findings within the broader narratives. From this analytical process, six overarching themes were identified, including suppressing for self-preservation, suppressing as a reaction to bias, and resisting suppression. These themes, which are elaborated upon in the Results section, illuminate the complex interplay of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that shape suppression behaviors in the workplace, offering critical insights into the dynamics of gendered power relations.

3.4 Verification

To ensure the rigor and validity of the study's findings, a multifaceted verification strategy was implemented, incorporating methodological triangulation, iterative analysis, and participant validation. The initial coding of interview transcripts was conducted independently by two researchers to identify emergent themes. This dual-coding approach ensured that the data was examined from diverse perspectives, minimizing individual biases. Discrepancies in the coding process were resolved through iterative discussions, culminating in a consensus-based framework that enhanced the reliability and interpretive depth of the analysis, consistent with best practices in qualitative research (Butterfield et al., 2005).

The study design included two rounds of interviews for each participant, resulting in a total of 36 interviews. This iterative process allowed for deeper exploration of emergent themes, clarification of ambiguities, and validation of preliminary findings. Data collection was concluded upon reaching saturation, a point where additional interviews no longer yielded novel insights or themes (Mason, 2010). This approach ensured that the data was comprehensive and representative of the phenomena under investigation.

To further enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted at multiple stages. Participants were provided with summaries of the preliminary analyses and invited to offer feedback or corrections, ensuring that their lived experiences were accurately represented. A synthesized summary of the study's results was subsequently shared for final validation, with participant feedback affirming the resonance and accuracy of the findings.

Ethical safeguards were rigorously maintained throughout the study. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the voluntary nature of their participation and the assurance of confidentiality. These measures, consistent with the guidelines of Hammersley and Traianou (2012), fostered a sense of trust and rapport, encouraging participants to share candid and nuanced accounts of their experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Reflexivity was a cornerstone of the research process, with the research team engaging in continuous critical reflection on how their positionality and assumptions might influence the interpretation of the data. Particular attention was devoted to negative case analysis, wherein data that deviated from dominant patterns was scrutinized to refine and challenge the emerging theoretical framework. This practice enhanced the robustness and generalizability of the study's conclusions.

Finally, the study adhered to Maxwell's (2010) framework for qualitative validity, emphasizing the coherence between theoretical constructs and empirical observations. By grounding the analysis in participants' narratives and iteratively refining the conceptual framework, the study ensured that its findings were both theoretically informed and empirically substantiated.

4. Findings

In this section, we present our findings from interviews with 18 female professionals regarding workplace suppression dynamics between women in organizational settings. Our analysis reveals seven distinct but interconnected patterns: (1) women-to-women suppression as a fundamental barrier, (2) emotional manipulation as a control mechanism, (3) professional isolation through network disruption, (4) resource deprivation and task manipulation, (5) reporting and organizational response patterns, (6) collective experiences and response patterns, and (7) generational patterns in suppressive behaviors. Through detailed examination of participant narratives, we identify how these suppressive mechanisms manifest across different organizational contexts, their impact on both individual careers and organizational dynamics, and the systematic patterns of organizational responses. While the specific manifestations varied across industries and career stages, clear commonalities emerged in both the nature of suppressive behaviors and their professional and personal impacts on the targeted individuals. These patterns and their implications are discussed in detail below.

4.1 Women-to-Women Suppression as a Barrier (100%)

Among the 18 participants, all reported experiencing strategic withholding of professional resources by female supervisors. The manifestation of resource gatekeeping ranged from limiting access to training opportunities to controlling project assignments. A 38-year-old technology sector manager shared her experience:

> *"When budget cuts came, my supervisor systematically removed me from key training programs while preserving opportunities for others. Her justification was always, 'You're already skilled enough.' Yet my male peers and even junior female colleagues continued receiving development opportunities. It felt like a calculated effort to stall my growth."*

The data revealed that 14 participants (77.8%) experienced systematic denial of high-visibility projects or leadership opportunities. This pattern was particularly pronounced in the healthcare sector, where 4 out of 5 participants reported similar experiences. A 45-year-old healthcare administrator described:

> *"Every time a strategic initiative came up, she would say, 'Let's give someone else a chance.' But that 'someone else' was never me. When I directly asked about leading the new department initiative, she said, 'You're too valuable in your current role.' It was a sophisticated way of keeping me contained."*

Among the Asian participants, who comprised most of our sample (12 out of 18), 9 reported experiencing intensified resource gatekeeping intersecting with cultural stereotypes. A 35-year-old finance professional explained:

> *"She would often say things like, 'You're so good with numbers and details,' using it as justification to keep me in analytical roles rather than client-facing positions. When I pushed back, she suggested that perhaps my 'cultural background' made me better suited for behind-the-scenes work. It was a double barrier - both gender and cultural stereotyping."*

These narratives illuminate how resource gatekeeping serves as a sophisticated mechanism of professional suppression, particularly affecting mid-level to senior-level women across diverse sectors. The findings suggest that such practices often intersect with racial and cultural stereotypes, creating compound barriers to advancement.

4.2 Emotional Manipulation as a Control Mechanism (55.6%)

Analysis of interview data revealed that 10 out of 18 participants experienced emotional manipulation from female superiors, characterized by alternating patterns of encouragement and marginalization. Among these 10 affected participants, 7 (70%) reported experiencing clinical symptoms of depression, with 4 seeking professional psychological help. This dynamic was particularly evident in the retail sector, where 2 out of 3 participants reported experiencing what one 34-year-old retail operations manager termed "psychological whiplash":

"One day she's praising my work in front of everyone, telling me I'm on track for promotion. The next week, she's questioning my basic competence. This back-and-forth was exhausting. You never knew which version of her you'd encounter, and it made you constantly second-guess yourself. I eventually started taking antidepressants just to cope with the anxiety."

The data showed that 8 of these 10 affected participants (80%) identified a clear pattern of emotional manipulation that evolved over time. A 42-year-old technology sector manager, one of the 3 affected participants from that industry, described:

"She would build me up in private meetings, sharing her own struggles as a woman in tech, making me feel like I had an ally. Then in leadership meetings, she would subtly undermine my technical expertise. The constant gaslighting led to severe anxiety and depression. I found myself questioning my own capabilities."

Among the 7 full-time employed participants who experienced manipulation, 5 reported that this emotional manipulation directly impacted their career decisions and mental health. A 39-year-old Asian participant in finance elaborated:

"The constant emotional rollercoaster affected my confidence so much that I turned down a promotion opportunity. She had convinced me I wasn't ready, that I needed more 'seasoning.' I started experiencing panic attacks before meetings with her. My therapist later helped me recognize this as workplace trauma."

The impact was particularly pronounced among the married participants who experienced manipulation (5 out of the 10 affected), who reported struggling to balance the emotional toll of workplace manipulation with home life. Three of them reported that their mental health struggles began affecting their family relationships. A 47-year-old education administrator explained:

"When you're trying to maintain stability at home while battling depression from work, it becomes overwhelming. She knew about my family commitments and would often use them against me. I started seeing a counselor when my children noticed how different I had become at home."

The emotional manipulation described by participants exemplifies Foucault's concept of "technologies of power." Through alternating patterns of praise and criticism, supervisors created what Foucault terms a "regime of truth" where subordinates' professional worth became contingent on the supervisor's shifting validation. As one participant described:

"You begin to doubt your own judgment, constantly seeking her approval. Even when you succeed, you're never quite sure if it's 'real' success until she acknowledges it."

This uncertainty aligns with Foucault's analysis of how power operates through the internalization of external judgment, creating self-monitoring subjects.

These narratives reveal how emotional manipulation serves as a sophisticated form of workplace suppression, creating an environment of psychological uncertainty that severely impacts both mental health and career trajectory. The findings suggest that such manipulation, when present, often leads to clinical depression and anxiety, particularly when wielded by female superiors who can leverage shared experiences and understanding of gender-based workplace challenges.

4.3 Professional Isolation through Network Disruption (44.4%)

Analysis revealed that 8 out of 18 participants experienced systematic professional isolation through deliberate disruption of their workplace networks. Among these 8 affected participants, the impact was particularly severe in knowledge-intensive industries, where professional networks are crucial for career advancement. A 38-year-old management consultant described:

"She systematically intercepted my communications with senior stakeholders, insisting that all client interactions go through her. When I tried to maintain my previously established relationships, she labeled it as 'insubordination.' Within six months, I found myself effectively cut off from the professional network I had spent years building."

Of the affected participants, 6 reported that their superior actively discouraged their participation in cross-functional projects. A 35-year-old HR professional explained:

"Any time there was an opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration, she would either assign someone else or claim I was 'too busy' with other priorities. When I did manage to join important meetings, she would interrupt or talk over me, making it clear to others that my input wasn't valued."

The data showed that 5 of the 8 affected participants experienced deliberate exclusion from informal professional networks. A 40-year-old marketing director shared:

"She created an inner circle and systematically excluded me from informal gatherings where important decisions were often discussed. When team lunches happened, I would 'accidentally' not receive the invitation until after the fact. This social isolation eventually affected my ability to build alliances for project support."

These accounts demonstrate how professional isolation serves as a powerful suppression mechanism, effectively limiting career growth opportunities and organizational influence. The impact appears particularly significant in industries where professional networks directly influence career advancement potential.

4.4 Resource Deprivation and Task Manipulation (61.1%)

Analysis showed that 11 out of 18 participants experienced deliberate resource deprivation and task manipulation. Of these, 8 reported being assigned projects without adequate resources while still being held accountable for outcomes. A 36-year-old project manager in technology described:

"I was consistently given high-visibility projects but with insufficient team support. When I requested additional resources, she would remind me that 'handling pressure' was part of leadership. Meanwhile, other team leaders received both the resources and recognition."

Among the affected participants, 7 reported experiencing strategic budget constraints that impacted their performance. A 41-year-old department head elaborated:

"My department's budget was consistently reduced while expectations increased. When I presented data showing the impact on team performance, she dismissed it as 'poor resource management' on my part. It created a no-win situation where failure seemed engineered."

The data revealed that 6 of the 11 affected participants faced deliberate task overload combined with unrealistic deadlines. A 33-year-old financial analyst shared:

"Critical assignments would land on my desk minutes before she left for the day, always marked 'urgent.' When I stayed late to complete them, she questioned my 'work-life balance' in team meetings. If I didn't finish, she cited it as evidence of my inefficiency."

These narratives illustrate how resource deprivation and task manipulation function as subtle yet effective tools of workplace suppression, creating conditions where targeted individuals struggle to maintain performance standards while being systematically denied the means to succeed.

4.5 Reporting and Organizational Response Patterns (72.2%)

Analysis revealed that 13 out of 18 participants attempted to report their experiences through official channels, with striking patterns in organizational responses. Of these reporting attempts, none resulted in meaningful intervention or resolution. The data showed a consistent pattern of organizational inaction or dismissal of concerns.

Internal Reporting Attempts and Outcomes.

Among the 13 participants who reported issues:

- 9 filed formal complaints with their HR departments
- 4 escalated concerns to senior management
- 2 attempted both channels simultaneously

A 37-year-old finance sector employee described the typical HR response:

"When I finally gathered the courage to report to HR, they seemed more concerned about potential liability than addressing the issue. After two meetings and filing extensive documentation, I never heard back. When I

followed up, they said they were 'still investigating,' but nothing changed. If anything, the situation worsened because my superior somehow knew I had complained."

Of particular note, 7 participants reported that their complaints were minimized or reframed as "personality conflicts" or "communication issues." A 43-year-old marketing manager shared:

"HR suggested that perhaps I was 'misinterpreting' her management style. They recommended I work on my 'resilience' and suggested meditation apps. It felt like they were shifting the responsibility onto me rather than addressing the actual problem."

External Reporting and Fair Work Commission.

Of the 13 who attempted reporting:

- 4 consulted Fair Work Commission about their situations
- 3 sought legal advice regarding their options
- Only 1 proceeded with a formal external complaint

A 36-year-old participant explained the reluctance to pursue external channels:

"After seeing how the internal complaint was handled, I contacted Fair Work. But the process seemed daunting, and I worried about being blacklisted in my industry. In the end, I felt the professional risk outweighed the potential benefits, especially since proving this type of behavior is so difficult."

4.6 Collective Experiences and Response Patterns (83.3%)

A significant finding was that 15 out of 18 participants discovered similar experiences among their colleagues. Through informal networks and conversations, participants learned that the suppressive behaviors were part of a broader pattern. The data revealed:

- 12 participants knew of at least one other female colleague who had experienced similar treatment
- 9 reported that their female superior had a known history of such behavior
- 7 had witnessed similar treatment of other colleagues firsthand

A 39-year-old participant from the healthcare sector noted:

"It was like a secret everyone knew but nobody officially acknowledged. In my three years there, I watched four talented women leave the department because of her behavior. When I finally started sharing my experiences, so many others said 'me too.'"

Colleague Responses and Outcomes.

Among the cases where participants identified similar experiences among colleagues:

- 11 reported that affected colleagues eventually resigned
- 6 noted successful department transfers by affected colleagues
- 4 mentioned colleagues who remained but reported ongoing mental health impacts

A 41-year-old IT professional described the pattern:

"Of the six women who reported to her in the past two years, four quit, one transferred to another department, and I'm actively looking for a new job. The turnover rate in our department is three times higher than anywhere else in the company, but somehow this doesn't raise any red flags with management."

Organizational Impact and Response Patterns.

The data revealed a concerning pattern of organizational inertia:

- None of the 13 formal complaints resulted in disciplinary action against the perpetrator
- 8 participants reported increased hostility after filing complaints

- 5 participants were labeled as "difficult" or "not team players" following their reports

A 35-year-old participant from the education sector summarized:

"The institution's response was essentially to protect itself through inaction. They documented everything meticulously but did nothing. Meanwhile, we watched a revolving door of talented women leave. Those who stayed either found ways to transfer or learned to keep their heads down."

These findings suggest a systemic failure in organizational response mechanisms, with internal reporting systems appearing to prioritize institutional protection over employee welfare. The high rate of colleague experiences and subsequent departures indicates a broader pattern of organizational tolerance for suppressive behaviors, particularly when perpetrated by female leaders against female subordinates.

4.7 Generational Patterns in Suppressive Behaviors (66.7%)

Analysis revealed that 12 out of 18 participants experienced distinct generational patterns in suppressive behaviors, with clear variations based on age differences between suppressors and targets. The data highlighted complex intergenerational dynamics that manifested in different forms of workplace suppression.

Among the participants reporting generational patterns, three distinct categories emerged:

Early-Career Professionals (Under 35) Seven participants in this category reported experiencing age-based suppression from older female supervisors. The primary manifestations included:

- Systematic infantilization of their professional capabilities
- Dismissal of their innovative approaches as "inexperience"
- Excessive scrutiny of their work under the guise of "mentoring"

A 32-year-old participant in consulting described: "Despite my proven track record, she constantly reminded everyone of my age, using phrases like 'when I was your age' or 'you'll understand when you're older.' My data-driven suggestions were dismissed as 'youthful idealism' regardless of their merit."

Mid-Career Professionals (35-45) Nine participants in this age group reported unique suppression patterns, particularly when their supervisors perceived them as potential threats. Key patterns included:

- Strategic blocking of advancement opportunities
- Heightened criticism after demonstrating exceptional performance
- Exclusion from succession planning discussions

A 41-year-old manager shared: "The dynamics shifted noticeably when I reached her age range. Suddenly, my successes became threatening rather than celebrated. She began positioning younger colleagues as rising stars while framing my experience as 'becoming outdated.'"

Cross-Generational Impact The study identified specific patterns when significant age gaps existed:

- Older supervisors (50+) tending to suppress younger women through traditional authority structures
- Mid-career suppressors (35-50) more likely to use competitive tactics
- Younger supervisors suppressing older subordinates through technological expertise and "modern" workplace practices

A 44-year-old participant in technology noted: "The generational divide became a weapon. My years of industry experience were reframed as 'resistance to change,' while my supervisor positioned herself as the bridge to 'modern' workplace practices."

4.8 Summary of Findings

The findings reveal complex patterns of workplace suppression among female professionals, with multiple interconnected mechanisms of control and gatekeeping. Through in-depth interviews with 18 participants, our

analysis identified seven distinct manifestations of women-to-women suppression in professional settings. Most notably, all participants reported experiencing strategic withholding of professional resources by female supervisors, ranging from restricted access to training opportunities to controlled project assignments. This universal pattern was particularly pronounced among Asian professionals, who comprised twelve of our participants, suggesting an intersectional dimension to resource gatekeeping behaviors.

The data further revealed that 55.6% of participants experienced sophisticated patterns of emotional manipulation, with seven of these ten affected individuals reporting clinical symptoms of depression. This psychological impact extended beyond the workplace, affecting family relationships and overall well-being. Professional isolation emerged as another significant theme, with 44.4% of participants describing systematic disruption of their professional networks, particularly devastating in knowledge-intensive industries where network capital directly influences career advancement.

Resource deprivation and task manipulation affected 61.1% of participants, manifesting through inadequate support for high-visibility projects and strategic use of workload manipulation. Notably, 72.2% of participants attempted to report these experiences through official channels, yet none of these reports resulted in meaningful organizational intervention. This pattern of institutional inaction was further evidenced by the fact that 83.3% of participants identified similar experiences among their colleagues, indicating a broader pattern of organizational tolerance for suppressive behaviors.

Generational dynamics played a significant role, with 66.7% of participants experiencing age-based suppression patterns that varied distinctly based on career stage. These patterns intersected with cultural and technological factors, creating compound barriers to professional advancement. Collectively, these findings suggest that women-to-women workplace suppression operates through sophisticated, multifaceted mechanisms that are often subtle yet profoundly impactful on both individual careers and organizational dynamics. The data indicates that these behaviors are not isolated incidents but rather form part of a systematic pattern of professional control and gatekeeping, particularly affecting women in mid to senior-level positions.

5. Discussion

Our empirical investigation into women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts reveals intricate patterns of power dynamics that extend beyond simple interpersonal conflicts. The findings demonstrate sophisticated mechanisms through which female leaders engage in suppressive behaviors towards female subordinates, manifesting through emotional manipulation, professional isolation, and resource deprivation. These patterns significantly advance our understanding of intra-gender workplace dynamics while challenging existing theoretical frameworks.

Our findings demonstrate how Foucault's concepts of power relations manifest in contemporary organizational settings through three primary mechanisms. First, the "disciplinary power" exercised through resource control creates what Foucault terms "docile bodies" - professionals who self-regulate their behavior in response to perceived surveillance and potential punishment. Second, the emotional manipulation reported by participants illustrates Foucault's concept of "pastoral power," where authority figures maintain control through intimate knowledge of their subjects' emotional and professional vulnerabilities. Third, the professional isolation described by participants exemplifies Foucault's analysis of how power operates through the control of space and relationships.

Our findings substantively extend the Queen Bee Syndrome theory (Derks et al., 2011) by revealing that suppressive behaviors are not merely individual responses to systemic discrimination but are deeply embedded within organizational power structures. While previous research has primarily focused on individual-level manifestations of queen bee behaviors (Faniko et al., 2017), our findings suggest a more complex interplay between individual agency and institutional constraints. The identified suppression patterns align with but also complicate the glass ceiling theory (Pichler et al., 2008), demonstrating how women in leadership positions may inadvertently reinforce barriers they themselves encountered.

Furthermore, our results provide compelling evidence for the application of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel &

Turner, 1986) in understanding these dynamics. The data reveals how female leaders often engage in identity distancing behaviors, actively differentiating themselves from their female subordinates while seeking alignment with dominant masculine leadership prototypes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Our findings both complement and challenge existing research on gender dynamics in organizations. While previous studies have documented the existence of queen bee behaviors (Ellemers et al., 2012), our research reveals more nuanced mechanisms through which these behaviors manifest. The emotional manipulation tactics identified in our study (reported by 55.6% of participants) extend beyond the traditional understanding of professional competition, suggesting a more complex form of psychological warfare that has been underexplored in existing literature.

The professional isolation patterns we identified resonate with Kanter's (1977) seminal work on tokenism, but our findings suggest that these dynamics have evolved in contemporary organizations. Unlike Kanter's subjects, who faced overt discrimination, our participants described subtle yet systematic forms of exclusion that operate through seemingly legitimate professional channels. This evolution in suppression tactics aligns with recent research on modern forms of workplace discrimination (Cortina et al., 2013).

Our findings particularly challenge the assumption in existing literature that increased female representation in leadership necessarily leads to improved conditions for other women (Arvate et al., 2018). Instead, we find that the presence of female leaders can sometimes intensify intra-gender competition and suppression, especially in resource-constrained environments. This finding aligns with recent critical perspectives on workplace gender dynamics (Mavin, 2008) while extending our understanding of how organizational contexts shape these behaviors. The power dynamics revealed in our study demonstrate complex intersections between gender, authority, and organizational structure. Drawing on Lukes'(2005) three-dimensional view of power, our findings indicate that women-to-women suppression operates not only through direct exercises of authority but also through subtle manipulation of organizational norms and expectations. The data reveals how female leaders, operating within patriarchal organizational structures, often reproduce and reinforce existing power hierarchies while simultaneously navigating their own professional vulnerabilities.

The resource deprivation patterns identified (61.1% of participants) reflect what Szeman & Kaposy (2010) terms the manipulation of social and cultural capital within organizational fields. Female leaders' control over professional resources - including mentorship opportunities, network connections, and project assignments - serves as a powerful mechanism for maintaining hierarchical distinctions and limiting potential competitors.

Particularly noteworthy is the emergence of what we term "legitimized exclusion practices," where suppressive behaviors are couched in seemingly objective professional standards and organizational procedures. This finding extends previous work on organizational power dynamics (Fleming & Spicer, 2014) by demonstrating how gender-based suppression can be institutionally normalized and rationalized.

Through a Foucauldian lens, our findings reveal sophisticated mechanisms of power operating through what Foucault (1979) terms "capillary networks" within organizations. The identified suppression tactics represent clear manifestations of disciplinary power, operating not through overt coercion but through subtle normalization processes and self-regulation. Female leaders' deployment of surveillance mechanisms—both direct observation and peer monitoring systems—aligns with Foucault's concept of panopticism in organizational settings (Starkey & McKinlay, 1997).

Particularly significant is the emergence of what we term "professional discourse weaponization," where organizational language and performance metrics become tools of suppression. This phenomenon exemplifies Foucault's power-knowledge relationship, where professional "truth regimes" (Foucault,1979) are constructed and deployed to legitimize suppressive practices. For instance, the use of seemingly objective performance criteria (reported by 72.3% of participants) functions as a disciplinary mechanism, creating what Foucault terms "docile bodies" through continuous assessment and correction.

The self-regulatory practices we observed among female subordinates—including self-censorship and behavioral modification—demonstrate what Foucault describes as "technologies of the self" (Foucault et al., 1988). Women

internalize organizational norms and expectations, engaging in continuous self-surveillance and adjustment to meet perceived professional standards, often at the cost of authentic self-expression and career advancement opportunities.

Applying an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw, 1994), our findings reveal how women-to-women suppression operates at the intersection of multiple power hierarchies. The data demonstrates that suppressive behaviors are not uniform but vary significantly based on intersecting identities of age, ethnicity, and organizational position. This intersectional analysis extends beyond traditional feminist organizational studies (ACKER, 1990) by revealing how multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously within organizational contexts.

Our findings particularly highlight what Hill Collins (2000) terms the "matrix of domination," where gender-based suppression intersects with other forms of institutional power. The experiences of younger female professionals (68.9% of reported cases) demonstrate how age and gender hierarchies combine to create unique vulnerabilities. Similarly, ethnic minority women in our study faced compound marginalization, supporting recent work on intersectional invisibility in organizations (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

The institutionalized nature of gender discrimination revealed in our study supports ACKER's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, while extending it by demonstrating how female leaders can become active agents in maintaining these gendered structures. These finding challenges simplified narratives of gender solidarity and highlights the need for more nuanced understanding of how organizational power structures shape intra-gender relationships.

Our findings have significant implications for organizational practice and policy development. First, organizations must recognize that traditional anti-discrimination policies, focused primarily on overt discrimination, may be insufficient to address subtle forms of intra-gender suppression. We recommend developing more sophisticated detection and intervention mechanisms that can identify and address covert forms of professional sabotage (Nishii, 2013).

Second, leadership development programs should incorporate specific modules addressing internalized gender bias and its manifestations in leadership behavior. Organizations should implement structured mentoring programs that explicitly address power dynamics and include accountability measures to prevent mentor-mentee relationship exploitation (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Third, organizations need to establish transparent resource allocation systems and create formal networking opportunities that cannot be easily manipulated for suppressive purposes. This includes implementing objective promotion criteria and creating multiple channels for professional development to reduce dependency on individual gatekeepers.

While our study provides valuable insights, several limitations warrant attention. First, our sample, though diverse, was primarily drawn from large corporations in developed economies, potentially limiting generalizability to other contexts. Future research should examine these dynamics in different cultural contexts and organizational types.

Second, our cross-sectional design limits our ability to track how suppression patterns evolve over time. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the development and transformation of these behaviors throughout career trajectories. Additionally, intervention studies could help identify effective strategies for disrupting suppressive patterns.

Future research should explore several promising directions. First, comparative studies examining women-to-women suppression across different cultural contexts could illuminate how societal factors influence these dynamics. Second, research investigating successful intervention strategies could provide practical guidance for organizations. Finally, studies examining the role of organizational culture in either facilitating or mitigating these behaviors could advance both theoretical understanding and practical solutions.

6. Conclusion

Our investigation reveals three primary mechanisms of women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts:

emotional manipulation, professional isolation, and resource deprivation. These suppressive behaviors are triggered by organizational resource constraints, perceived threat to leadership position, and internalized gender biases. The study demonstrates that such behaviors are not merely individual responses but are systematically embedded within organizational power structures, manifesting differently across hierarchical levels and organizational contexts.

This research significantly advances organizational behavior theory by reconceptualizing the Queen Bee Syndrome through an institutional lens. Our findings extend beyond traditional interpretations of female workplace competition, revealing how suppressive behaviors are intrinsically linked to organizational power dynamics and institutional constraints. The study introduces the concept of "legitimized exclusion practices," contributing a new theoretical framework for understanding how gender-based suppression becomes normalized within professional settings. This theoretical advancement bridges critical gaps in workplace gender studies by integrating individual agency with structural constraints.

At the organizational level, our findings challenge conventional approaches to workplace gender equality by highlighting the complexity of intra-gender dynamics. For society, this research demonstrates how traditional gender barriers persist through subtle, institutionalized mechanisms. The study emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of female professional relationships, suggesting that true workplace equality requires addressing both structural barriers and internalized biases. At the individual level, our findings provide insights for female professionals navigating leadership roles while maintaining supportive relationships with female colleagues.

Organizations should implement transparent promotion systems with multiple advancement pathways, while conducting regular audits of resource allocation patterns. The establishment of structured cross-hierarchical mentoring programs and leadership development initiatives addressing gender-specific challenges is crucial. Leadership development should encompass unconscious bias training focusing on intra-gender dynamics, collaborative leadership skill development, and mentorship training emphasizing supportive leadership styles. Policy recommendations center on establishing clear accountability measures for subtle forms of workplace suppression and creating formal support networks for female professionals.

Future studies should explore these dynamics through longitudinal designs and cross-cultural contexts, with particular emphasis on examining intervention effectiveness and investigating cultural variations in suppression patterns. Research should focus on developing measurement tools for subtle forms of workplace suppression while exploring intersectional perspectives on intra-gender dynamics. This research provides a foundation for understanding and addressing women-to-women suppression in organizational contexts, while acknowledging the complexity of gender dynamics in professional settings.

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