

**Radboud Universiteit**



# Breaking the Glass Ceiling - Understanding the Gender Gap in Art Museum Management

A Study About Female Leaders in Art Museums in the Netherlands

by

Anne Henrica Bauhuis

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Nijmegen School of Management

Radboud University

Supervised by dr. N.P. Chaves Perez

Second Examiner dr. M.H.J. Dennissen

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# Preface

When I first read the statistic that only about 6% of directors in Dutch art museums are women, I was shocked. Here is a sector known for being progressive, in a country famous for its equality, yet it has one of the worst gender gaps in leadership anywhere. It made me wonder: how is this possible? Is it still really the case that women are this underrepresented, and if so, why? This thesis started with that simple, frustrating question. I wanted to move beyond the numbers and hear the real stories of the women navigating their careers in this field.

This research is built on the stories of those women. As a narrative research project, it uses their personal experiences to answer my main questions: Is the ‘glass ceiling’ still a thing in museum management? What are the hidden obstacles holding women back? What helps them succeed? And how do their unique career paths shape the kind of leaders they become?

This wasn’t an easy project, and I definitely didn’t do it alone. I have so many people to thank for getting me to the finish line. My biggest thank you goes to the incredible female art museum directors who were kind enough to let me interview them. Thank you for trusting me with your stories, your frustrations, and your successes. Your experiences are the entire foundation of this thesis, and I am so grateful for your honesty and time. To my supervisor, thank you for your endless patience. A special thank you for your understanding and for giving me the extra time I needed to finally finish this thesis. Thank you for answering my panicked emails, for helping me untangle my messy ideas, and for not giving up on me, when I felt stuck. Your guidance and flexibility were a lifesaver. Thank you to my mom, for proofreading every single draft, and to my boyfriend, for the mental support and the endless supply of coffee. I couldn’t have done this without you both.

I hope this project adds something important to the conversation about making museums truly inclusive, from the top down. It is my sincere hope that this work serves not as a conclusion, but as a first step, both for myself and for others, toward further research and, most importantly, toward sustainable and meaningful progress.

*Anne Bauhuis*

*Nijmegen, 2025*

# Abstract

This narrative inquiry explores the lived experiences of women leaders in Dutch art museums, examining how they perceive, navigate, and transform the gendered structures within their institutions. Through in-depth interviews with eleven female directors, the research investigates the complex interplay between individual agency and institutional norms. Framed by Role Congruity Theory, the concept of Gendered Organizations, and Feminist Institutionalism, the analysis reveals that women directors encounter a landscape shaped by informal recruitment networks, gendered double standards in evaluating authority, and organizational cultures that often privilege masculine-coded norms of leadership and availability.

The findings are structured around three core themes. First, the study identifies the subtle structural and cultural constraints that shape women's access to and experience of leadership. Second, it details the strategies women employ to navigate these barriers, including strategic self-presentation, building alliances, and balancing authenticity with institutional expectations. Third, it highlights how these leaders act as agents of institutional redesign, implementing policies and practices—from flexible work arrangements and equitable parental leave to diverse acquisitions and inclusive governance—that foster more equitable pathways.

The study concludes that the experiences of these leaders demonstrate a critical shift in the sector. Achieving meaningful change requires moving beyond individual adaptation to systemic reform of both formal procedures and informal norms. This research contributes to the discourse on gender and leadership by centering the voices of women directors, showing that transformative leadership involves reshaping museum institutions to value and integrate feminist principles of care, collaboration, and inclusivity.

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# Introduction

The art world is a multifaceted ecosystem where cultural, economic, and social dimensions intersect. At the heart of this ecosystem are museums, institutions that curate, preserve, and interpret art, while shaping public narratives about history, identity, and creativity. Leaders within this domain, such as museum directors, have significant influence, they determine the artists featured, the narratives shared, and the representation of cultural heritage (Uwase, 2025). However, this power is unequally distributed. Despite women constituting over 60% of museum professionals globally (AAMD, 2018), they occupy fewer than 30% of directorial positions in the world's major art museums (GEMM Platform, 2014). In the Netherlands, this inequality continues, with women leaders often managing institutional biases that privilege male-dominated norms of leadership (Boekmanstichting, 2024).

Museum leaders have significant influence on cultural narratives (Uwase, 2025). Museum leaders' choices influence societal values, making them important for addressing inequalities. However, the art world's leadership structures have historically reflected patriarchal norms, framing leadership as a domain of 'authoritative decisiveness' (Eagly & Carli, 2007), a trait stereotypically associated with men. Leadership is often defined narrowly, favoring traits like assertiveness and decisiveness that are stereotypically associated with masculinity, while underappreciating collaborative or empathetic approaches (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In the Netherlands, despite progressive gender policies, workplace inequalities persist, the museum sector mirrors broader societal contradictions. Women are often well-represented in mid-level roles but face systemic barriers in reaching directorial positions (Boekmanstichting, 2024; Gan et al., 2017).

As the report by Women Inc. 'A story yet untold' highlights, "*only 6 percent of Dutch museum directors are women*" (Heithuis, 2022). This lack of women in leadership raises serious questions about the obstacles women encounter when seeking top roles and the systemic biases behind these disparities. Recent studies on women visual artists, highlight persistent gender inequalities in the Dutch cultural sector, such as income gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and challenges balancing work and family responsibilities (Boekmanstichting, 2024). These findings highlight the need to investigate leadership dynamics in cultural institutions, where gender norms and organizational structures may sustain inequalities. The famous 'glass ceiling' metaphor, first coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986), remains highly relevant in the context of museum leadership. Structural barriers, including unclear promotion criteria, lack of mentorship, and

inflexible work cultures, disproportionately hinder women's advancement. Institutional biases, including assumptions about women's ability to balance leadership roles and caregiving responsibilities, can hinder their progression (Elsesser & Lever, 2011).

As the report 'A story yet untold' notes, "*the art world is evolving, gender equality is becoming a more important theme that we see more and more in, for example, museums and exhibitions*" (Heithuis, 2022). Research also highlights the persistent gender wage gap in the cultural sector. Women museum directors earn, on average, less than their male counterparts, even when leading institutions of similar scale and prestige (Treviño, et al., 2017). As the Women Inc. report states: "*artistry was not considered suitable for women until the 19th century*", and this historical bias continues to influence perceptions of women's roles in the art world today (Heithuis, 2022). Research has shown that diverse leadership teams contribute to richer and more inclusive programming, enhancing the museum's ability to engage broader audiences (Botte, 2020). In contrast, institutions that lack gender diversity in leadership may struggle to fully integrate feminist and intersectional perspectives into their curatorial and operational practices (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013).

While progress has been made towards gender equality in the museum sector, there is limited understanding of how women who have achieved leadership positions have navigated the institutional systems that historically presented barriers. Existing research primarily documents the gender gap and identifies structural obstacles to advancement, often overlooking the lived experiences and strategies of women who have successfully overcome these challenges. This study addresses this gap by exploring how women directors in Dutch art museums perceive, navigate, and ultimately reshape the gendered leadership structures within their institutions. By analyzing their experiences, this research offers insights into how institutional inequalities are both perpetuated and transformed from within. Consequently, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the opportunities and difficulties women encounter in obtaining and sustaining leadership roles in the Dutch museum field, as well as the broader dynamics of gendered power in cultural institutions. At the core of this thesis lies the following research question:

*'How do women leaders in Dutch art museums perceive, navigate and transform the gendered structures of leadership within their institutions?'*

By answering the following questions:

1. How do women in Dutch museum leadership experience the structural and cultural constraints that shape their access to and experience of leadership?
2. How do they navigate and negotiate gendered expectations and institutional barriers throughout their career trajectories?
3. In what ways do they enact or inspire institutional redesigns that foster more equitable leadership pathways for future generations?

This study addresses these questions through a qualitative narrative inquiry, conducting in-depth interviews with eleven female art museum directors in the Netherlands. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences, moving beyond previous data on representation to explore the nuanced ways gender is navigated in leadership practice. This research contributes to the literature on Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Management by applying and testing frameworks like Role Congruity Theory, gendered organizations and Feminist Institutionalism in the specific context of Dutch cultural institutions. It seeks to bridge the gap between documenting gender-based inequalities and understanding the lived realities of leadership. The findings offer practical insights for museum boards, cultural policymakers, and aspiring leaders, by identifying persistent barriers and effective navigation strategies.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature and the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 details the methodological approach, including data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the research results, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion, conclusion, and recommendations. Finally, the references and appendices are included.

# Literature Review

This literature review explores the structural and cultural factors that influence the representation and position of women in management positions at art museums, with a particular focus on the Dutch context. It combines insights from organizational and gender studies with social-psychological theory and museological literature on leadership, inclusion, and institutional change. Building on this, the next section explores the state of the literature on gender (in)equality in museum leadership hierarchies.

## Women in Museum Leadership

The gender gap in museum leadership is well documented across multiple studies and reports. In the art-museum domain specifically, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) found that women hold fewer than half of the directorships and (on average) are paid less than men (Gan, Voss, Phillips, Anagnos, & Wade, 2014; Treviño, Voss, Anagnos, & Wade, 2017). These reports link women's underrepresentation and lower pay to budget size and museum type, identifying top-tier institutions as the places where inequality is most acute (Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017). While some progress has occurred, women remain more likely to lead smaller museums with lower budgets, whereas men continue to dominate the directorships of larger, higher-status museums, a distribution that signals persistent structural barriers for women (Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017). Moreover, research indicates that while the representation of women in museum leadership has improved, progress remains slow.

Studies attribute this limited advancement to persistent institutional biases embedded within recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes (Acker, 2006; Clark, 2019; Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017). These findings suggest that structural inequality within museums continues to shape leadership trajectories, underscoring the need for systemic organizational change. Early analyses already warned that cultural organizations have historically favored men for top roles and have reproduced leadership pipelines through informal networks (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006). This dynamic aligns with subsequent evidence from the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) studies, committees frequently consult their existing contacts and networks, which increases the probability that men are selected. Women who are chosen for leadership positions are often watched more closely and need to provide stronger evidence of their abilities to be seen as effective leaders

(Treviño et al., 2017). Beyond individual decisions, inequality is sustained by organizational routines and norms. Drawing on feminist institutionalist thinking within museum studies (Levin, 2010), the literature highlights how hiring templates, board expectations, and funding logics can reproduce gendered advantages unless rules and practices are changed. In the Netherlands, policy frameworks and sector codes have stimulated attention to diversity and equity, yet monitoring efforts also point out that some initiatives may only have a surface-level impact and that detailed, public information about leadership makeup remains scarce (Boekmanstichting, 2024).

Compensation patterns mirror these structural dynamics. Both AAMD reports indicate that pay gaps are smallest or nonexistent in the lowest budget categories but grow larger at the highest budget levels, contributing to a general gender pay gap among museum directors (Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017). In other words, the locus of inequality sits precisely where prestige, resources, and external visibility are found, with higher-paying positions at larger institutions tending to be held by men. This ranking is important because top-tier director jobs allow leaders to influence museum collections, events, and industry standards. Work-life balance issues also affect who can become and stay a leader. In museums, policies that don't support families, strict schedules for events, and the high stress of director jobs can lead to burnout and make it harder for women, especially those with caregiving duties, to stay in their roles (Clark, 2019). Consistent with broader gender studies, women leaders often face a 'motherhood penalty' where caregiving is seen as a reduced commitment, harming promotion prospects, even when performance is the same (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013). These issues are worsened by biased evaluations, in leadership roles typically held by men, the same actions might be viewed differently based on gender, with women more likely to face doubt when they take charge in sensitive areas like selling off or returning collections, or in making organizational changes (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). Access to professional opportunities is also a common issue. Studies show that the best jobs are often found through exclusive groups where women are less likely to be included, particularly those not already connected to established art or network circles (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006; Treviño et al., 2017). Women report having fewer mentors and less involvement in informal decision-making, which hinders their access to high-profile projects that typically lead to director positions (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006; Treviño et al., 2017). Without deliberate efforts such as open recruitment, inclusive hiring panels, and mentorship initiatives, exclusive professional networks tend to reproduce existing gender hierarchies and favor men for top leadership positions. Research has shown that organizational structures and informal

practices often sustain inequality unless actively challenged (Acker, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Williams et al., 2012). Targeted interventions and leadership development programs are therefore essential to promote gender equity and diversify institutional leadership pipelines (Beeson & Valerio, 2019; Gan et al., 2014).

As more women lead museums, leadership norms are shifting toward inclusive, mentoring, participatory, and change-oriented practices typical of transformational leadership (Beeson & Valerio, 2019; Botte, 2020). Feminist leadership extends this by challenging hierarchies and advancing equity through shared decision-making, policy reform, community engagement, and decolonizing narratives (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandell & Nightingale, 2013). In the Dutch context, women directors prioritize outreach and access for underrepresented groups, aligning success with openness, accessibility, and meaningful public engagement (Vinson, 2007; Sandell & Nightingale, 2013; Botte, 2020). Yet headwinds remain: resistant, male-dominated structures, budget constraints, and gendered expectations that require balancing authority with warmth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Botte, 2020; Vaquinhas, 2018). Even so, women leaders are well-positioned to institutionalize progressive policies and drive systemic change in cultural institutions.

While most research on this issue originates from North America, the broader challenge is evident in the Dutch cultural sector. A study by WOMEN Inc. details underrepresentation, pay inequality, and bias across various Dutch arts fields, highlighting the need to examine leadership paths and decision-making processes, not just overall statistics (Heithuis, 2022). The Boekmanstichting's Cultuurmonitor also indicates that while diversity, inclusion, and equity are policy priorities, detailed, consistent data on gender at the highest levels of institutions is lacking, making it difficult to track progress and ensure accountability (Boekmanstichting/Cultuurmonitor, 2024). Historically, women have led museums, but their paths and contributions have often been overlooked in institutional records (Anguix Vilches, 2022).

Taken all together, the literature portrays women's leadership in museums as shaped by a complex combination of factors: differences based on budget and prestige (Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017); institutionalized bias in recruitment and evaluation (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006; Elsesser & Lever, 2011); issues with work-life balance and caregiving expectations (Clark, 2019; Sandell & Nightingale, 2013); unequal access to networks and sponsorship (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006; Treviño et al., 2017); and intersectional inequalities in who benefits from openings at the top (Crenshaw, 1989; Clark, 2019). Even though policies and industry standards have increased focus on equity, the biggest problems remain

in areas with the most prestige, power, and money. The following section will look at theories like role congruity, gendered organizations, and feminist institutionalism to understand how gender expectations, rules, and practices within museums create ongoing inequality in leadership.

## Theoretical Framework

### Role Congruity Theory

Role Congruity Theory (RCT) offers a lens for understanding why women encounter challenges in cultural leadership. Essentially, the theory suggests a clash between typical female expectations (e.g., warmth, communality, nurturance) and stereotypically leader-typed expectations (e.g., assertiveness, agency, decisiveness) (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This perceived incongruity produces two interrelated forms of bias. First, women are evaluated as less suitable for leadership, a descriptive bias about who ‘fits’ the role. Second, when women act assertively to meet leadership demands, they risk backlash for violating gender expectations, a prescriptive bias, for instance, being judged as ‘harsh’ or insufficiently ‘likeable’ for the same behaviors that are rewarded in men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). In reality, these patterns lead to higher standards, more doubt about authority, and women needing to provide more proof to be seen as legitimate leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Evidence from large-scale surveys indicates that women leaders must demonstrate competence more repeatedly than men and face more judgment of similar decisions (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). RCT predicts exactly this ‘double bind’. When women show the decisiveness valued in executive roles, they might be judged as not warm enough. Conversely, if they focus on collaboration and care, they could be seen as lacking authority (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These imbalances in evaluation make it harder for women to get promoted, reduce the recognition they get for succeeding, and ultimately lead to different career paths.

Sectoral patterns reinforce and are reinforced by these biases. In art museums, men still hold most of the top director positions that come with large budgets, and men are also more often on the paths leading to these jobs. Women in leadership roles report facing more doubt and pushback when they try to introduce new policies or curatorial ideas (Treviño, Voss, Anagnos, & Wade, 2017; Elsesser & Lever, 2011). RCT helps explain why these frictions increase at the top, as the importance and visibility of leadership roles grow.

Expectations about what leaders should look like are more strictly enforced, and when leaders don't fit the typical male image, they get punished more.

Importantly, role incongruity is not isolated, it is connected with organizational structures and professional networks. Studies of museum workplaces show that senior jobs often come from informal networks and reputation systems where men are more common, which limits women's access to mentors, important assignments, and the private discussions where strategies are made (Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006; Treviño et al., 2017). These gatekeeping practices make the biases described by RCT worse. When decision-makers already believe women are less suited for leadership, having no sponsors and fewer chances to achieve important things, makes it harder to change those beliefs. However, making searches and promotions totally open, with clear rules and mixed groups, can interrupt both the descriptive and prescriptive strands of congruity bias by making performance standards explicit and give stereotypes less room to grow (Botte, 2020; Treviño et al., 2017).

Work–life expectations are another link between what's expected of roles and how organizations actually operate. Museum director jobs require constant public work, including evenings, weekends, network events, and crisis handling, which many museums still expect from leaders who are always available. In line with broader gender studies, women leaders report more scrutiny about caregiving and availability, similar to a ‘motherhood penalty’ that affects their perceived commitment and chances for promotion (Clark, 2019; Sandell & Nightingale, 2013). RCT explains why this is important. When the typical leader is pictured as free of ties and focused on one thing, personal duties are seen as signs of less power, making women seem less like a good fit for the job (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Also, it's important to look at how different factors like race and class affect women leaders. Since stereotypes aren't all the same, the idea of a ‘leader’ clashes with ideas about women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ people. Research shows that mostly white women have benefited from the rise in women leaders, while women of color and LGBTQ+ women face unique challenges when it comes to being hired, evaluated, and judged by the public (Crenshaw, 1989; Clark, 2019; Sandell & Nightingale, 2013). Intersectionality helps refine Role Congruity Theory predictions. The perceived mismatch can be stronger, and the backlash more severe, when multiple marginalized identities move further away from the dominant leader image. Role Congruity Theory helps explain why women face ongoing challenges in museum leadership, even when more opportunities are available. The theory suggests that women are initially seen as less suitable for leadership roles, and they face harsher judgment for acting assertively (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These challenges are especially strong in top

positions where leadership expectations are most standard. In reality, these issues are linked to how people network, a lack of sponsors, and assumptions about leaders' availability (Acker, 2006; Williams, et al., 2012). The theory suggests some practical steps: use clear, criteria-based hiring, have diverse hiring committees that get training, offer mentorship for important tasks and allow flexible work so leadership isn't just about traditional male traits (Acker, 2006; Beeson & Valerio, 2019; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The next part will explore how gender and feminist theories explain the museum's official and unofficial rules that can help or hurt these changes.

## Gendered Organizations

Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations argues that organizational structures are not neutral but are instead shaped by gendered assumptions. She posits that organizational logic favors a masculine-coded 'ideal worker' who is constantly available, free from caregiving duties, and unburdened by personal needs (Acker, 1990). Practices like job design, promotion criteria, and expectations about 'cultural fit' often reflect norms about time, authority, and commitment that are more easily aligned with men's life courses and interaction styles. Consequently, routine organizational practices can advantage men and disadvantage women without explicit discrimination (Acker, 1990). Acker identifies several processes through which organizations become gendered: the division of labor and distribution of rewards, symbols and images that link authority with masculinity, everyday interactions that enforce gender norms, and the internalization of these norms as natural. In later work, she describes 'inequality regimes' that show how gender, race, and class are organized and legitimized together at work (Acker, 2006). This makes it harder for women with unequal care duties to meet demands for long hours, constant presence, and uninterrupted careers. These gendered rules are still present, even in 'new economy' workplaces that claim to be flexible. Christine L. Williams, Christine Muller, and Kristen Kilanski (2012) show how things like project work and client jobs make constant availability seem like personal responsibility, while performance evaluations remain unclear and dependent on personal connections. Women are still judged against an ideal of tireless devotion, and requests for flexibility can be read as lack of commitment (Williams et al., 2012).

When applied to art museums, Acker's idea helps explain why women's careers often slow down at senior levels, even without obvious obstacles. Leadership jobs involve odd hours, network events, travel, and handling emergencies—all based on the 'always-available'

idea that implicitly favors workers without caregiving duties. Hiring and reviews often use unclear standards like ‘fit’ or ‘presence’, which allow gendered ideas about authority to influence decisions. Unofficial networks also boost unequal chances for advancement.

This idea fits well with Role Congruity Theory. Role Congruity explains how stereotypes about gender affect how women leaders are seen, while Acker shows how the way organizations are set up gives those stereotypes more impact through things like job structures, time commitments, how decisions are made, and everyday routines. To fix this, you need more than just training on biases; you need changes to the system itself. This means making rules for promotions clearer, scheduling important meetings so everyone can attend, allowing flexible work for leaders without punishment, and keeping track of who gets the big opportunities. These actions help reduce the room for personal opinions where gender stereotypes about leadership can flourish.

### Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist Institutionalism sees institutions as setups with inherent gender bias. It explains how formal rules like hiring and pay, along with informal norms and social circles, affect who gets to be a leader. Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell (2010) argue that organisations do not simply reflect neutral procedures. They create expectations and power dynamics that favor certain leadership paths while making others seem less valid. This approach focuses on the structures of institutions, their rules, standard practices, and unwritten codes of conduct, as the primary drivers of gender inequality, rather than individual prejudices.

A concrete mechanism through which inequality is reproduced within museum leadership trajectories is the operation of informal recommendation structures. While vacancies are often formally open, in practice selection committees and boards tend to rely heavily on reputations and endorsements circulating within their existing networks. As Bourdieu (1979, 1993) argues, social capital is not merely a set of contacts but a form of power that grants access to positions and resources. Candidates embedded in the “right” networks thus benefit from symbolic capital, whereas those without such connections remain largely invisible in the appointment process. Becker’s (1982) concept of “art worlds” further underscores that legitimacy and value in the art field are not established in neutral ways, but rather through collective processes in which established actors define who is deemed “suitable” or “professional.” Within these networks, names and recommendations circulate in

ways that are closely tied to historically male-dominated power structures. As a result, men disproportionately benefit from influential sponsors, while women and other underrepresented groups are excluded from comparable access to social capital. The outcome is a self-reinforcing process: committees repeatedly select candidates who align with existing networks and cultural norms, thereby reproducing inequality under the guise of objective professionalism. This mechanism demonstrates how subtle, informally embedded practices sustain existing hierarchies and systematically obstruct women's advancement to top positions.

In the Dutch cultural sector, this perspective helps explain why formal equality policies have not eliminated gender gaps at the top. The Cultuurmonitor (2024) shows that women make up a majority of the cultural workforce yet remain underrepresented in senior positions, with the largest and most prestigious institutions still predominantly led by men (Boekmanstichting, 2024). These differences are not entirely due to explicit prejudice but stem from informal expectations of constant availability, visibility, and connections within networks, which mirror the masculine 'ideal worker' standard discussed in Feminist Institutionalism.

These issues are also influenced by deeper inequalities in career progression. The Boekmanstichting reports that women are more likely to work part-time or freelance in the arts, jobs that usually don't lead to top positions and often miss out on mentorship or key assignments (Boekmanstichting, 2024). Feminist Institutionalism would see this as proof that unwritten rules, like who's considered 'ready' or gets high-profile projects, shape formal processes like job openings or hiring decisions. Similar patterns appear across Europe: the European Museum Academy (2024) notes that despite women dominating museum workforces, they remain clustered below decision-making level.

For Dutch art museums, Feminist Institutionalism therefore highlights that achieving gender equality requires more than bias training or individual advancement efforts. This requires changing systems, making sure criteria for selection and hiring are clear, including diversity tracking in how organizations are run, setting up formal mentoring and sponsorship programs, and checking how important projects are given out. Feminist Institutionalism helps us see how unwritten rules affect who gets to be a leader, making it easier to understand and change the gender imbalance in Dutch art museum leadership.

Dutch-led historical research further situated these dynamics. Laura Anguix-Vilches (2022), part of the Radboud University project Women Managing Museums, traces how early female administrators were channelled into low-status curatorial and educational roles, while

senior management tracks professionalised around male-dominated networks. These legacies still shape assumptions about who appears ‘ready’ for leadership, echoing the gendered professional ways Feminist Institutionalism highlights.

This literature review and theoretical framework shows that persistent gender inequality in Dutch art museums cannot be explained by individual bias alone, but is reproduced through institutional logics, informal networks, and cultural norms. While international studies (Gan et al., 2014; Treviño et al., 2017) and national monitoring tools (Cultuurmonitor; Governance Code) provide valuable background, they offer limited insight into how these dynamics are actually experienced by those at the top. Having outlined the theoretical foundations and gaps in existing literature, the next chapter turns to the methodological design of the study, explaining how narrative interviews are conducted and analyzed to uncover the lived experiences of female directors and to explore how the glass ceiling can be challenged in practice.

# Methodology

This chapter details the study's methodology, connecting its theoretical framework with the research design. It covers the analytical approach, research plan, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and study limitations. The goal is to examine the career paths of women art museum directors in the Netherlands to determine if a glass ceiling still exists and to explore ways to achieve more equitable leadership.

## Research Approach

This study is grounded within an interpretivist epistemology, viewing social reality as subjectively constructed through human experience. This perspective is particularly suitable for investigating complex social phenomena like leadership, as it prioritizes understanding the subjective lived individual experiences. It aligns with the research method narrative inquiry, that people construct and understand their lives and identities through storytelling.

As a researcher with prior exposure to the Dutch cultural sector, my positionality is that of a semi-insider, to the Dutch museum field. This likely facilitated access, as I shared a foundational understanding of the field. However, having this position risks normalization of issues and assumptions. To mitigate potential bias, notes were taken throughout the research process to critically examine assumptions and preconceptions during data collection and analysis. Thereby ensuring that the findings remained grounded in the participants' narratives rather than my own assumptions

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing narrative inquiry as its primary methodology. Narrative inquiry is a method that focuses on individuals' lived experiences and the ways they construct meaning through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a method, narrative inquiry is especially suited for exploring the career trajectories of women art museum directors in the Netherlands, given its ability to capture personal experiences, social structures, and institutional influences on leadership. Women museum directors navigate complex professional landscapes shaped by gender biases, institutional cultures, and their own actions. Narrative inquiry allows women museum directors to express their experiences in their own words, offering detailed and contextual insights that other research methods, like surveys or thematic analyses, may miss (Riessman, 2008).

# Research Design

## Data Collection

This study used a qualitative approach to explore gender issues in museum leadership. It involved conducting in-depth, semi structured interviews with eleven women museum directors in the Netherlands about their leadership experiences, challenges, and approaches to success. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: they must hold a directorship at an art museum in the Netherlands and identify as women. Interviews were structured around a few key themes: the structural and cultural constraints that shape the female directors' access to and experience of leadership; navigating and negotiating gender expectations and ways to redesign and foster more equitable leadership pathways. This format allowed for guided inquiry based on a set of core themes while remaining flexible enough to explore emerging topics in depth, facilitating a conversational and rich data collection process, allowing for both guided inquiry and open-ended discussion. Some participants shared their experiences through clear and detailed narratives, while others required more prompting and follow-up questions. This approach made the interviews more conversational and flexible than standardized questionnaires. The full interview question guide is included in Appendix 1.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in person or, when necessary, via Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using a hybrid approach that combined deductive coding, guided by the study's theoretical framework, with inductive coding to identify emerging themes from participants' accounts. This analysis links individual experiences to broader organizational structures and societal norms, highlighting how these intersect to sustain inequality in cultural sector leadership.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a systematic approach guided by the principles of narrative inquiry and hybrid thematic analysis strategy, combining both deductive and inductive coding techniques. This process was structured to remain faithful to the participants' personal stories while examining how their experiences reflected and challenged theoretical concepts.

The process began with a phase of immersion in the data. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim to form the primary textual data analysis. During the transcribing of the interviews, I wrote memos and a summary of the interview after finishing the transcription.

The coding process was hybrid. Deductive (A Priori) codes were derived directly from the theoretical framework. The codes were used to create the interview guide. This included codes such as informal networks, double standards, ideal worker norm, work-life negotiation, navigating institutional barriers, and strategies for institutional redesign, and so forth (see Appendix 1). To remain open to the participants' narratives, I also coded inductive, for any unexpected concepts, tensions or themes that arose from the data. These codes included; attribution of work to male superiors, social safety, flexible holiday policies, broadening the audience profile, generational barriers, deconstructing elitist museum model, life-phase specific policies, whiteness of the sector, regional variations, non-linear career paths and gendered ageism.

After the initial coding of all transcripts, I analyzed the coded data to identify broader patterns of meaning. In line with the narrative approach, I not only considered what was said but also how the stories were structured. I paid attention to recurring narratives, such as stories of being "*hoisted onto the shield*" versus stories of deliberate ambition, and noted points of tension or contradiction within individual accounts for example, stating no barriers were faced while simultaneously describing gendered incidents.

The coded data was then organized and analyzed to identify broader patterns of meaning. This involved putting both the deductive and inductive codes into the three key themes (the structural and cultural constraints that shape the female directors' access to and experience of leadership; navigating and negotiating gender expectations and ways to redesign and foster more equitable leadership pathways) to answer the research questions:

The first theme was built from codes that describe the systemic and often invisible barriers faced by women, including informal networks, double standards, ideal worker norm, institutional barriers for women, gendered norms in decision-making, implicit gender norms, generational barriers, whiteness of the sector, regional variations, and gendered ageism. The second theme captures the strategies employed by the directors, drawing on codes such as work-life negotiation, navigating institutional barriers, perceived (in)congruence between femininity and leadership, instances of undervaluation or resistance, (in)visibility of care and emotional labor, strategies for institutional redesign, informal sponsorship, networking, mentorship, attribution of work to male superiors, and non-linear career paths. The last theme encompasses proactive efforts to institutionalize change, informed by codes like strategies for

institutional redesign, social safety, flexible holiday policies, broadening the audience profile, deconstructing elitist museum model, life-phase specific policies, formal rules vs. informal norms, and access to influence.

The final stage involved weaving the thematic analysis into the narrative results report that constitutes Chapter 4. For each theme, I selected compelling, and representative narrative excerpts from the interviews to illustrate the findings, ensuring the participants' own voices and stories remained central to the analysis. The writing process focused on constructing a coherent analytical narrative that directly addressed the research question, showing how women leaders perceive, navigate, and transform gendered structures through their personal and professional stories.

## Ethical Considerations

This thesis adheres to strict ethical research standards due to the sensitive nature of discussing gender biases and career challenges. Participants will be fully informed about the study's aims, methods, and confidentiality measures. Names and museum affiliations will be kept anonymous. They provided explicit verbal consent for participation and audio recording. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information, including names and specific museum affiliations, have been removed from the data and the final report. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms (e.g., Museum Director 1) throughout the thesis. The researcher will acknowledge their role in shaping the study and maintain awareness of potential biases (Finlay, 2002). As a researcher with prior professional exposure to the Dutch museum field, I maintained a reflexive log to monitor preconceptions and to ensure that coding decisions were grounded in participants' accounts rather than my assumptions.

# Research Results

This chapter presents the analysis of the narrative interviews with eleven female museum directors.

## Analysis of the interviews

### Structural and Cultural Constraints that Shape Women's Access to and Experience of Leadership

The experiences of the eleven museum directors reveal that gendered structures and cultural norms continue to influence access to, and perceptions of, leadership within Dutch art museums. Although many participants initially downplayed systemic inequality, their accounts nevertheless exposed subtle, persistent barriers embedded in institutional culture, recruitment processes, and professional expectations. Access to leadership remains mediated by informal, male-dominated networks. As Museum Director 3 noted “*the bureaus still have ties to that old network, of course*” referring to executive search firms’ reliance on established circles of male professionals. Similarly, Museum Director 6 attributed her advancement to “*well-connected male mentors*”, emphasizing the importance of informal sponsorship. While Museum Director 10 confirmed this pattern, describing how she was approached for her current role through colleagues and her predecessor rather than an open application procedure.

This reliance on insider networks was viewed as both enabling and exclusionary. Museum Director 4, who was often “*approached*” for positions, described this as “*a strange luxury position*”, raising questions about transparency and fairness. Several participants noted that this system privileges those already embedded in professional and social networks, which often remain dominated by men and individuals from similar socio-economic backgrounds. As Museum Director 9 summarized, “*some people have an advantage because of their socio-economic background*” indicating that class as well as gender can influence access to leadership.

Even within leadership positions, women’s authority was frequently contested. Museum Director 8 recalled being repeatedly referred to as “*a young director*” despite her extensive experience: “*When you’re almost fifty, are you still a young director? I wonder if I had been a*

*man, if they would have said that.*” Likewise, Museum Director 10 described being infantilized by stakeholders who still called her “*meisje*” (“*little girl*”), exemplifying how infantilizing language reinforces gendered hierarchies of authority. Several directors linked this to a broader credibility gap, as Museum Director 2 explained: “*men can be much more assertive ..., and people simply take it as truth, even when it is bluff*”. Museum Director 7 similarly remarked that “*decisions of men are often accepted as true more quickly*”. More overt sexism persisted as well, illustrated by a colleague’s remark to Museum Director 3: “*I would like to put you over my knee, pull your pants down and spank you on your bare bottom.*” These examples demonstrate how gendered expectations continue to shape interactions and perceptions of legitimacy in leadership contexts.

Expectations around work–life balance further expose the persistence of the masculine “ideal worker” model. Directors reported being confronted with assumptions about maternal caregiving and reduced professional commitment. Museum Director 1 recalled being asked repeatedly: “*Are you going to work less now?*”, after the birth of her third child, adding: “*Why would I suddenly work less?*”. Museum Director 11 recalled being asked in a job interview, “*How are you going to combine this with two children?*”, a question not posed to male candidates. Similarly, Museum Director 6 pointed out that she was “*the only woman with a family who works full-time*” highlighting the enduring social norm of part-time motherhood. Museum Director 3 shared the emotional toll of such expectations: “*The feeling that you are failing. I think I suffered from that more than my husband.*” These accounts suggest that professional advancement remains closely tied to the masculine “ideal worker” model, where caregiving responsibilities are seen as incompatible with leadership.

While museums are often perceived as progressive institutions, participants problematized their internal cultures as conservative and hierarchical. Museum Director 2 characterized the sector as “*outwardly progressive but inwardly conservative*”. Museum Director 6 similarly remarked that “*the museum sector in the Netherlands is quite conservative*” suggesting that openness to female leadership varies by region and institutional size. Regional directors, such as Museum Director 3, observed that: “*Here in the South... the men are still really the ones who make the decisions and seek each other out at drinks to do business.*”, illustrating the persistence of patriarchal sociability outside the Randstad.

Even directors who did not personally experience discrimination acknowledged observing it around them. Museum Director 4 stated, “*I haven’t really experienced*

*institutional barriers myself, but I have seen a lot of them around me*". Others noted that gender biases were often seen as generational or stylistic differences, making them harder to confront directly.

A notable tension emerges between participants' rhetorical denial of gender barriers and their implicit recognition of them. Several emphasized that they had "*never thought much*" about being women in leadership (Museum Director 7) or that they "*did not encounter significant difficulties*" (Museum Director 1), yet their narratives consistently revealed unequal treatment, exclusion from networks, and double standards. This dissonance suggests a normalization of inequality: success within gendered structures can obscure those structures themselves. As Museum Director 9 reflected, while she did not perceive sexism directly, she recognized that "*people always expect that you have attention for them... If you were a man, you might be able to cut it off a bit sooner.*"

This contradiction functions as a narrative strategy of professional legitimacy. Within a sector that prizes meritocracy, positioning oneself as self-made rather than disadvantaged allows women leaders to align with dominant institutional ideals. However, such individualization of success also reproduces what Acker (2006) terms "*inequality regimes*" sustaining the very hierarchies these directors navigate.

## Navigating and Negotiating Gendered Expectations and Institutional Barriers

While structural and cultural barriers continue to shape women's access to leadership, the interviewed directors demonstrate how they actively negotiate, adapt to, and sometimes reproduce these constraints. Their accounts reveal agency not as the absence of structure, but as a situated practice, marked by strategic self-presentation, emotional labor, and selective conformity within gendered institutions.

The directors' career paths reveal diverse forms of agency and self-determination. Several participants emphasized initiative and perseverance as key factors in their ascent to leadership. Museum Director 1 explained that she had "*actively applied for leadership positions, motivated by a long-standing ambition to direct cultural institutions*" while Museum Director 7 described each of her career moves as "*coming from myself... the need to*

*do something different again, to develop myself further*". These accounts emphasize personal drive over external validation, signifying an individualized strategy for career progression.

However, others portrayed their leadership journeys as less intentional. Museum Director 3 stated that she "*never really aimed to become a director*" but was instead "*hoisted onto the shield*" by others, while Museum Director 11 admitted she "*never applied to be a director*". Such narratives of incidental advancement signal both humility and adaptation to gendered expectations that discourage overt ambition in women. In both cases, professional legitimacy is articulated through narratives that balance competence with modesty, a tension central to women's leadership discourse.

A recurring theme across interviews was the strategic modulation of behavior and communication. Museum Director 5 characterized her approach as "*chameleon-like*" explaining that "*you have to say what you have done, where you have worked, and who you know before the conversation starts... because otherwise you are ignored*". Similarly, Museum Director 3 admitted to adopting a more "*masculine*" tone when dealing with assertive male counterparts, while Museum Director 6 described bringing a male colleague to certain meetings because "*he doesn't say anything, but he is there*". These accounts demonstrate how women internalize and strategically navigate credibility norms coded as masculine. Yet, this adaptation carries ambivalence. As Museum Director 8 acknowledged, "*If I copy those techniques, it feels like that's not me... and then it just doesn't come across well*". Her comment highlights the emotional tension between authenticity and performance, between being effective and being oneself.

For many directors, establishing and maintaining visibility was a critical strategy in navigating institutional hierarchies. Museum Director 11 stated plainly that "*networking is essential. If you're invisible, you won't be on the list for recruiters*". Similarly, Museum Director 6 emphasized the need to "*take up more space based on your title*". Such remarks illustrate how women must actively perform visibility and authority to maintain legitimacy. Yet, some resisted gendered framings altogether. Museum Director 7, for instance, emphasized that she tries "*not to think much about being a woman in leadership*", signaling a desire to reject tokenization even as this stance risks obscuring structural inequities.

Negotiations between professional ambition and care responsibilities further underscore the relational dimension of women's agency. Several directors discussed the need to make conscious choices about motherhood, work hours, and household division. Museum

Director 5 shared that she “*consciously chose not to have children because I wanted to work*” describing it as a decision to dedicate herself fully to her career. Museum Director 6 took a different approach, maintaining full-time employment while her partner reduced his workweek to four days, noting that “*in my surroundings, I am the only woman with a family who works full-time*”.

Others framed motherhood as both challenge and asset. Museum Director 11 explained that “*through having children, you learn to juggle multiple things and you become much more efficient*”, suggesting that caregiving can enhance, rather than diminish, leadership capacity. Still, most participants acknowledged that they continued to face scrutiny for balancing both roles. As Museum Director 10 observed, “*as a woman you also have to justify more often how you do certain things*” highlighting that professional credibility remains entangled with gendered assumptions about domestic responsibilities.

Across interviews, emotional labor appeared as both a leadership strategy and a coping mechanism. Many directors emphasized empathy, transparency, and care as deliberate tools of authority. Museum Director 11 described “*rituals of care*”, such as personally following up with rejected applicants so they would “*feel heard and respected*”. Similarly, Museum Director 8 stressed the importance of inclusive decision-making to “*build trust*”. These practices exemplify what feminist scholars identify as gendered forms of leadership, balancing authority with relational legitimacy. Yet, they also reveal the burden of maintaining institutional harmony within patriarchal hierarchies.

Several participants acknowledged using gendered structures pragmatically. Museum Director 1 admitted leveraging her “*male board members for fundraising because they can access networks of other men more easily*”, while Museum Director 5 conceded that “*If I think that as a woman I won't get the result at a certain table, then we send a man*”. These strategies exemplify what feminist theorists describe as “*pragmatic complicity*”, acts that ensure professional survival while inadvertently reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Ultimately, the directors' narratives foreground a form of constrained agency, one enacted through continuous negotiation between authenticity and adaptation, visibility and caution, resistance and accommodation. Their strategies reveal not only resilience but also the extent to which gendered power operates through subtle expectations of comportment, care, and modesty. In navigating these expectations, women leaders both challenge and reproduce the very structures that define their professional realities.

## Redesigning and Fostering More Equitable Leadership Pathways

The third theme explores how women leaders in Dutch art museums attempt to reshape institutional structures and cultures to promote greater equity and inclusivity. While their capacity for change varies depending on institutional context and resources, nearly all directors described taking deliberate steps to create more open, diverse, and socially responsible museums. Their efforts range from implementing inclusive policies to transforming internal hierarchies and redefining the social role of the museum itself.

Many directors sought to dismantle hierarchical work cultures by promoting openness, equality, and social safety. Museum Director 1 emphasizes that *“everyone is equally important in this museum. We cannot exist without security staff, without cleaners, without the café. No one is too good to empty the dishwasher”*. Similarly, Museum Director 7 described introducing policies to improve social safety, including confidential advisors, whistleblower procedures, and training sessions to distinguish between discomfort and genuine unsafety. As she put it, *“We say yes, this is just very awkward, but we will have the conversation with each other”*.

At the same time, participants recognized the fragility of informal inclusivity. Museum Director 8 observed that *“because people are sometimes so close, they don’t dare to confront each other”*, illustrating that inclusivity initiatives must be accompanied by structural safeguards. To support well-being, several directors implemented flexible working conditions. Museum Director 6 introduced policies such as flexible hours, additional personal leave days, and free communal meals to encourage a sense of equality and community, explaining that *“you are judged on the results and not necessarily on from what time to what time you are present in the office”*. Museum Director 5 also established flexible vacation policies that allow employees to observe holidays according to their own beliefs: *“A free choice of vacation days for your own circumstances... I find it wonderful that people can take time off for Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, or Ketu Koti”*. These policies both acknowledge diverse life circumstances and symbolically decenter dominant cultural norms within museum workplaces.

Several directors explicitly redefined leadership as a collective rather than individual enterprise. Museum Director 2 described her museum’s multi-year plan as *“really made together, not just by me”* and Museum Director 3 similarly framed her style as *“democratic”*

and “*inspiring*” highlighting her belief that “*we all have a voice at the table*”. Such participatory approaches challenge traditional hierarchies of expertise and authority, aligning with feminist models of distributed leadership. Embedding empathy and care within institutional norms was also seen as central to equity. Museum Director 4 implemented “*life-phase policies*” addressing menopause and caregiving, explaining, “*You do need to talk about it, have space for it, and sometimes adjust things*”. These actions normalize topics historically excluded from professional discourse and demonstrate how leaders can redesign institutional culture from within.

For many directors, inclusivity extended beyond internal governance to the museum’s public role. Museum Director 3 prioritized the acquisition of works by women artists and outreach to underrepresented groups, while Museum Director 11 aimed to focus future acquisitions “*almost entirely on female artists*” arguing that compensation is necessary because “*only a few percent of works in collections are by women*”. Museum Director 5 complemented these initiatives with gender-neutral restrooms and revised exhibition programming to attract more diverse audiences.

Other leaders sought to reimagine the museum as a civic space. Museum Director 6 opened her institution for cultural dinners with refugees to “*debunk the idea of the museum as a very stately building where not everyone is welcome*”. Similarly, Museum Director 8 organized free admission days, observing that “*then you see that the audience is different*”. Such interventions translate equity from abstract policy into embodied, spatial, and affective practices that challenge the museum’s historical elitism.

Despite these efforts, directors acknowledged persistent structural and cultural constraints. Museum Director 1 lamented that her museum still attracts “*a predominantly older, highly educated audience*”, while Museum Director 4 similarly noted that visitors remain “*an older, highly educated white audience with higher incomes*”. As Museum Director 2 observed, “*for many people, the ticket price is still a hindrance*”. These reflections highlight the endurance of class and cultural capital as barriers to access.

Some directors sought to tackle inequality structurally. Museum Director 3 introduced extended paternity leave, arguing that “*the moment you give a woman three months of maternity leave and a man is only allowed to take a week... you are already creating an inequality*”. Museum Director 5 established diversity committees and social-safety mechanisms, conceding, “*You cannot do everything right for everyone... I just keep course*”

*with what I believe in*". Even reform-oriented leaders faced resistance from governance systems, funding models, and entrenched professional norms. While Museum Director 8 cautioned that the feminization of the sector "*risks devaluing the profession itself*".

Recognizing these constraints, several directors emphasized the importance of building future leadership pipelines. Museum Director 6 advocated for mentorship programs to "*train the right people*" for inclusive practice, while others criticized the continued reliance on headhunters and closed networks.

Across the interviews, women leaders expressed a shared vision of museums as spaces for dialogue, care, and social transformation. Museum Director 11 articulated this most explicitly, stating that "*museums should be places of conversation, not just conservation*". Their accounts reveal that leadership can function as a mode of institutional redesign, transforming both internal culture and public purpose through incremental yet deliberate acts of inclusion. While structural barriers endure, these women enact change through policies of care, participatory governance, and redistribution of visibility. Their efforts demonstrate the generative tension between agency and structure: leadership as both embedded within, and capable of reimagining, the unequal systems it inhabits.

# Conclusion

## Discussion

This study examined how women leaders in Dutch art museums perceive, navigate, and transform the gendered structures of leadership within their institutions. The interviews were analyzed according to three themes. These findings demonstrate how gender inequality in cultural leadership is reproduced through both formal systems and everyday practices. Interpreted through Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), Acker's theory of Gendered Organizations (Acker, 1990, 2006), and Feminist Institutionalism (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010), they show that women leaders simultaneously work within and against institutional structures that continue to privilege masculine norms of authority and commitment. By linking these frameworks, the study shows that inequality in museum leadership is not primarily a question of individual discrimination but an institutional phenomenon. Women's continued underrepresentation in top-tier directorships, as documented by Gan et al. (2014), Treviño et al. (2017), and the Cultuurmonitor (2024), is maintained by intertwined mechanisms: stereotype-based evaluation, gendered job design, and network-driven recruitment. Yet the directors' actions also demonstrate how agency can reshape institutions from within. Their commitment to participatory governance, care-centered management, and social inclusion illustrates the transformative potential of feminist leadership in redefining both the practice and meaning of power in museums.

### Structural and Cultural Constraints that Shape Women's Access to and Experience of Leadership

Interviews reveal that women's access to museum leadership is still influenced by informal recruitment networks and gendered concepts of authority. Directors consistently stated that senior roles are frequently filled through personal connections and reputation, bypassing transparent, merit-based hiring. One participant reflected, "*It's not about what you know but who knows you. These networks still decide who gets the call*" (Museum Director 4). This observation reflects Feminist Institutionalism's argument that informal norms and unwritten rules sustain inequality, even in contexts that outwardly promote diversity (Mackay et al., 2010). These patterns mirror findings from both the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) reports and the Boekmanstichting's Cultuurmonitor (2024), showing that the largest

and most prestigious institutions in the Netherlands remain predominantly male-led despite national equity initiatives.

The cultural dimension of these constraints aligns closely with Role Congruity Theory (RCT). Many directors recounted being perceived as “too soft” or “too harsh,” depending on their behavior, precisely the double bind that Eagly and Karau (2002) describe. Assertive behavior is rewarded in men but penalized in women as unfeminine or unlikable (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Participants also experienced subtle linguistic diminishment, being called “meisje” (“little girl”) or labeled “young” despite seniority, which reflects the ongoing bias that Elsesser and Lever (2011) identify, women must demonstrate competence more often to achieve the same legitimacy as men.

The assumption of constant availability further illustrates Acker’s (1990) “ideal worker” model, in which organizations reward those who appear fully dedicated and unencumbered by caregiving. As one director observed, “*There’s still this idea that a ‘real’ director is always there, day and night, without limits*” (Museum Director 7). Several participants recalled questions about whether they would reduce their hours after becoming mothers, echoing findings on the “motherhood penalty” in cultural sectors (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013; Williams, Muller, & Kilanski, 2012). Such expectations reinforce Acker’s (2006) inequality regimes, where gendered assumptions about time, care, and commitment are institutionalized through seemingly neutral practices. Despite progress toward flexible policies, leadership in the museum field continues to be structured around masculine norms of authority, presence, and devotion.

### Navigating and Negotiating Gendered Expectations and Institutional Barriers

The directors’ narratives reveal that women leaders navigate these gendered expectations through a mixture of adaptation and resistance. Consistent with Role Congruity Theory, they described developing strategies to reconcile the tension between being authoritative and being perceived as appropriately feminine (Eagly & Karau, 2002). One director summarized this dynamic succinctly: “*If you’re too kind, you’re weak; if you’re too direct, you’re bossy. You can’t win*” (Museum Director 6). Some adjusted their communication styles to appear firm but not aggressive, while others sought validation through professional credentials, international experience, or reputation. These coping strategies reflect efforts to manage prescriptive and descriptive biases simultaneously.

At the same time, the women's accounts illustrate how the sector operates within structural constraints. Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes helps explain how gendered hierarchies persist through everyday practices. For instance, directors who brought male colleagues to meetings "for symbolic support" were not simply conforming to norms but strategically using them to gain legitimacy. Such actions reflect the duality Mackay et al. (2010) describe in Feminist Institutionalism, actors reproduce institutions even as they attempt to change them.

Authenticity and relational leadership emerged as key tools of navigation. Many directors emphasized transparent communication, collaboration, and empathy as central to their management style, qualities associated with transformational and feminist leadership (Beeson & Valerio, 2019; Botte, 2020; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Yet these same traits also require additional emotional labor, as women are often expected to maintain harmony and care for staff well-being (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013). Their leadership thus remains doubly burdened, tasked with both performing authority and mitigating the gendered discomfort that authority provokes.

Work-life negotiations further expose the endurance of gendered organizational structures. Directors indicated that leadership positions continue to be predicated on an assumption of uninterrupted career progression and consistent physical presence. Even when flexibility was introduced, as Williams et al. (2012) argue, such policies can disguise ongoing expectations of self-managed overwork. Women leaders who challenge these norms by setting boundaries or delegating tasks risk being perceived as less committed, reinforcing the "availability bias" that Acker (1990) identifies as central to gendered organizational logic.

### Redesigning and Fostering More Equitable Leadership Pathways

Once in leadership positions, many women directors used their authority to challenge and redesign institutional norms. Their efforts, ranging from flexible work arrangements to diversity in collections and inclusive governance, illustrate how individuals can become agents of change within gendered systems. As one participant put it, "*I don't just want more women in the room; I want the room itself to work differently*" (Museum Director 2). These initiatives align closely with Feminist Institutionalism, which emphasizes transforming both formal and informal rules to create enduring equity (Mackay et al., 2010).

Examples from the interviews mirror theoretical prescriptions. Flexible scheduling and results-based evaluation directly counter Acker's (1990) "ideal worker" assumption, redefining productivity and leadership beyond physical presence. Policies addressing parental leave and menopause reflect calls in the literature to embed care into workplace structures (Sandell & Nightingale, 2013; Williams et al., 2012). Likewise, diversity committees, gender-neutral facilities, and transparent communication channels exemplify the structural reforms Botte (2020) and Vinson (2007) associate with feminist leadership in the arts.

In their external work, several directors also sought to democratize representation through inclusive programming and acquisitions, echoing the participatory leadership models discussed by Eagly and Carli (2007) and Sandell and Nightingale (2013). By prioritizing underrepresented artists and audiences, they focused their institutions on actively promoting social change, rather than merely preserving heritage neutrally. This resonates with Feminist Institutionalism's call for equity to be a fundamental institutional purpose, rather than an external add-on (Mackay et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, participants emphasized the limits of individual agency. Financial instability, conservative boards, and reliance on elite networks impeded reform efforts. As one director remarked, "*You can change the culture in your team, but the boardroom is another world*" (Museum Director 8). These findings underscore Acker's (2006) argument that inequality regimes are self-reinforcing and difficult to dismantle without systemic redesign. As several directors observed, change remains slow and uneven, often dependent on personal conviction. Sustainable transformation therefore requires embedding equality into the formal governance codes, recruitment procedures, and evaluation systems of museums, consistent with recommendations from the Boekmanstichting (2024).

The findings emphasize that achieving gender equity in Dutch art museum leadership requires systemic change rather than reliance on individual adaptation. Transparent recruitment, diverse selection committees, and flexible job structures can counteract both the descriptive and prescriptive biases identified by Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Addressing the organizational routines and expectations described by Acker (1990, 2006), such as assumptions about presence, time, and devotion, can dismantle inequality regimes at their roots. Embedding these reforms in governance policies, accountability mechanisms, and funding frameworks, as proposed by Feminist Institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010), is essential for long-term transformation.

Equally important is the recognition and valorization of leadership styles grounded in collaboration, empathy, and inclusivity. These qualities, often devalued precisely because they are coded as feminine, represent not weakness but a reimagining of leadership itself (Beeson & Valerio, 2019; Botte, 2020). As the interviewed directors demonstrate, feminist leadership is not simply about increasing representation, it is about reshaping institutions so that equity, care, and diversity become integral to their mission and governance.

The next chapter will build on these insights to formulate broader conclusions about the relationship between gender, power, and institutional change in the Dutch museum sector. It will also outline policy implications and avenues for further research on how feminist leadership practices can continue to transform cultural institutions into more equitable and inclusive spaces.

## Conclusion

This study examined how women leaders in Dutch art museums perceive, navigate, and transform the gendered structures of leadership within their institutions. The findings reveal that the classic notion of a fixed “glass ceiling” no longer fully captures the realities of gender inequality in the sector. Instead, women encounter a more fluid and multilayered landscape, one shaped by informal networks, implicit expectations of leadership style, and enduring norms around time, availability, and care. These are not immovable barriers but shifting conditions that must be continually negotiated through a constant process of paradoxical navigation.

Within this evolving landscape, women directors demonstrate resilience and strategic agency. They advance by cultivating credibility, building alliances, and leveraging reputation and sponsorship. Their success, however, extends beyond personal achievement. Once in leadership, they use their authority to challenge inherited structures, redesign policies, and foster inclusive organizational cultures. In doing so, they transform museums from within, embedding equity not only in staffing but also in programming, governance, and audience engagement.

Viewed through the combined lenses of Role Congruity Theory, Gendered Organizations, and Feminist Institutionalism, these findings suggest that inequality persists less through explicit exclusion than through institutional routines and cultural assumptions that continue to privilege masculine-coded norms of authority. Yet, women leaders are

actively rewriting those norms, demonstrating that institutional power can be exercised through collaboration, care, and reflexivity without diminishing authority.

The Dutch museum sector is thus at a pivotal stage. Progress is real, but fragile. The changes often depend on the commitment of individual leaders. Sustainable transformation therefore requires that the institutional reforms initiated by these women be anchored in formal governance codes, recruitment procedures, and funding frameworks. Only then can the labyrinth be dismantled, not because women have become better at navigating it, but because the institution itself has fundamentally changed.

## Recommendations

### Implications for policy and practice

To achieve lasting gender equality in museums, two main things are needed: clear rules and changes to informal norms. For leadership roles, appointments should follow open, written procedures. This means public job descriptions, clear ways to judge candidates, and documented reasons for who is shortlisted and chosen. Expanding who is on supervisory boards and hiring committees, and telling recruiters to find diverse candidates, can break old patterns. An external observer can also ensure fair processes.

Organizations should normalize care and flexibility through institutionalized parental leave and clear, non-discretionary flexible scheduling arrangements. Expectations for evening and weekend work should be set in advance and rotated fairly. Salary ranges, starting salaries, and promotion criteria should be published, with regular audits of recruitment, progression, and pay to identify and correct disparities. Given that hidden workloads often stem from an "always available" culture, workload management is crucial: meeting discipline, protected focus time, and communication curfews establish credible boundaries.

For leadership roles, structured sponsorship, rather than informal mentoring, helps promising staff advance. Sponsors create opportunities like visible projects or fundraising experience, with monitored results. To prepare staff for selection, provide simulations, fundraising practice, and media training, addressing criteria often used for "safe choices." Short temporary assignments at various institutions can broaden networks. For collections, programming, and audiences, inclusion should be a multi-year policy with clear goals and public reporting. Collaborative curation and representation audits align acquisitions and

exhibitions with community views, while easy access and community-based programs reduce participation gaps.

### Directions for further research

Future studies should investigate long-term studies and assess the impact of parental leave, flexible work policies, sponsorship programs, and audience initiatives on staff retention, promotions, and workplace culture. Experiments can measure bias in evaluations and how well people fit certain roles. Comparing different regions and countries can help identify factors like funding, governance styles, and donor relationships that influence these issues. A diverse sampling approach is crucial to understand how gender intersects with race/ethnicity, class, migration background, disability, and age, revealing where barriers combine or differ. Finally, combining different research methods, like linking personal stories to HR data, mapping appointments, and analyzing job advertisements, can show how conversations, structures, and results are connected, and where changes to procedures or norms would be most effective.

### Limitations of the Study

Several limitations are acknowledged. The personal nature of participants' stories means their accounts are influenced by memory, how they present themselves, and the circumstances. Narrative inquiry focuses on how meaning is made, rather than stating objective facts. The researcher's interpretation is naturally involved, so the themes reflect both what the participants said and the researcher's analytical perspective. Although the interviews provide detailed information, the small number of participants means the results cannot be generalized statistically, instead the findings offer deep, context-specific insights. If in-person meetings are not feasible, Zoom interviews might limit the connection with participants, reduce the amount of non-verbal information gathered, and restrict chances to build trust. Additionally, by focusing on women currently in director positions, the selection process might not fully capture the experiences of those who have left or been excluded from leadership paths. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how women directors describe their career paths and address systemic challenges. Its value comes from examining these narratives not just as personal histories, but as proof of the institutional, cultural, and structural inequalities that still affect leadership in Dutch art museums.

## Significance

This research examines the obstacles women face and the ways they work to overcome these challenges, aiming to promote more fairness and inclusion in the museum field. Museums can truly fulfill their potential as spaces of cultural expression and social change only by addressing the systemic biases and structural inequalities that prevent women's advancement.

This study calls on the art world to address its contradictions: an industry that celebrates diversity in artistic expression yet struggles to embody such inclusivity in its leadership ranks. As one participant in the Boekmanstichting study suggested: “*Measuring is knowing—we must institutionalize equity to dismantle the status quo*” (Boekmanstichting, 2024). By centering the voices of women directors, this research fills a gap in Dutch cultural policy and contributes to the dialogue concerning gender equity within cultural institutions. By focusing on the Dutch museum context, it examines the intersection of national-level policies and community-based efforts to reshape leadership frameworks. As asserted by the International Council of Museums, integrating gender considerations is not merely a moral imperative, but a “*prerequisite for relevance in the 21st century*”.

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# Appendix I: Interview questions

## Introduction

This study was conducted in the form of narrative research. This means that the emphasis was on listening to the personal stories and experiences of female museum directors. During the interviews, I asked a few guiding questions, but I mainly let the interviewees talk about what was important to them. Their perspectives and interpretations were central.

It is important to note that answers such as “no” or “I don't know” are also valuable for this study. In addition, I always invited interviewees to indicate when they disagreed with the terms, concepts, or assumptions used, so that their views on these could also be taken into account.

Some interviewees were able to share extensive stories on their own, while others required a bit more structure. To keep the conversation flowing smoothly, I prepared a set of interview questions in advance, based on the themes that emerged during my literature review and the development of the theoretical framework. The section below explains how I came to these questions.

## Overview of interview questions

Based on the theoretical framework, I identified a number of key indicators derived from the different theories discussed. These indicators might help answer the research questions. These indicators served as the foundation for developing my interview questions. The aim was to explore whether these theoretical indicators manifest in the lived experiences and narratives of the female museum directors. By linking the interview questions to the theoretical concepts, I was able to investigate the extent to which the theories resonate with or diverge from the realities described by the interviewees.

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Indicators/Codes</b>	<b>Interview questions</b>
Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002)	gender stereotypes, double standers, Gender, inequality, barriers,	When did you realize you wanted to become a museum director? Have you ever experienced barriers or limitations in your career because you are a woman?

	Perceived (in)congruence between femininity and leadership, Instances of undervaluation or resistance faced by female leader	Do you think female leaders are judged differently than male leaders? Have you ever had to adjust your style to be taken seriously? What do you think are the biggest challenges for female leaders in the sector? Do you think female directors are more likely to take responsibility for inclusion policy? Do you feel a responsibility to support other women or young professionals?
Acker's Gendered Organizations (1990, 2006)	'ideal worker', availability, work-life balance, Gender, inequality, barriers, Leadership style, organizational culture, (In)visibility of care and emotional labor, Unequal distribution of power and resources, Implicit gender norms	How do you deal with expectations around work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities? What values and qualities do you consider important in leadership? How would you describe your leadership style?
Feminist Institutionalism (Mackay, Kenny & Chappell, 2010), Networks and social capital (Bourdieu, 1979; Baldwin & Ackerson, 2006)	formal rules vs. informal norms, Social safety, work culture, Institutional barriers for women (e.g., glass ceilings, old boys' networks), Gendered norms in decision-making and policy processes, Strategies used by women to navigate or transform institutional structures, Degree of inclusivity or implementation of gender mainstreaming within institutions, informal sponsorship, access to influence, Career path, networking, mentorship	What initiatives or policy measures has your museum taken in this area? How is social safety ensured in your organization? What changes do you see in how the sector deals with social safety and equality? What role did networking, mentors, or headhunters play in your career? Did you apply for positions yourself, or were you often asked to apply? What role did education and international experience play in your path to leadership? Can you describe your career path? What were some important choices or moments? How do you see the role of museums in promoting diversity and inclusion? What do you think the museum of the future will look like? What advice would you give your younger self?