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**Working Paper**

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GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1535

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Global Labor Organization (GLO)

*Suggested Citation:* Magnanelli, Barbara Sveva; Nasta, Luigi; Scicchitano, Sergio (2024) : Motherhood and Leadership: Exploring Employee Perceptions of Female Leaders in the Workplace, GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1535, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/307514>

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# **Motherhood and Leadership: Exploring Employee Perceptions of Female Leaders in the Workplace**

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## **Abstract**

A key challenge faced by female leaders, especially mothers, is the persistence of “maternity bias,” which reflects prejudices that arise from assumptions about a woman’s ability to lead due to her actual or anticipated responsibilities as a mother. This bias often results in unjust treatment, such as reduced career opportunities and the assumption that mothers are less dedicated to their work. This paper investigates the impact of motherhood on the perception of female leaders within organizations, addressing a gap in the literature on gender and leadership. While existing studies often focus on differences between male and female leadership styles, they overlook the specific challenges faced by female leaders who are mothers. This study aims to examine whether being a mother for a female leader affects employees' perceptions and their intention to remain with the organization and if this is mediated by their leadership style. Using a sample of companies belonging to various industries and from different countries, the study will investigate how employees perceive the competence and leadership of their female leaders based on their motherhood status. The results suggest that employees’ perceptions of ethical leadership play a key role in their intention to stay with the organization. While the leader’s identity as a mother does not directly influence retention, it shapes employees' views of their ethical leadership, which in turn significantly impacts their decision to remain with the firm. This highlights the importance of ethical leadership in fostering employee retention. Results can inform policies aimed at reducing gender-based discrimination and improving organizational diversity and leadership equity.

**Keywords:** leadership, motherhood, female, gender, manager, discrimination

**JEL codes:** J71, L26, M1, L22

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Acknowledgments: we thank participants at the 49th EBES Conference – Athens, October 16-18, 2024.  
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## 1. Introduction

One of the central questions frequently explored in literature is why there are so few female leaders. Much of the discussion in this area revolves around comparing and contrasting the so-called “male” and “female” leadership styles, often suggesting that men tend to be more successful leaders because they either inherently possess or acquire specific leadership traits that facilitate their rise to leadership positions within organizations (Courpasson, 2006). According to the study of Kark et al. (2012), women face a greater disadvantage than men when they were not perceived as “androgynous”, exhibiting a blend of feminine and masculine traits, in terms of personal identification. Calas and Smircich (1993) argue that certain characteristics typically attributed to females, which are reinforced by societal expectations, include among the others gentleness, assertiveness, avoidance of competition, reticence to take risk, and other qualities our culture considers as “feminine qualities. The implication is that the characteristics associated with successful leadership are considered masculine and are in direct contrast to the “feminine” traits just described. Even when a woman possesses the necessary technical qualifications, also potentially equal to or even superior to those of her male counterparts, and the appropriate personality traits, she must continually struggle against societal stereotypes and deeply rooted childhood beliefs, ultimately undermining her self-confidence (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In fact, the ideal manager has been historically associated with stereotypical "masculine" traits, such as self-confidence, independence, assertiveness, dominance, and rationality (Schein, 1973). Studies have shown that in various organizations and countries, both women and men described a "good" or successful manager using masculine terms (Powell & Butterfield, 1979; Schein, 2007; Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, & Liu, 1996), encapsulated the Schein (1973) paradigm known as “think manager–think male”.

Research by Fenn (1978) has shown that during the hiring process in many cases where “blind” comparisons (the candidate's gender is not revealed) are conducted, the most qualified individual is selected for the leadership role. However, when the candidate's gender is known, societal biases almost invariably lead to the female candidate being perceived as less suitable, due to a deep-seated belief that she will be unable to control her emotions and display the required leadership qualities. Traditional stereotypical "feminine" traits were viewed as either irrelevant or incompatible with success in managerial roles. Such perceptions are believed to disadvantage women in management, as they must navigate the perceived conflict between their "leader role" and their "gender role" (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Powell & Graves, 2003). This implies that in many organizations women do not have equitable access to managerial roles (Eagly and Carli, 2003). This kind of thought can be worsened when the woman is pregnant or is a mother already. In fact, extant literature has shown that there is

a prejudice towards women that are also mother, called “maternity bias”. The maternity bias can be described as the prejudiced or unjust treatment that women face in their professional life because of their actual or anticipated pregnancy, delivery, or related health problems. This type of bias can manifest in several ways, like withholding promotions or chances for career growth, setting lower standards for performance, or subjecting expectant employees to unfavorable generalizations and assumptions about their dedication to work. As Heilman (2012) noted, successful women in traditionally male-dominated roles demonstrate their competence, but in doing so, they often face social backlash and negative treatment from both men and women for defying gender-prescriptive norms. Women aspiring to senior management positions encounter both overt and covert barriers, regardless of whether they conform to or break away from the norms intended to limit them. This is exacerbated in case the woman is a mother, given that society expects a specific behavior from a woman being a mother that implies a strong focus on her kids, without contemplating the idea that the mother is also a person with qualities, competencies, and aspirations that she should meet to satisfy herself and being an example to her kids.

Given the differences between men and women when it comes to leadership roles, a relevant amount of literature has started to focus the attention on the different leadership style and leadership features between male and female managers, focusing on the gender aspects. Additionally, morality has emerged as a significant topic in organizational behavior and psychology, leading to increased research attention on moral and ethical issues in leadership and how perceptions of ethical leader behavior impact on the workplace. While studies have provided valuable insights into how ethical leaders are perceived and their impact (Den Hartog, 2015), there remain many unanswered questions about the antecedents, outcomes, and contextual factors influencing ethical leader behavior.

Nevertheless, to the extent of our knowledge there still is a paucity of literature in management that focuses on parenthood condition of a female leader and on the “if” and the “how” it impacts on firm’s outcomes, such as employees’ perceptions/behaviors and intention to stay.

Thus, believing that examining women in leadership must include the motherhood condition, which significantly influences career progression, this research aims at contributing to fill this literature gap, investigating on how the motherhood condition of a female leader impacts on the perception of her employees and their intention to stay. In fact, given the theoretical framework, female leaders who are mothers encounter greater challenges compared to both men and women without children. These challenges are often rooted in biases about their competence, which can have a negative impact on their professional lives (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007). Thus, specifically, the current research seeks

to explore if and how the leadership style of the female leader is perceived by employees, impacting on their intention to stay in the firm, when the female leaders is a mother compared to when she is not a mother. Specifically, acting within the theoretical framework given by the leadership style theory (Burns, 1978), the role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), and the Think Male – Think Manager paradigm (Shein, 1973) and its further extension operated by Morgenroth et al. (2020). the following research question is investigated: is the effect of leadership identity (being mother or non-mother) on employees' intention to stay mitigated by the leadership style?

To explore this relationship, a questionnaire was distributed through the Prolific platform, leading to a final sample of 306 participants. The results suggest that employees' perceptions of ethical leadership play a key role in their intention to stay with the organization. While the leader's identity as a mother does not directly influence retention, it shapes employees' views of their ethical leadership, which in turn significantly impacts their decision to remain with the firm. This highlights the importance of ethical leadership in fostering employee retention.

The reminder of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 explores the literature and hypotheses development; section 3 shows the methodology; section 4 proposes the results; the final section concludes the study proving theoretical and practical implications and contributions.

## **2. Literature review and hypotheses development**

### **2.1. Female Leadership Style**

The evidence worldwide shows that female leaders often excel in interpersonal skills, empathy, and communication, which significantly enhance employee engagement. Employees are more likely to feel valued, understood, encouraged, and supported in a work environment where female leadership is acknowledged and promoted (Magnanelli and Raoli, 2025). Moreover, in numerous industries, women make up a substantial part of the consumer base. Placing women in leadership roles allows organizations to better understand and address the needs of their diverse customers, resulting in improved market responsiveness and higher customer satisfaction.

The leadership style becomes a crucial focus to study the dynamics behind the relationship between the female leader and her employees.

When studying women in leadership, the transformational and the transactional leadership styles are the reference theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Previous research suggests that women may exhibit behaviors that enhance their ability to adopt an effective transformational leadership style (Eagly *et al.*, 2003; Vinkenburgh, van Engen, Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). According to the findings of the meta-analysis conducted by Eagly *et al.* (2003), compared to male leaders, female leaders were more transformational and more likely to use contingent reward behaviors, a component of transactional leadership involving the exchange of rewards for satisfactory performance; in contrast, male leaders were more inclined toward two other aspects of transactional leadership like active management by exception and passive management by exception, delaying intervention until problems became severe. Additionally, the authors found that men scored higher on laissez-faire leadership, characterized by a lack of involvement and widespread absence.

These differences between women's and men's leadership may stem from the fact that transformational leadership helps reconcile the typical incongruity between leadership roles and the female gender role. This is because such styles are not inherently "masculine" but instead draw on characteristics that align with the feminine gender role, as well as a mix of "masculine" and "feminine" traits. Thus, the transformational leadership style is typically attributed to female leaders because it contains many attributes that are usually associated to females, such as people-oriented, transformative, and communicating; while the transactional leaders style is typically attributed to men, given the opposite characteristics connected to this style, such as autocratic, business-oriented and transactional, generally associated to males (Appelbaum, Audet and Miller, 2003). Transformational leadership is a style where leaders inspire and motivate followers to exceed their own self-interests for the good of the organization, fostering an environment of change, innovation, and personal growth. Transformational leaders focus on developing their followers, helping them achieve their full potential, and aligning their goals with the overall vision of the organization. A component or a subset of transformational leadership is the so called "Ethical leadership" style. Ethics and morality were largely overlooked in mainstream behaviorally focused leadership research and theory until scholars began exploring moral issues within the context of charismatic and transformational leadership (Treviño *et al.*, 2003). Leaders, in fact, act as role models and use rewards and punishments to encourage desired behaviors and ethical conduct. Brown *et al.* (2005, p. 120) defined ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making". At its core, ethical leadership entails leading in a way that upholds the rights and dignity of others: since leaders inherently hold social

power, ethical leadership emphasizes how they utilize this power through their decisions, actions, and influence on others (Gini, 1997). Treviño et al. (2000, 2003) conducted research to understand what ethical leadership means to observers of executives. Through structured interviews with 20 senior executives and 20 ethics/compliance officers across various industries, they asked informants to describe an ethical leader they knew, focusing on characteristics, behaviors, and motives. The study found that ethical leaders were perceived as honest, trustworthy, fair, principled decision-makers who cared about people and society, and behaved ethically in both personal and professional contexts. This formed the “moral person” aspect of ethical leadership, reflecting personal traits, character, and altruism. The research also identified the “moral manager” dimension, which refers to a leader's proactive efforts to influence followers' ethical behavior. Moral managers make ethics a clear priority by communicating values, role-modeling ethical behavior, and using rewards and discipline to hold followers accountable for ethical conduct.

This type of leadership, when adopted, has a positive impact on the organizational culture, the employee behavior, and the overall ethical climate in the workplace. In sum, the ethical leadership is connected to the broader concept of transactional leadership thanks to the ethical dimensions of how leaders interact with followers and the potential for ethical behavior within transactional leadership frameworks. The ethical leadership can be seen as enhancing the moral dimension of transactional leadership by ensuring that the rewards and punishments are applied in a just and ethical and transparent manner. The ethical leadership is considered as a distinct leadership style that emphasizes the leader's role in modeling ethical behavior and establishing an ethical climate within an organization.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Eagly and Carli (2003), any potential advantage women might have in leadership style could be undermined by the prejudice and discrimination they face as leaders. Prejudice involves the unfair assessment of a group based on stereotypical assumptions about the group rather than evaluating individual behavior or qualifications. When stereotypes about a group exist, people tend to expect its members to exhibit traits and behaviors that align with those stereotypes. Observers unconsciously interpret information to fit their gender-stereotypic expectations (von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1995). These stereotypical inferences result in prejudice against individual members of the group when their group's stereotypes conflict with the qualities associated with success in certain social roles. In leadership contexts, such stereotypical inferences can lead employees to perceive female leaders less favorably when their group's stereotypes conflict with the qualities typically associated with effective leadership, such as assertiveness or dominance. This incongruity not only results in prejudice but also fosters

discrimination, as it diminishes the evaluation of female leaders' suitability and effectiveness in leadership roles. Consequently, these biased perceptions can create barriers to women's success in managerial positions despite their leadership capabilities.

## **2.2. Maternity bias and penalty for female leaders**

Motherhood intersects with women's advancement into leadership positions within firms, significantly impacting their working lives, career advancement, and management choices. Pregnancy, albeit a temporary phase for female workers, can have long-term implications for both individuals and organizations, including pregnancy-related absences, maternity leave, and challenges returning to work as new parents (Makela, 2005; McIntosh et al., 2012).

Working mothers confront a dual burden, encountering societal expectations and biases both at home and in the workplace, hindering their ability to balance family and career responsibilities. The "maternal wall" phenomenon affects how coworkers and employers perceive the competence and warmth of working mothers, contributing to disparities in professional growth, financial security, and overall well-being (Williams, 2004).

Maternity bias, a prejudiced or unjust treatment women face in their professional lives due to pregnancy or related issues, manifests in various ways, including withholding promotions, setting lower performance standards, or subjecting expectant employees to unfavorable assumptions about their dedication to work (Gay, 2021).

Moreover, visible pregnant women managers are often judged as less committed, dependable, and authoritative compared to their non-pregnant counterparts (Halpert, Wilson, and Hickman, 1993; Corse, 1990). The reasons might rely on cultural beliefs regarding the "ideal worker" role perpetuate these biases, disadvantaging working mothers in managerial positions (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007). In fact, literature highlighted that fathers do not experience these types of workplace disadvantages since the concept of good father is not seen in our culture as incompatible with being a good worker (Townsend, 2002; Güngör & Biernat, 2009). Furthermore, working mothers face obstacles such as reduced likelihood of being interviewed for a position (Firth, 1982), or being provided with advancement opportunities (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).

The theoretical framework better explaining these views and phenomena is the Think Manager-Think Parent paradigm which extends previous research on gender stereotypes in leadership positions



formulated by in his Think Manager-Think Male paradigm (1973), highlighting how parenthood conditions shape perceptions of men and women. While women face biases and challenges due to parenthood, societal expectations align more closely with workplace norms for men, resulting in a fatherhood bonus rather than penalties (Morgenroth, Ryan, & Sonderlund, 2020).

In conclusion, gender stereotypes and biases profoundly influence workplace dynamics, particularly affecting working mothers' career advancement and opportunities. Parenthood intersects with professional experiences in complex and gendered ways, reflecting broader societal attitudes and biases toward women in the workplace.

Considering the discussion so far, it can be concluded that leaders that are mothers face greater challenges than both men and childless women. This is often due to biases regarding their competence, which negatively affect their work (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007).

Given the above literature frameworks, in this paper we want to combine the two frameworks believing that the maternity bias and penalty that female leaders face in the majority of the cases can actually be mitigated by their leadership style. Thanks to the leadership style they adopt, the negative perception that employees have of their female leaders that are also mothers can be reshaped. We expect that acting within the transformational leadership style and more specifically being an ethical leader can positively have an impact on the employees' perception and their intention to stay.

This leads to the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1. The proposed hypotheses are as follows:

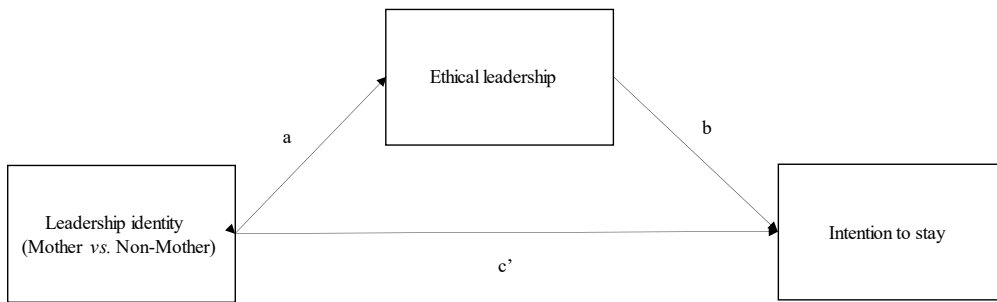
*Hypothesis 1: Leadership identity has a positive influence on employees' perception of ethical leadership.*

*Hypothesis 2: Ethical leadership positively influences employees' intention to stay with the organization.*

*Hypothesis 3: Leadership identity has no direct effect on employees' intention to stay with the organization.*

*Hypothesis 4: The relationship between leadership identity and employees' intention to stay is mediated by ethical leadership.*

Figure 1. Conceptual model (Authors' elaboration)



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample and data collection

We utilized an *ad hoc* online survey to measure the constructs in our study . The research followed an experimental design with two conditions, aimed at manipulating the leadership identity variable. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios, both of which presented their manager as a woman. In one condition, the woman was also described as a mother, while in the other, she was not. Before participating, respondents were informed that the study would assess their perceptions as employees. This approach allowed us to examine how the perception of leadership identity, specifically whether the manager was also a mother, affected participants' views on ethical leadership and their intention to stay with the organization.

The questionnaire was structured into three distinct sections. In the first section, participants were presented with the experimental scenario, which introduced them to a fictional workplace setting where the leader was a woman. This scenario served as the foundation for the subsequent measurement of key variables. In the second section, we administered questions designed to measure the constructs in our conceptual model.

The third section collected sociodemographic information, including variables such as gender, educational background, geographical location, job tenure, and the industry in which participants were employed. These data were crucial for controlling for potential confounding factors and ensuring a deeper understanding of how individual characteristics might influence perceptions of leadership and retention intentions.

The questionnaire was distributed through the Prolific platform, which was used to obtain a randomly selected sample of participants. Prolific is widely recognized in contemporary research for its ability to efficiently recruit diverse and representative participant samples, support longitudinal studies,

ensure high data quality through rigorous verification processes, and enable pre-screening of participants using a variety of filters (Peer et al., 2017). These features make Prolific an ideal tool for ensuring both the reliability of the data and the appropriateness of the sample for in-depth analysis.

The study initially gathered 314 responses; however, after excluding submissions that failed an attention check, the final sample comprised 306 participants. In terms of gender, 55.2% of the participants identified as male ( $n = 169$ ), 44.4% as female ( $n = 136$ ), and 0.3% preferred not to disclose their gender ( $n = 1$ ). Regarding education, most participants held a bachelor's degree (53.3%,  $n = 163$ ), followed by those with a master's degree (31.0%,  $n = 95$ ). A smaller percentage had a high school diploma or lower (14.4%,  $n = 44$ ), and only 1.3% ( $n = 4$ ) held a doctorate. Geographically, most participants were based in Europe (71.6%,  $n = 219$ ), while the rest were distributed across South America (8.8%,  $n = 27$ ), Australia (8.8%,  $n = 27$ ), Asia (7.2%,  $n = 22$ ), and North America (3.6%,  $n = 11$ ). In terms of job tenure, 37.3% ( $n = 114$ ) had been employed for 1-3 years, 27.5% ( $n = 84$ ) for 4-6 years, and 19.0% ( $n = 58$ ) had more than 10 years of experience. A smaller group of participants reported working for less than 1 year (5.6%,  $n = 17$ ) or 7-10 years (10.8%,  $n = 33$ ). Participants held various positions within their organizations, with the majority occupying mid-level or supervisory roles (63.1%,  $n = 193$ ). Entry-level or junior staff made up 27.1% ( $n = 83$ ) of the sample, while senior management or department heads represented 9.5% ( $n = 29$ ). Only one participant (0.3%) held an executive or C-level position. Finally, participants came from a range of industries. The largest proportion worked in the technology sector (25.2%,  $n = 77$ ), followed by finance (17.6%,  $n = 54$ ), manufacturing (10.5%,  $n = 32$ ), and retail (9.5%,  $n = 29$ ). Other industries included education (8.2%,  $n = 25$ ), healthcare (4.9%,  $n = 15$ ), agriculture (1.3%,  $n = 4$ ), and a range of other sectors (22.9%,  $n = 70$ ).

## **3.2 Measures**

### **3.2.1. Leadership identity**

The variable leadership identity was coded as a binary variable to reflect the random assignment of participants to one of two scenarios. In both scenarios, the manager was presented as a woman; however, in one condition, she was also described as a mother, while in the other, this detail was not included.

### **3.2.2. Perceived ethical leadership**

Perceived ethical leadership, referring to how participants evaluated the ethical behaviors of the woman leader presented in the scenario, was assessed using a 15-item scale developed by Yukl et al. (2013) ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ). Responses were collected on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Totally disagree”) to 7 (“Totally agree”). This scale captured participants’ evaluations of the ethicality of the leader’s actions, decisions, and behavior within the given scenario.

### 3.2.3. Intention to stay

Intention to stay was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Silva et al. (2024) ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), also using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Totally disagree”, 7 = “Totally agree”). In this context, intention to stay referred to participants' likelihood of remaining with the company where the woman leader was in charge, as described in the scenario. This measure reflects their commitment to staying in the organization based on the perceived qualities of the leader.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model and assess the relationships between the observed variables and their underlying latent constructs. CFA is a statistical technique that allows researchers to test whether the data fit a predefined factor structure based on theoretical assumptions. It helps confirm that the observed variables accurately represent the intended constructs. To further evaluate the convergent validity of our constructs, we analyzed the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) metrics (see Table 1). Convergent validity ensures that the items designed to measure the same construct are indeed related and exhibit a high degree of correlation.

Table 1. CFA and AVE

Indicator	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value
<i>Perceived ethical leadership (<math>\alpha = 0.95</math>)</i>			
The manager shows a strong concern for ethical and moral values.	0.891	0.056	15.993
The manager communicates clear ethical standards for members.	0.993	0.054	18.413

Indicator	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value
The manager sets an example of ethical behavior in her decisions and actions.	0.917	0.053	17.437
The manager is honest and can be trusted to tell the truth.	0.927	0.051	18.222
The manager keeps her actions consistent with her stated values (“walks the talk”).	0.939	0.058	16.229
The manager is fair and unbiased when assigning tasks to members.	0.994	0.065	15.386
The manager can be trusted to carry out promises and commitments.	0.976	0.052	18.665
The manager insists on doing what is fair and ethical even when it is not easy.	1.021	0.054	18.743
The manager acknowledges mistakes and takes responsibility for them.	0.904	0.060	15.031
The manager regards honesty and integrity as important personal values.	0.909	0.050	18.005
The manager sets an example of dedication and self-sacrifice for the organization.	0.847	0.067	12.707
The manager opposes the use of unethical practices to increase performance.	0.964	0.074	13.012
The manager is fair and objective when evaluating member performance and providing rewards.	0.980	0.059	16.704
The manager puts the needs of others above her self-interest.	0.748	0.075	10.017
The manager holds members accountable for using ethical practices in their work.	0.771	0.062	12.438
<i>Intention to stay (<math>\alpha = 0.83</math>)</i>			
I would plan to work at this job for as long as possible.	1.108	0.064	17.211
I would not look for a new job soon.	1.044	0.083	12.568
I would plan to stay in this job for at least two to three years.	1.179	0.065	18.245
Average Variance Extracted			
Factor			AVE
Perceived ethical leadership			0.570
Intention to stay			0.623

Notes. Factor model,  $\chi^2 = 516.205$ ;  $df = 134$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; FL = Factor Loading; SE = Standard Error; All factor loadings are significant at the 0.001 level.

As part of our preliminary analysis, we also examined key model fit indices to ensure the adequacy of the measurement model. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) was 0.963, which meets the threshold recommended by Shevlin and Miles (1998). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.910, in line with the standards outlined by Hu and Bentler (1999). Additionally, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was 0.043, adhering to the criteria set by Hu and Bentler (1999). All these fit statistics are within the acceptable ranges, as established by seminal works in the field, confirming that our model demonstrates a good fit to the data (see Table 2).

Table 2. Fit Statistics

<b>Fit Statistics</b>	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.910
Goodness of fit index (GFI)	0.963
Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.043

#### 4.2. Hypotheses testing

In this study, Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS, developed by Hayes (2013), was employed to test the mediation effects. Model 4 is widely used in mediation analysis as it allows researchers to investigate the indirect effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable through a mediator. The independent variable, leadership identity, was coded as -1 = “non-mother” and 1 = “mother” to capture the manipulation of the leader’s identity. Ethical leadership was introduced as the mediator (Me), while intention to stay served as the dependent variable (Y). Following previous research, this approach was chosen for its robustness in estimating direct, indirect, and total effects while providing confidence intervals for the significance of mediation paths through bootstrapping. In line with the methods used in prior studies, we utilized 5,000 bootstrap samples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals, ensuring rigorous testing of the mediation hypothesis. The findings reveal several important insights regarding these dynamics.

First, the analysis suggests a marginally significant relationship between leadership identity and ethical leadership ( $b = 0.210$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ), indicating that employees who perceive their leader as a mother tend to rate them higher regarding ethical leadership. However, this relationship does not reach the conventional level of statistical significance, suggesting only a weak trend in this association. Thus, hypothesis 1 is not supported.

In contrast, ethical leadership emerges as a strong and significant predictor of employees' intention to stay with the organization ( $b = 0.781, p < 0.001$ ). This finding demonstrates that when employees perceive their leader as more ethical, they are significantly more likely to express a desire to stay with the company. The strength and significance of this relationship highlight the critical role that ethical leadership plays in shaping employees' retention intentions. Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Regarding the direct relationship between leadership identity and intention to stay, the analysis finds no significant effect ( $b = 0.166, p = 0.135$ ). This indicates that perceiving a leader as a maternal figure does not directly influence employees' decisions to stay with the organization. The absence of a significant direct effect suggests that the influence of leadership identity on the intention to stay is mediated by ethical leadership style. Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported.

The presence of a full mediation is confirmed by the significant indirect effect of leadership identity on the intention to stay through ethical leadership ( $b = 0.164, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.003 \text{ to } 0.330$ ). Since the confidence interval for the indirect effect excludes zero, this mediation effect is statistically significant. This finding suggests that leadership identity influences employees' intention to stay indirectly by enhancing their perception of ethical leadership, which in turn affects their retention intentions. This means that leadership identity impacts employees' retention intentions solely through its effect on their perceptions of the leader's ethical behavior. Thus, hypothesis 4 is supported.

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that a leader's maternal identity plays an indirect role in shaping employees' intention to stay with the organization, mediated through perceptions of ethical leadership. The fact that maternal leadership identity does not directly impact employees' retention intentions highlights that the perception of a leader as a mother is not enough on its own to drive commitment to stay. Instead, it is how this identity influences employees' perception of the leader's ethical behavior that becomes critical.

The full mediation effect indicates that employees who perceive their leader as a mother may also be more inclined to view them as ethical, but it is the ethical leadership itself that significantly predicts whether employees intend to stay. In other words, the leader's identity as a mother is not what directly affects their retention decisions, but it shapes their view of the leader's ethical conduct, which, in turn, drives their decision to stay.

This relationship suggests that the qualities associated with being a mother, such as care, responsibility, or fairness, might enhance the perception of ethical leadership. However, these attributes alone do not directly influence employees' retention. Instead, they function through ethical leadership, meaning that the influence of maternal identity becomes significant only when it is perceived to manifest in ethical leadership behavior.

### *Theoretical contributions*

While research often concentrate the attention on the impacts of female leadership on firms, the role of motherhood in leadership remains less explored. This study contributes to the leadership literature by addressing the underexplored intersection of gender, leadership, and motherhood, extending the understanding of how female leaders' identity as mothers affects employee perceptions and organizational outcomes. Although extensive research has examined gender differences in leadership styles and the obstacles women face in leadership positions, our work advances this field by integrating the concept of motherhood as a dimension that can further complicate these dynamics. Specifically, we highlight that the motherhood identity of female leaders may invoke ethical leadership perceptions among employees, which subsequently enhances employee retention intentions.

Furthermore, this research makes a novel contribution by applying the role congruity theory and the Think Male–Think Manager paradigm to the context of maternal leadership. Unlike traditional approaches that predominantly contrast "masculine" and "feminine" leadership traits, our study explores how the socially constructed maternal identity influences employees' perceptions of ethical leadership. This allows us to illuminate how biases associated with motherhood can function as both obstacles and, in certain mediated contexts, enhancers of a leader's perceived effectiveness, particularly in fostering ethical organizational climates.

Lastly, our findings support and expand on the leadership style theory (Burns, 1978), suggesting that ethical leadership – a style closely tied to trust and retention – may be subtly linked to perceptions of maternal identity in leaders. This contributes a unique perspective to the leadership literature by showing that, under specific conditions, aspects of personal identity (e.g., motherhood) may positively impact the ethical image of leaders, indirectly fostering employee loyalty. This insight could prompt further investigation into identity factors beyond traditional leadership traits, ultimately enhancing theoretical models that account for diversity in leadership identities and their implications for organizational outcomes.



### *Practical implications*

The practical implications of this study suggest several strategies that organizations can implement to enhance their leadership practices, particularly by focusing on ethical leadership and the unique attributes often associated with motherhood. First, organizations can develop leadership training programs that emphasize the cultivation of empathy, ethical decision-making, and concern for employee well-being, qualities frequently exhibited by mother-leaders. By integrating these attributes into leadership development initiatives, companies can foster ethical leadership across all levels, regardless of parental status, thus benefiting the overall leadership culture within the organization.

Additionally, companies can create communication strategies that highlight the ethical qualities of their leaders, with particular attention to those who are mothers. This approach can be part of a broader effort to humanize leadership and build trust within the organization. By publicly emphasizing the ethical contributions of mother-leaders, companies may improve their internal and external reputations, fostering stronger relationships between employees and management while enhancing organizational credibility.

Finally, organizations should aim to cultivate an organizational culture that recognizes and values the contributions of leaders who are mothers. Creating environments that encourage leaders to integrate their roles as parents into their professional identities can enhance the overall workplace climate, promoting empathy and ethical decision-making throughout the organization. A supportive culture that acknowledges the unique perspectives and strengths of mother-leaders can also contribute to the development of more inclusive and compassionate leadership models.

This research presents some limitations that can be overcome by future studies, enriching the preliminary findings on this new relationship that has been investigated by the present research. First, although this study collected data from an international sample, the representation of diverse cultural contexts may still be limited. Differences in cultural norms regarding gender roles and motherhood could influence perceptions of maternal leadership differently across regions. Thus, to enhance the generalizability of our findings to contexts with different cultural perspectives on gender and leadership a broader sample including countries with strong cultural differences could be investigated. Additionally, future studies could examine whether the effects of motherhood on leadership perceptions vary across different industries or organizational levels. For instance, studies could investigate if maternal bias has a stronger impact in male-dominated sectors, or if female leaders at senior levels face different challenges compared to those at mid-management. Finally, a further

development of the present study can focus also on the motherhood “moment” of the female leader, distinguishing among female leaders that are mothers of toddlers, preschooler, school-aged child, and teens.

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