

Discursive legitimacy: How women leaders navigate double bind in project-based organizations

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Received: May 23, 2026; Revision: September 08, 2026; Acceptance: September 24, 2026

ABSTRACT

Women continue to face contradictory expectations in leadership positions despite their increasing participation in organizational decision-making. They are expected to demonstrate authority, competence, and decisiveness while simultaneously conforming to gender norms emphasizing warmth, empathy, and relationality. These competing expectations create challenges for establishing and maintaining leadership legitimacy, particularly within project-based organizations where leadership is enacted through intensive communication, coordination, and interpersonal influence. Although previous studies have examined the double bind as a psychological and structural challenge, less attention has been devoted to understanding how women leaders communicatively negotiate these tensions in everyday organizational practice. This study examines how women leaders in Indonesia's creative industries navigate the double bind through communicative practices. Drawing on Feminist Organizational Communication and Discursive Leadership perspectives, this study employs a qualitative approach using Critical Thematic Analysis of in-depth interviews with 11 women leaders working in Event Organizer and Wedding Organizer organizations. The findings reveal four interconnected communicative patterns through which leadership legitimacy is negotiated: relational communication as a power practice, adaptive communication as negotiated power, emotional expression as affective labor, and fluid role dynamics as structural negotiation. The findings demonstrate that double bind is not merely a psychological dilemma or structural constraint but a communicative phenomenon that is continuously produced and negotiated through everyday organizational interaction. Women leaders actively construct legitimacy by balancing relational closeness, communicative adaptability, emotional regulation, and role flexibility. The study offers a theoretical contribution by reconceptualizing double bind as a discursive process and introducing discursive legitimacy as a framework for understanding how leadership authority is communicatively established, maintained, and negotiated within gendered organizational contexts. Future research should examine how discursive legitimacy operates across different organizational settings and explore how intersectional factors, including age, professional background, and organizational structure, shape women's communicative leadership practices

Keywords: *communicative agency; discursive leadership; feminist organizational communication; gendered organizations*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in contemporary organizations is increasingly understood not as an individual attribute but as a socially constructed process that emerges through communicative practices and interactional dynamics (Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). This shift, often referred to as the communicative turn in leadership studies, redirects attention toward how leadership authority is produced, negotiated, and legitimized within discourse. Within this perspective, gender is not merely a demographic category but a constitutive element embedded in organizational communication, shaping who is recognized as a legitimate leader and under what

conditions such recognition is granted or negotiated.

Women leaders, however, continue to occupy a structurally contradictory position within organizational contexts. They are expected to embody assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority that align with dominant constructions of effective leadership, which are historically masculinized. At the same time, they are normatively evaluated through expectations of femininity, such as warmth, empathy, and relational sensitivity (Heilman, 2012; Kark & Buengeler, 2024). This tension produces what (Eagly & Carli, 2007) conceptualize as the double bind, a condition in which women face penalties regardless of whether they conform to leadership expectations or gender norms. Consequently, women leaders must continuously navigate a narrow and unstable space of acceptability, where any communicative choice may risk delegitimization (Chidinma Favour Chikwe et al., 2024).

Although the double bind has been widely examined, much of the existing literature approaches it from psychological or structural perspectives, emphasizing its constraining effects on women's leadership trajectories. Such approaches often position women as passive recipients of organizational bias, thereby overlooking the situated and interactional processes through which they actively respond to these constraints. In particular, the communicative dimension of how women leaders manage, negotiate, and strategically respond to contradictory expectations in everyday organizational settings remains insufficiently theorized (Oktaviani, 2024).

Research on women's leadership has consistently demonstrated that gender remains a significant factor shaping leadership evaluation and career advancement. A substantial body of literature conceptualizes women's leadership challenges through the lens of the double bind, which refers to a situation in which women face contradictory expectations associated with both leadership and gender roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women are expected to demonstrate competence, authority, and decisiveness to be perceived as effective leaders. Simultaneously, they are expected to maintain warmth, empathy, and relational sensitivity in accordance with traditional gender norms. Studies have shown that women who display agentic leadership behaviors are often evaluated more negatively than men exhibiting similar behaviors, while women who conform to feminine expectations may be perceived as lacking leadership competence (Heilman, 2012; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). This stream of research has been valuable in explaining how gender stereotypes shape leadership perceptions and outcomes.

A second stream of scholarship has expanded the discussion beyond individual evaluation by examining the organizational and structural conditions that sustain gender inequality. Gendered Organization Theory argues that organizational processes, work structures, and leadership norms are historically constructed around masculine assumptions, making gender inequality deeply embedded within organizational life (Acker, 1990). Similarly, Feminist Organizational Communication scholars have demonstrated that power relations and gendered expectations are reproduced through everyday communication practices and organizational discourse (Buzzanell, 1994; Linabary et al., 2021). These studies reveal that women's leadership challenges are not merely personal experiences but are connected to broader organizational systems that shape opportunities, authority, and legitimacy. Nevertheless, women are frequently portrayed as recipients of structural constraints rather than as actors who actively negotiate these conditions through communication.

More recent studies have begun to explore women's agency in responding to gendered expectations. Research has highlighted how women leaders engage in identity

work, communicative adaptation, and strategic negotiation of leadership expectations to navigate gendered organizational environments (Arendt & Buzzanell, 2018; Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Oktaviani, 2024). These studies provide important insights into how women respond to competing organizational and gendered demands while sustaining professional credibility and leadership effectiveness. However, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how leadership legitimacy itself is communicatively constructed and negotiated through everyday interactions. This limitation becomes particularly evident in project-based organizations where authority is often fluid, team structures are temporary, and leadership relies heavily on coordination, negotiation, and relational influence. Consequently, the communicative processes through which women leaders navigate double bind and construct leadership legitimacy remain insufficiently understood.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the discursive practices through which women leaders construct and maintain legitimacy in project-based organizational contexts. Specifically, it examines women leaders in Indonesia's creative industries, with a focus on Event Organizer and Wedding Organizer sectors. These contexts are analytically significant because they are characterized by temporality, fluid team configurations, and high reliance on coordination, negotiation, and client interaction. Such conditions intensify the centrality of communication in leadership processes while simultaneously reproducing gendered expectations regarding professionalism, emotional labor, and relational competence.

Building on a Feminist Organizational Communication perspective, women leaders continue to occupy a contradictory position within organizational contexts. They are expected to demonstrate authority, decisiveness, and competence associated with effective leadership while simultaneously conforming to gender norms emphasizing warmth, empathy, and relational sensitivity (Heilman, 2012; Kark & Buengeler, 2024). This contradiction is commonly conceptualized as the double bind, a condition in which women face competing expectations that are difficult to satisfy simultaneously (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women who display agentic behaviors may be perceived as violating conventional gender norms, whereas those who conform to communal expectations risk being viewed as less competent leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Scholars argue that double bind extends beyond an individual psychological dilemma and reflects organizational structures that reproduce gendered assumptions about leadership and authority (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Feminist Organizational Communication scholars further demonstrate that these inequalities are produced and sustained through everyday communication processes (Buzzanell, 1994; Linabary et al., 2021). Although recent studies highlight women's communicative adaptation, identity work, and leadership negotiation within gendered organizational contexts (Arendt & Buzzanell, 2018; Kark & Buengeler, 2024; Oktaviani, 2024), limited attention has been devoted to how leadership legitimacy is communicatively constructed and negotiated. Building on a Feminist Organizational Communication perspective, this study conceptualizes double bind as a discursive phenomenon and positions women leaders as active communicative agents who negotiate competing expectations to construct and sustain leadership legitimacy.

This article proceeds by first elaborating the theoretical foundations of discursive leadership, double bind, and feminist organizational communication. It then outlines the methodological approach and analytical procedures employed in the study. The findings section presents key patterns of discursive strategies used by women leaders, which are subsequently discussed through the lens of discursive legitimacy as a conceptual

contribution. The article concludes by highlighting implications for organizational theory, leadership practice, and future research directions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative interpretive-critical research design grounded in the critical paradigm (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). This paradigm was selected because it facilitates examination of how gendered power relations, organizational ideologies, and communicative practices shape women's leadership experiences while emphasizing the transformative potential of women-centered knowledge production (Buzzanell, 1994). The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes related to leadership and gendered organizational dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven women leaders working in Event Organizer (EO) and Wedding Organizer (WO) organizations in Indonesia.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy widely used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insights relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2014). Selection was based on the following criteria: occupying a formal leadership position, actively managing teams in event-related projects, possessing a minimum of two years of leadership experience, having encountered gender-related challenges in leadership practice, and being willing to share reflective accounts of their experiences.

The participants ranged in age from 24 to 39 years and represented diverse organizational positions, including owner-directors, chief executive officers, project managers, and team leaders. Their professional experiences ranged from two to thirteen years across wedding, corporate, government, and entertainment event sectors. This diversity enabled exploration of women's leadership experiences across varied project-based organizational contexts while maintaining a common industry setting. Detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants

Code	Name/Age/Exp./Org.	Position
INF.01	BC (Age. 32 & Exp. 6 years) at <i>Yours Creative</i>	Owner/CEO
INF.02	MP (Age. 25 & Exp. 5 years) at <i>RMJ Company</i>	Event Leader
INF.03	EB & RB (Age. 32/29 & Exp. 4 years) at <i>Limanta WP</i>	Owner/Leader
INF.04	NW (Age. 30 & Exp. 2-3 years) at <i>Xera Organizer</i>	Owner/PM
INF.05	FF (Age. 25 & Exp. 3-4 years) at <i>Afa Project</i>	Project Manager
INF.06	EF (Age. 25 & Exp. 5 years) at <i>Nuansa Organizer</i>	Leader
INF.07	DA (Age. 32 & Exp. 5-6 years) at <i>Mahakarya Organizer</i>	Leader
INF.08	JR (Age. 30 & Exp. 7 years) at <i>Memories Organizer</i>	Owner/Leader
INF.09	AP (Age. 33 & Exp. 6 years) at <i>Aplus Planner</i>	Owner/Leader
INF.10	WR (Age. 39 & Exp. 13 years) at <i>DW Organizer</i>	Owner/Director
INF.11	AA (Age. 24 & Exp. 3 years) at <i>Sunic ID Project</i>	Event Leader

Sources: Compiled by the author (2026)

Interview questions focused on participants' everyday communicative practices, experiences of contradictory gender expectations, strategies used to navigate double

bind situations, and perceptions of leadership legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes while allowing flexibility to pursue issues that emerged during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) developed by Lawless and Chen (2019). CTA integrates the systematic procedures of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a critical orientation that examines how discourse reflects, reproduces, and challenges organizational power relations and ideological assumptions.

The analytical process was conducted iteratively through two stages. During open coding, interview transcripts were examined to identify recurring patterns of meaning through recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. These linguistic indicators enabled identification of salient communicative experiences and discursive practices reported by participants. During closed coding, the resulting categories were interpreted through the lenses of Feminist Organizational Communication and Discursive Leadership to examine how leadership legitimacy was communicatively constructed, negotiated, and constrained within gendered organizational contexts. Rather than focusing solely on thematic description, this approach facilitated critical interpretation of how everyday communication practices reproduced, negotiated, or challenged dominant assumptions regarding leadership, authority, and gender.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed source triangulation and member checking following established qualitative research criteria for credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). These procedures were used to strengthen interpretive consistency, validate emerging findings, and minimize potential researcher bias during data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis identified four primary themes in women leaders' communicative practices within EO and WO organizations. Each theme reflects a distinct mode through which double bind is navigated and leadership legitimacy is negotiated. Table 3 presents an overview of the analytical results, including the ideological formations, power relations, and hierarchical structures associated with each theme.

Table 3. Navigation of the Gendered Double Bind

Analytical Theme	Critical Interpretation: <i>Ideology, Power, Gendered Legitimacy</i>
Relational Communication	Ideology: Familialism & kinship norms. Power: Relational/soft power enacted through interpersonal closeness. Legitimacy: Implicit hierarchy masks unequal influence access, requiring navigation of the warmth–competence double bind to maintain authority without violating gendered expectations.
Adaptive Team Communication	Ideology: Neoliberal flexibility & contextual adaptability. Power: Negotiated power continuously reconstructed via situational code-switching. Legitimacy: Fluid hierarchy demands constant self-regulation, reflecting strategic management of competence–likability tensions inherent in project-based leadership.
Emotional Expression	Ideology: Emotional labor & affective regulation norms. Power: Affective power deployed through calibrated tone, strategic empathy, & controlled assertiveness.

Role & Position Dynamics	Legitimacy: Emotional hierarchy polices gendered affectivity, directly reinforcing the double bind's policing of "acceptable" professional emotionality. Ideology: Structural meritocracy & positional legitimacy. Power: Structural power anchored in formal accountability & decision-making frameworks. Legitimacy: Formal hierarchy persists despite organizational flexibility, requiring hyper-competence performance to counteract gendered legitimacy deficits.
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Sources: Compiled by the author (2026)

Relational Power Through Communication

The most consistent pattern across participant accounts was the centrality of interpersonal closeness in building organizational communication. Leaders routinely described establishing teams through pre-existing personal networks and framing organizational relationships in familial terms. Representative accounts illustrate the depth of this pattern:

"Hmm, kalau kita berdasarkan kedekatan. Jadi isinya adalah keluarga dan teman-teman." [We work based on closeness. The team consists of family and friends.] (INF_01, BC)

"Aku nyebutnya adik-adik karena memang kebetulan di WO ini kebanyakannya sepupu-sepupu juga yang jadi tim kita." [I call them younger siblings because most of the WO team members are actually cousins.] (INF_03, EB)

Critical analysis reveals that relational communication in these organizations embeds a shape of familialism, an ideology that frames organizational life as intimate and personal. While this ideology produces genuine warmth and organizational cohesion, it simultaneously operates as a mechanism of relational power; a form of soft power in which influence derives not from formal position but from proximity to the leader. The apparent horizontality of familial organization conceals what we term an implicit hierarchy: those with greater personal closeness to the leader gain preferential access to information, opportunity, and organizational influence.

For women leaders, this relational orientation represents a double bind navigation strategy that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. It enables leadership by aligning with feminine expectations of warmth and relational care, thus reducing the friction associated with women's exercise of authority. However, it constrains leadership by producing dependencies and ambiguities that can undermine the clarity of authority. When close relationships become the basis of organizational structure, asserting formal authority risks disrupting the relational fabric upon which organizational function depends.

This finding aligns with observation that contemporary organizational power increasingly operates through relational and affective bonds rather than formal hierarchy (Mumby, 2010). In the context of women's leadership, relational communication becomes a site of double bind navigation precisely because it simultaneously satisfies and complicates the contradictory demands women face.

This finding extends previous discussions of relational leadership by demonstrating that interpersonal closeness functions not only as a source of organizational cohesion but also as a mechanism through which women leaders

negotiate leadership legitimacy. Unlike traditional accounts that emphasize relationality as a leadership strength, the present study reveals its ambivalent character. While relational communication enables women leaders to align with expectations of warmth and care, it may simultaneously create dependencies that complicate the exercise of formal authority. From a critical perspective, this finding suggests that relational leadership should not be viewed solely as an empowering resource. Rather, it represents a negotiated communicative space in which legitimacy is continuously constructed, maintained, and potentially constrained by the very relationships that sustain organizational cohesion.

Adaptive Communication Strategies as Negotiated Power

A second prominent theme concerned the adaptive and situationally responsive character of participants' communication strategies. Leaders consistently described modifying their communicative approach based on team dynamics, client characteristics, and event-specific pressures:

"Sukanya yang jelas-jelas aja. Even pun kalau ada kesalahan apapun ya Fifi akan tipe orang yang menegur langsung." [I prefer clarity. Even when something goes wrong, I address it directly.] (INF_05, FF)

"Lebih santai sih. Nggak yang gimana-gimana. Terus mahamin karakternya dia dulu." [More relaxed. And I first try to understand their character.] (INF_02, MP)

This communicative flexibility enacts what CTA reveals as a negotiated power dynamic: authority in these organizations is not fixed in formal positions but is continuously reconstructed through communicative interaction. A fluid hierarchy emerges in which positional authority is supplemented and sometimes supplanted by situational communicative competence (Liu et al., 2023; Schoeneborn et al., 2025). The leader who can most skillfully read and respond to organizational dynamics retains or acquires disproportionate influence.

From a double bind perspective, adaptive communication functions as a discursive navigation strategy that allows women leaders to modulate their positioning between assertive and relational registers (Dupree, 2024). By deploying directness with some interlocutors and collaborative warmth with others, leaders can partially satisfy the contradictory demands of leadership and femininity norms without permanently committing to either pole. This strategic code-switching, identified in the interview data as conscious and purposive represents a form of discursive agency through which women negotiate the double bind rather than simply suffering its constraints.

The neoliberal ideology of adaptability and flexibility that underlies this pattern carries its own critical implications, however. The demand that leaders continuously adjust their communicative repertoire to suit organizational demands places disproportionate burden on women, who must navigate both the general demands of adaptive communication and the additional layer of gender-based evaluation (Bongiorno et al., 2024). What presents as individual flexibility is partly a structural demand that falls unequally on women leaders.

This finding is consistent with previous studies that identify communicative adaptability as a central leadership competency in contemporary organizations (Arendt & Buzzanell, 2018; Liu et al., 2023). However, the present study extends this literature

by demonstrating that adaptive communication serves not only managerial functions but also gendered functions. Participants adjusted their communication styles not merely to enhance team coordination or organizational effectiveness, but also to navigate contradictory expectations associated with femininity and leadership. In this sense, communicative adaptability becomes a mechanism through which women leaders negotiate legitimacy within organizational environments where authority remains unevenly gendered.

From a critical perspective, this finding suggests that adaptability may operate as both a resource and a burden. While communicative flexibility enables women leaders to respond effectively to diverse organizational demands, it also reflects an unequal expectation that women must continuously adjust themselves to gain recognition as legitimate leaders. The need for constant adaptation indicates that leadership legitimacy is not granted automatically but must be communicatively earned and repeatedly reaffirmed. This reveals how gendered organizational expectations continue to shape leadership experiences even within relatively flexible and project-based organizational contexts.

Emotional Expression as Emotional Labor and Affective Power

Participants consistently described intensive management of emotional expression as a central element of leadership practice. Emotional expression emerged not as spontaneous response but as a communicatively strategic resource, deployed in relation to organizational norms and leadership objectives:

"Pemarahan, tegas, disiplin. Karena memang gak suka yang kemenyak-kemenyek. Sedangkan kerjanya harus kayak gitu, dikejar deadline." [Corrective anger, firmness, discipline. I dislike indecisiveness. The work requires it — we are under deadline pressure.] (INF_02, MP)

"Namanya cewek nih kadang agak susah mengontrol emosi ya... hal itu juga jadi pelajaran di aku buat ee kalau sambil mimpin itu agak susah buat ngontrol emosi." [As women, controlling emotions is sometimes difficult... and that has been a lesson — that leading while managing emotions is genuinely demanding.] (INF_11, AA)

Critical analysis of this theme foregrounds the emotional labor dimension of women's leadership, namely the requirement to manage and display emotions in organizationally prescribed ways as part of leadership work (Lewis & Benschop, 2023; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Emotional expression in these accounts functions as affective power, referring to the capacity to influence others through emotional communication. However, this power operates within an emotional hierarchy that differentiates between legitimate and illegitimate emotional displays in professional contexts. Gendered evaluations of leadership behavior further intensify this dynamic, as women leaders are often assessed through different standards than their male counterparts, particularly when displaying assertiveness, authority, or emotional expression (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024).

The double bind is acutely present here. Assertive emotional expression, including directness, controlled firmness, and elevated intonation when addressing errors, is evaluated against gendered standards that code the same behavior differently depending on the gender of the actor (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Paustian-Underdahl

et al., 2024). What reads as decisive leadership in a male leader may be coded as aggressive or emotional in a female leader. Participants demonstrated awareness of this asymmetry and calibrated their emotional expression accordingly, a form of discursive self regulation that constitutes both a navigation strategy and a form of gender tax on leadership practice.

This finding extends feminist organizational communication scholarship by demonstrating how women leaders strategically regulate emotional expression to navigate contradictory gender expectations within organizational settings (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). The findings suggest that emotional management is not merely an individual response to workplace demands but a communicative practice shaped by broader organizational norms and gendered expectations. Participants actively calibrated their emotional expression to maintain professional credibility while avoiding negative evaluations associated with dominant assumptions about femininity and leadership.

This finding supports previous research demonstrating that emotional expression is evaluated differently according to gendered expectations (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Lewis & Benschop, 2023). However, the present study shows that emotional regulation extends beyond individual impression management and becomes an integral component of leadership work itself. Participants were expected not only to perform leadership tasks but also to continuously monitor how their emotions would be interpreted by others. This finding highlights the persistence of gendered emotional standards that require women leaders to invest additional communicative labor in maintaining professional legitimacy.

A critical reflection emerging from this theme concerns the invisibility of emotional labor within organizational evaluations of leadership. Although emotional regulation contributes significantly to team coordination, conflict management, and organizational stability, such efforts are rarely recognized as leadership competencies. Instead, women remain vulnerable to negative judgments when emotional expressions deviate from accepted norms. This contradiction illustrates how organizational expectations simultaneously require and constrain emotional expression, reinforcing the double bind experienced by women leaders.

Role and Position Dynamics as Structural Negotiation

A fourth theme concerned the fluid and negotiated character of leadership roles within EO and WO organizations. Unlike more bureaucratic organizational contexts, leadership positions in these settings are dynamic, redistributable, and contingent on event-specific demands:

"Iya belum tentu. Jadi kalau aku sebagai owner memang di preparation ya. Nah nanti pada saat hari H-seminggu udah mulai meeting vendor out baru ditentukan siapa leadernya." [Not necessarily. As owner I handle preparation. Then about a week before the event, we determine who will lead on the day.] (INF_04, NW)

"Kalau misalnya kita turun bareng, aku jadi leader, tapi kalau misalnya kadang ada mungkin weddingannya ada 2 dalam satu hari, kita jadi bagi, bagi 2." [When we

work together I lead, but if there are two weddings on the same day, we split the leadership.] (INF_03, EB)

This structural fluidity produces conditions that are simultaneously liberating and constraining for women leaders. On one hand, fluid role structures reduce the fixedness of gender-based exclusion: leadership can be distributed according to competence and situational relevance rather than rigid hierarchy (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025a, 2025b). On the other hand, the apparent meritocracy of fluid structures can obscure the gendered conditions under which leadership competence is assessed and recognized.

Feminist organizational communication theory (Acker, 1990; Buzzanell, 1994) illuminates how apparently neutral organizational structures embed gender bias in their foundational assumptions. The fluid hierarchy of EO/WO organizations does not eliminate structural power; it distributes it differently, creating conditions in which women must continuously demonstrate and reestablish their leadership credentials rather than having them recognized through stable structural position. The result is a form of communicative labor that is ongoing, effortful, and largely invisible, through which women leaders maintain their organizational standing.

This finding both supports and extends previous studies on project-based organizing that emphasize flexibility and distributed leadership structures (Gander & Sharafizad, 2025b). While such structures may create opportunities for broader participation in leadership processes, the present findings suggest that flexibility alone does not eliminate gendered inequalities. Instead, women leaders remain responsible for repeatedly demonstrating competence and authority in ways that are less frequently demanded of their male counterparts. Leadership therefore becomes an ongoing process of legitimacy construction rather than a status secured through formal position alone.

This theme reveals an important organizational contradiction. Structures that appear flexible and meritocratic may still reproduce gendered expectations through informal evaluations of competence and authority. As a result, the absence of rigid hierarchy should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of equality. Rather, power operates through more subtle communicative and relational processes that require continuous negotiation. This finding underscores the importance of examining how leadership legitimacy is produced in everyday organizational interactions rather than assuming that structural flexibility necessarily reduces gender-based constraints.

Toward a Theory of Discursive Legitimacy

The four themes identified above converge on a central theoretical proposition: that women leaders in organizations operating on a project basis construct leadership legitimacy through discursive practice rather than through positional authority alone. We term this process discursive legitimacy: the ongoing communicative work through which women establish, maintain, and negotiate their standing as legitimate leaders within organizational environments shaped by gender dynamics.

Discursive legitimacy involves at minimum four communicative operations (Buss et al., 2025). First, relational positioning: building and maintaining the interpersonal bonds through which authority is recognized and enacted. Second, adaptive framing: adjusting communicative register to satisfy shifting organizational demands without permanently committing to either the assertive or the relational pole. Third, emotional calibration: managing emotional expression to navigate the asymmetric evaluation of

emotional displays by women in professional contexts. Fourth, structural improvisation: exploiting the fluid role structures of work organized around discrete projects to create opportunities for leadership demonstration that circumvent entrenched gender bias.

This theoretical contribution reframes the double bind from a static constraint to a dynamic communicative field within which women are active agents. The double bind does not disappear through these strategies, as the structural conditions that produce it persist. However, discursive legitimacy enables women to construct workable leadership identities within its contradictions, rather than being paralyzed by them.

This finding aligns with and extends the discursive leadership framework developed by Fairhurst (2008) by demonstrating how gender complicates the communicative construction of leadership authority. It also responds to calls from (Linabary et al., 2021) for feminist organizational communication research that centers communicative agency among women rather than focusing exclusively on structural constraint.

Theoretically, this study contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, it extends Double Bind Theory by demonstrating that double bind operates not only as a psychological dilemma or structural constraint but also as a communicative process that is continuously negotiated through interaction. Second, it advances discursive leadership scholarship by showing that leadership legitimacy is constructed through gendered communicative practices rather than through positional authority alone. Third, it contributes to Feminist Organizational Communication by highlighting women's communicative agency in navigating organizational contradictions while simultaneously revealing the persistent influence of gendered power relations. The concept of discursive legitimacy therefore provides a framework for understanding how leadership authority is communicatively produced, maintained, and contested within project-based organizational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how women leaders in project-based creative organizations navigate the double bind through everyday communicative practices. The findings demonstrate that double bind operates not only as a psychological dilemma or structural constraint but also as a communicative phenomenon that is continuously negotiated through organizational interaction. Women leaders construct and sustain leadership legitimacy through relational positioning, communicative adaptability, emotional regulation, and role negotiation. The study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing discursive legitimacy as the communicative process through which leadership authority is established, maintained, and negotiated within gendered organizational contexts.

This perspective extends existing understandings of double bind and highlights women leaders as active communicative agents rather than passive recipients of organizational constraints. This study is limited by its focus on women leaders within Event Organizer and Wedding Organizer organizations in a single Indonesian city. Future research could examine discursive legitimacy across different organizational settings and explore how factors such as age, professional background, and organizational structure shape women's communicative leadership practices.

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