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Article:

Women leading otherwise? Rethinking leadership configurations in the music industry through Keychange

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Abstract

Women continue to face systemic barriers to exercising leadership in the music industry. This article critically examines Keychange, a transnational initiative that seeks to transform the industry through talent development advocacy and leadership training for women and gender-diverse individuals. Drawing on participant interviews and situated within a relational and collective leadership framework, the study explores how leadership in the cultural and creative industries, when approached in relation to women and inequality, is not solely an individual attribute, but emerges within the networked configuration of people around a common purpose. These collaborative and affective practices are embedded within relationships of mutual support and shared purpose, offering tangible benefits for individual participants and, potentially, for the sector as a whole. The combination of feminine leadership and feminist approaches provide new and diversified models on how the industry can be led. Conventionally gendered behaviours and tropes remain deeply embedded, however, and it will require sustained activist energy if the tentative gains made to date are to be consolidated through deeper structural transformation. The findings offer insights relevant not only for the design of future leadership programmes but also for an academic discourse struggling to articulate the distinctiveness and value of women and leadership in the cultural and creative industries.

Keywords: leadership, women and gender-diverse networks, music industry, cultural and creative industries, affect, Keychange

1. Introduction

As evidenced by the male dominance in executive positions across the music industry, including 86.8% at major record labels (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2025) and a particular concentration of men in higher-paying roles industry-wide (UK Music, 2024), women face systemic barriers to progression and leadership, including ageism, sexual harassment, and inadequate family support (Help Musicians & Musicians' Union, 2024). While recent improvements—like increased gender-diverse board representation (Seat at the Table, 2024) — signal progress, they remain the exception rather than the norm. Despite these barriers, examples of affirmative action—such as women-led collectives, gender-specific funding and mentorship schemes—have emerged to improve gender diversity in leadership. Many of these efforts have helped generate data and critical visibility around gender disparities (UK Music, 2024; Midia, 2024). Research is still limited however on how leadership is understood and enacted within such initiatives and how they shape access to leadership roles in music and the broader cultural and creative industries (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025).

This article examines Keychange, a transnational initiative launched in 2017 to promote gender equity in the music industry. Initially centred on a talent development programme for women, Keychange quickly expanded its scope to include gender-diverse talent, including trans, non-binary, gender fluid and other underrepresented gender identities[1]. In 2025, Keychange entered a new phase, putting emphasis more explicitly toward leadership through a six-month training for selected women and gender-diverse leaders—"DEI&A trailblazers, founders, artist-activists, and senior executives"

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[1] We wish to acknowledge that, while the term *women* is used throughout this paper, Keychange has, over recent years, developed a more inclusive language that reflects its commitment to representing all underrepresented genders. We try to make this clear in all instances we talk about the initiative's efforts in particular.

(Keychange, 2025a)—aimed at advancing both individual leadership and fostering collective action for systemic change. Given the international visibility the initiative has gained, as well as its current focus on leadership, Keychange provides an interesting arena to address some of the questions posed by this special issue—namely, *how leadership manifests within the cultural and creative industries and what new forms it may take,* as well as *what mechanisms enable collective action and support for women in these sectors*.

Existing literature often draws a distinction between individual and collective leadership in organisational settings or teams (Day et al. 2004; Denis et al, 2012; Fairhurst et al., 2020). A relational leadership lens (Ospina et al., 2010; Sutherland 2019) has focused on leadership within social change organisations. However, less attention has been paid to how environments that support the development of individual leadership capacities can also harness both individual and collective leadership to advance systemic change within non-structured organisations, such as transnational and informal networks. Our research shows that 'leadership' in the cultural and creative industries, when discussed in relationship with women and inequalities, isn't located uniquely in the individual, but in the networked configuration of people around a common purpose. Closely related to a collaborative sense of agency, this tendency is consistent with the hybrid and practice-oriented conceptualisations of leadership theorists such as Gronn (2009) and Raelin (2014; 2016) and proposes a model that holds particular relevance for the cultural and creative industries, where conventional pathways to leadership remain narrow, competitive, and gendered.

This article is structured as follows. We begin by situating our empirical study within broader literature on gender inequalities in the cultural and creative s, with a focus on music. We then outline our theoretical framing around cultural and collective leadership and affect, followed by our methodological approach and a short presentation of Keychange. The empirical findings are structured around different configurations of leadership (individual- collective) and the mechanisms that nurture it as they evolve within Keychange. Throughout, we integrate academic literature inductively to remain close to the data, with further theoretical analysis presented in the discussion. We conclude by considering the broader implications for women's leadership research and practice in the cultural and creative s.

Literature review

2.1 Why discussion on women and leadership in the cultural and creative industries matters

Work in the cultural and creative industries has long been characterised by precarity, low levels of pay, high turnover (Steedman and Brydges, 2023) and a preponderance of freelance/portfolio careers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013), making it difficult to assess actual female and gender diverse employment rates. Still, research in film (Loist et al., 2024), art (Provansal, 2024), fashion (Stokes, 2015) and music (Raine and Strong, 2019) shows a clear issue with gender inequality across creative practices. Workers in the cultural and creative industries often accept precarious, flexible employment (Anheier & Markovic, 2024), further disadvantaging women who are disproportionately burdened with care responsibilities (O'Brien, 2025). These inequalities limit women's access to leadership roles (European Union, 2021), often confining them to low or mid-level positions with fewer decision-making responsibilities. Carr and Van Raalte (2025) identify three key issues shaping this barrier: creative work as a privileged precarity; the creative genius myth; and networks and social capital.

Within the music industry specifically, whilst women are increasingly visible, they fall victim to the self-replicating domination of leadership roles. The prevalence of informal work structures and hiring practices, operating and reinforcing established professional and social networks (Davies, 2024) and often offering a 'male to male advantage' (Cullen-Lester and Perez-Truglia, 2019), make it more difficult for women to climb the leadership ladder and reach executive positions, particularly those

who are Black and/or working-class (Brook et al., 2020). The myth of the creative genius is often coded as male, adding substance to a cultural sector "phantom of the male norm" (Billing 2011), which creates a self-perpetuating cycle where leaders have historically been men, reinforcing the idea that they are more suited to these roles (Bierema, 2016), and sapping women's motivation to 'elbow' their way in (Ladkin, 2010).

Research on gender inequalities in the music industry has focused on how gender shapes music makers' interactions with the industry (Leonard, 2007), structural barriers, including 'boys club' dynamics (Leonard, 2016), gender-based violence and misogyny (Women and Equalities Committee, 2024), stereotyping and sexualisation (Lieb, 2013), and masculine bias in music education (de Boise 2017). Recent work examines how women, often individually, navigate leadership within this unequal landscape (Rusak, 2024; Hamer & Minors, 2024) with a growing body of intersectional scholarship challenging the tendency to overlook race and class. Research on the classical music industry has analysed issues of gender with class (Bull, 2019) and race (Scharff, 2018), particularly within the context of precarious work and exclusion. However, the available literature lacks the intersectional experiences of those beyond the Global North, masking the compounded inequities faced by women of colour, disabled women, and working-class artists and industry professionals globally.

2.2 Leadership discourse in the cultural and creative industries

Leadership only became a focus within the cultural sector in the last quarter century, initially driven by concerns around the quality and availability of top tier executive talent in large cultural organisations amid financial and managerial crises in the UK (Hewison, 2004; Sutherland and Gosling, 2010). Taking practical shape in the form of well-funded development initiatives like the Clore Leadership Programme and the government-backed Cultural Leadership Programme in the mid-2000s, leadership discourse quickly proliferated, concentrating particularly on publicly funded organisations (Price, 2017) and expanded internationally amid growing policy interest in the cultural and creative industries (Dalborg & Löfgren, 2016; Kolsteeg & Zierold, 2019). Leadership conceptions and models were imported from business and merged with cultural tropes such as artistic genius. However, the supposedly convention-busting charismatic heroes celebrated and fetishised as a result, have often ended up exhibiting problematically conventional leadership behaviours to toxic effect—an issue the sector has yet to address (Nisbett et al., 2025).

Challenges to the narrowness of early cultural leadership discourse gradually emerged, highlighting women's marginalisation (Dodd et al., 2008), the overlooking of artists and creative practitioners' contribution to their own sector (Douglas and Fremantle, 2009), racial exclusion (Alleyne and Cuyler, 2022), and Anglo/Euro-centric modelling (Caust, 2015). Yet debate and initiatives often remained detached from commercially oriented cultural and creative industries, like the mainstream music industry, despite some policy-level conflation between traditional arts and the CCIs' economic growth (Alexander, 2018). Meanwhile, post-millennial fashionability of leadership discourse in the cultural and creative industries has not meant that everyone is comfortable with the term. Patterns of reluctance, particularly experienced by women (Ladkin 2010), to take on the title of 'leader', and discomfort with its entailments of power and gendered or racialised privilege have been noted (Goodwin, 2020), suggesting that the term itself contributes to excluding some from assuming the very roles that would allow them to make necessary change. Emerging perspectives take leadership in the cultural and creative industries away from simple identification with individual leaders or particular managerial roles, emphasising its plurality (K. Goodwin, 2025), viewing those involved in the cultural and creative industries as agentic actors with a responsibility to lead in public discourse (Cairnduff, 2025) and engage with ethical challenges as much as with aesthetic or entrepreneurial ones (Price, 2024). A growing interest in models of shared or collaborative leadership represents a way of contributing more positively to sectoral diversity (Antrobus, 2023; Caust & Goodwin, 2024; Reid & Fjellvær, 2023). Keychange can be seen as an adaptation of this strand of thinking.

2.3 Collaborative agency, affect and networks: expanding the collective turn in leadership

Broader leadership scholarship has also shifted toward viewing leadership not as the domain of a single, authoritative and heroic leader, but as a distributed and socially constructed process emerging through interaction (Raelin, 2014). Researchers have explored how leadership functions are carried out by teams, organisations, coalitions, communities, networks, and broader systems through distributed social behaviours (Gronn, 2009; Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016; Maupin et al., 2020). This shift emphasises how leadership is embedded in collective activities rather than residing in individual traits or formal roles, reconceptualising leadership as a contextualised practice rather than a personal competency (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin 2016).

Central to this view is the notion of collaborative agency, where agency is not merely an individual trait but a co-constructed phenomenon arising from intersubjective exchanges among participants engaged in a shared practice. Importantly, both Gronn (2009) and Raelin (2014) argue that agency is simultaneously individual and collective, and activated through dialogic interactions—spaces in which individuals listen, reflect, and are open to transformation through engagement with others. This form of agency does not dissolve the individual into the group but instead takes shape through the pattern or "configuration" of key relationships (Gronn 2009). In this framing, leadership becomes a hybrid expression of collaborative agency, involving mutual exchanges of influence between individuals and groups, with distributed and solo models co-existing.

Women's networks can be seen as spaces where collaborative agency and collective leadership can flourish. Literature on women's networks (Papafilipou et al., 2022; Villesèche and Josserand, 2017) highlights how they mobilise beyond the individual level to foster transformative change towards gender equality. Evidence of women's networks in the music industry dates back to 1976 (Bayton, 1998), often centred on skill development, social connections and potential work opportunities (Hancock, 2017; Veloce et al., 2025). Their prevalence across Europe and beyond (G. Goodwin, 2025) suggests their role in helping women and gender diverse people navigate the sector. Yet, they may also increase gender segregation by remaining peripheral to dominant industry structures. Moreover, their potential to shape the relational construction of leadership identities while sustaining collective leadership through shared narratives, has been overlooked.

Our analysis of Keychange draws on the affective turn in feminist organisational studies (Fotaki and Pullen, 2019) which has increasingly drawn attention to the role of affect in shaping professional and political subjectivities, particularly in contexts where traditional forms of leadership and power are being reimagined. As Fotaki et al. (2017) argue, affect is not merely a private phenomenon, but a relational and political force that can generate new forms of solidarity, resistance, and transformation. This framing is particularly relevant in understanding the forms of leadership that emerge in initiatives like Keychange, where shared experiences and mutual care often underpin professional development. In such settings, emotions—and the labour required to manage, suppress, or amplify them (Ashton, 2021; Hochschild, 1983; Veldstra, 2018)—play a central role, shaping not only individual identity work but also the collective practices through which leadership is enacted.

3. Context and methodology

3.1 A short history of Keychange

The cultural and creative industries have grappled with issues of inequality over the past decade, with campaigns like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #OscarsSoWhite amplifying critiques of exclusionary practices (cuyler, 2025). These campaigns have created a wider conversation around issues of diversity and in response, sector-specific initiatives have emerged, aiming to translate this discourse into tangible structural change.

Keychange emerged within this context as a global movement for gender equity in the music industry. Launched in 2017 and supported by Creative Europe funding (European Union's funding programme for the cultural and creative industries) it reached various European countries and took an international dimension with its expansion to Canada and the US in 2022. Focused on a development programme for women and gender-diverse artists and innovators, including in-person meet ups, training, mentoring and exposure opportunities in showcases, festivals and industry meetings, Keychange also mounted a global campaign encouraging festivals and industry organisations to commit to diversity goals via a monitored Pledge (Swartjes et al. 2022) and policy-oriented actions. In 2025, Keychange renewed Creative Europe funding and launched a dedicated programme supporting 42 women and gender diverse established practitioners identified as "future leaders" (Keychange, 2025b). This paper draws on the evaluation of earlier editions to explore how leadership was experienced, shedding light on Keychange's current focus on this area.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The research draws on data gathered during the evaluation of the Keychange, conducted by the first author between August 2023 and February 2024. While a range of sources informed contextual understandings of the programme and participant's experiences (eg. internal reports and cohort surveys), the analysis presented here is based solely on interviews with participants, for which explicit consent for research use was obtained. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online, either individually or in small groups (2-3 participants), lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The sample included 25 participants from all cohorts and countries involved, balancing artists and industry professionals across different career stages, selected through a mix of Keychange team recommendations and an open call to alumni. Verbal informed consent was recorded at the start of each interview, which participants understood would serve both evaluation and research purposes. Interviewees have been anonymised to protect their privacy. Transcripts were manually coded using an inductive thematic analysis guided by concepts from the literature. Coding focused on four interconnected areas: (1) self-identification patterns of leadership and identity work; (2) mechanisms of leadership development, (3) the role of affect and (4) the emergence of collective and relational forms of leadership. Coding and analysis were conducted by the first author and discussed with co-authors to enhance analytical rigour and reduce individual bias. Additional interviews with Keychange staff and partners, conducted during the programme evaluation, are not analysed here, though they provided background information and highlighted Keychange as a catalyst for industry change. The first author also attended a 2024 Keychange gathering at Tallinn Music Week and conducted two follow-up interviews in spring 2025 with a Keychange team member and the current leadership development programme lead, to better understand the initiative's evolution.

The first author's dual role as evaluator and researcher offered contextual insight but required continuous critical reflection to manage potential bias. The co-authors, not involved in data collection, provided analytical distance—one bringing an external perspective with no prior involvement in Keychange, and the other drawing on limited engagement with Keychange as an early-career researcher studying gender inequalities in the music industry.

4. Findings

4.1 The heavy burden of aspiring to lead in the music industry

Interviewees often described joining Keychange when they needed a professional push- through networks, visibility, or international opportunities. Beyond career goals, many spoke about the emotional weight of aspiring to lead in an industry where traditional norms continue to shape perceptions of who is 'fit' just to participate, let alone to lead. This tension was expressed by feelings of imposter syndrome and doubts over whether they truly 'belonged' in the industry, as explained by the following quote:

"When I entered Keychange, I felt I understood something — it was this thing in the background, something that had always been there but that I couldn't name, that was always undermining my skills. A lot of doubts about my abilities, myself, my place in the music business — and even about my music." (Int #18)

Several interviewees shared experiences of gender-based discrimination, marginalisation, and objectification- encounters that had not only shaped their careers but also fuelled a personal commitment to challenging systemic inequalities within the industry. One artist reflected on how repeated experiences of being reduced to her being a woman in professional settings motivated her to engage with Keychange's mission:

"My old manager would say to me, 'Oh, aren't you pretty?' in a business meeting with partners. I immediately got turned into a mascot of the meeting. I can't be a part of the conversation anymore, because I'm just there to sit and look nice (…). I feel that's just not the way it should work. So, I guess I have this idealistic and activistic soul." (Int #9)

Although not all participants had previously engaged in gender-specific initiatives in the industry, some had already taken steps to address leadership gaps. One industry professional explained why she had initiated informal gatherings in her city:

"I started looking around and seeing a very male-dominated music industry. I was frustrated by that. There was such a clear lack of women in leadership (...). You'd see younger women entering the industry, but they often wouldn't stay, or they'd change careers (...). The goal was to create a safe space (...) somewhere you could find people who relate to your experiences." (Int #1)

A further poignant theme across interviews was the persistent experience of tokenism and exclusion from established male-dominated professional networks. One artist reflected:

"I felt that these thoughts, attitudes and insecurities I had, were built by what was around me: being immersed in an environment that makes you doubt if you are there because you are a woman, or if you are not there because you are a woman." (Int #24)

Some interviewees expressed a sense of being included in leadership positions not for their abilities, but rather as a symbolic gesture to meet gender quotas. One industry professional explained:

"I have myself been the token female on a lot of things. It's like, 'Oh, yeah, we put you in, then it's more likely that we get funding.' Or, 'Because everyone else is male, we need a female here..'. It was something I was thinking a lot about how I can address this. But I wasn't really sure how. I needed a kind of push and a community. If you're one woman in a very male world, to also be the one who pushes, it's hard…" (Int #10)

This quote shows that being the 'token female' often comes with an internalised pressure to conform, further compounded by the challenge of advocating for change in an environment that might not appreciate such efforts. For some interviewees, aspiring to lead came with complex negotiations around professional legitimacy and concern about how alignment with gender equality initiatives might affect their careers. An industry professional explained:

"I never wanted to become someone in the industry who would be seen as having a radical feminist view through the lens of a professional career (...). I was afraid that (Keychange) might be too much of this very pushy feminine–masculine approach. I wasn't sure it was something I wanted to be part of." (Int #22)

One interviewee initially questioned the programme's relevance to her as an established professional in her country but found that being part of the cohort prompted her to critically reflect on t her leadership identity and the social structures shaping it:

> "I couldn't find my personal link at first. I was already a leader, a successful business owner. Then I started digging and discovering that even though I had a lot of support and empowerment from my family, it was still a patriarchal, cis-family system with double standards for my brother and for me. I started peeling away layer after layer of my environment and really questioning things." (Int #23)

As this section shows, the emotional labour (Veldstra, 2018) involved in aspiring to lead and the identity work (Ely et al., 2011) it entails are deeply intertwined with the institutional cultures that determine who can lead, in what ways, and under what conditions.

4.2 Spaces for leadership as affective becoming

Keychange provided three interrelated support mechanisms—training, mentoring, and exposure—but interviewees primarily highlighted the dedicated time and resources these offered for their own professional and personal growth. One industry professional reflected:

> "It was a massive game changer (…) to be in an environment focused on thinking about me and my career development. I had been so focused on developing my NGO, and there was a separation between the project I worked for and myself—my career, my professional needs, and goals." (Interview #6)

Some interviewees underlined that their participation often involved unlearning solitary working patterns and embracing more collaborative, team-oriented approaches:

> "It really improved my leadership skills. I had always been more of a solo player—maybe because of the country I'm from or the music scene I work in (…). But this experience really made me reflect and realise that you do need a team... I found myself becoming more comfortable working with others- it didn't feel as disruptive or difficult anymore." (Interview #22)

Our interviews revealed diverse experiences with mentoring. Several (e.g. Int #8, #16, #20) described mentoring as an emotionally grounded exchange centred on affirmation—being selected, encouraged, and recognised—where mentors and mentees became 'emotional anchors' (Taylor & Luckman, 2024) supporting each other's growth.

A recurring theme was the sense of confidence, legitimacy and a symbolic identity derived from being part of Keychange. One industry professional, who had just lost her job, described how Keychange restored her sense of self-worth at a vulnerable moment:

> "Knowing that I was selected to be part of and contribute to Keychange gave me the self-confidence I really needed this year (…). It helped build my capacity and resilience and focus on where I stand in the music industry, where my skills lie and what I want to do going forward and with certain connections." (Int #17)

For another artist, addressing motherhood in such context was also empowering:

> "We never talk about it. It's almost taboo, just like, Oh, my God, no! (…) Can I be a musician or someone walking into the music industry and being a mom? I was myself wondering all those questions, so finally a discussion about that. I sat down, and listened

to people, their story and experience as parents and musicians and said 'Yes it is possible!'". (Int #20)

Creating such a context depended on deliberate efforts to foster emotional safety. One interviewee described:

"For the first time in a gathering focused on development, career, and responsibility, someone told me, 'Whatever you're feeling right now- whether you're tired or not, whether you want to participate or not- it's all valid.' The message was powerful. What struck me was that it wasn't just words... It truly felt genuine. It was amazing- mind-blowing, even." (Interview #23)

The embodied experience of being physically present with peers who share similar challenges and aspirations was repeatedly highlighted as transformative. One industry professional recalled:

"There were around 76 people in the room, either female or genderqueer and only one guy (...). I entered being prepared, like, 'Okay, now there are all these super talented people, and I have to prove that I'm worth being here.' (...) But it was such a warm, appreciative, and encouraging atmosphere. That's something I had never experienced before." (Int #5)

These examples reflect Brennan's (2004) concept of "affective atmospheres"- the collective mood sensed upon entering a space- where affect is seen as relational energy shaped through bodily encounters. Such supportive atmospheres were maintained even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Keychange moved online. Interviewees from that cohort highlighted the vital emotional support and sense of community fostered during a period of professional uncertainty, particularly through voluntary online group sessions led by a peer participant, a music psychologist, which were described as crucial. Such reflections point to how leadership was experienced not simply as the acquisition of skills but as a process of identity building and *affective becoming*- a shift in how participants understood themselves, their value, and their relationship to others in the industry.

4.3 Networking as affective ground for leadership development

As noted in the literature, networks for women support skills development, social connections and access to opportunities. Keychange evaluation data indicate a similar trend: 77% of the survey respondents felt comfortable seeking advice within the community, and 46% had hired or collaborated with another participant (Keychange, 2024). However, and echoing Bleijenbergh et al. (2021), who explored women's academic networks through the lens of affect, interviewees often described networking not as a purely instrumental or strategic endeavor, but as a deeply relational and emotionally grounded practice with their peers, Keychange staff or trainers, as exemplified by the quotes below:

"These are people I look up to, especially in the way they run their organisations. These are relations that on a day-to-day personal level are helping me. But it's not like the programme itself really offered leadership expertise for me. Keychange is rather a network, it's not about a person. It's not a creative leadership master class. It's not a master's degree or something." (Int #8)

"I think this person (a facilitator) moves in such true alignment, as if they really practice what they preach (…). This is hard to find in the music industry, honestly. People who are dedicated to music, dedicated to the art, but also to a better world for us all to live in." (Int #25)

Among the intangible transformative practices that emerged with resonance in our data, was the act of introduction. Beyond a professional routine, these acts were experienced as moments of deep affirmation. One artist, coming from a cultural context shaped by histories of marginalisation, or low self-worth as she explained, described this as a 'huge discovery' when performed by a Keychange team member:

> "She introduced us as a rock star to a rock star (…) I've learned a lot about how beautifully you can do that. That we can practice appreciation, that through seeing people, and vocalising what you see in them, this empowerment can be effective and great (...). I noted how differently I introduce my colleagues now, and obviously, how they introduce me as well." (Int #23)

Interviewees' narratives show that they engaged in what might be described as *affective networking*: the creation of emotionally resonant spaces fostering solidarity and self-affirmation. Networking here emerges as a space of *emotional co-production* through shared vulnerability, appreciation and support. In this sense, leadership becomes inseparable from the affective relations that sustain it, a form of social capital (Day 2000) generated through collaborative practice, 'interpersonal relationships, networks and structures that result in shared meanings and cooperative endeavour' (Carroll and Simpson, 2012: 1286), are built.

4.4 Leadership as individual and collective agency

For several interviewees, Keychange fostered a sense of responsibility that translated into a proactive commitment to replicating an inclusive ethos and advocating openly for gender equity in the industry, a form of agency manifested in intentional decision-making or curatorial practices. The quote below by an industry professional exemplifies this:

> "When I started booking and curating, I booked based on what I felt was right. That meant supporting underrepresented voices, including female-identifying artists, and giving them real opportunities. I realised I was replicating the same kind of support Keychange had given me. That experience shaped how I work professionally, and it's always been my way moving forward." (Int #16)

Another interviewee noted that while her immediate experience of the programme was mixed, its long-term impact became evident through her practice:

> "I was working on a residency project, and it just struck me- so it's going to be a residency mostly oriented towards women and focused on parenthood, so that women can actually be there (….). I now have a huge network, I know how to gather things, how to connect. I realise now that it really changed my perspective, my work and my career." (Int #21)

Interviewees underlined that while engaging in empowering encounters within the Keychange cohort, they felt the stark contrast with the wider industry's inertia. For one industry professional interviewed, this realisation led her to involve men in conversations around emotional well-being and systemic change in the industry:

> "I turned to my friends at the festival and said: 'Let's flip the narrative. (...). Not just talking about women but also engaging men in conversations about both women and men—in an inclusive way (…) I turned my experiences into questions, into projects, into a search for answers. In the end, it's all leading toward change- not just personally, but in the music industry too." (Int #23)

Participants emphasised how transnational connections served a crucial role in supporting leadership as a form of collective agency. As one interviewee put it, "I think all of us, we are ambassadors, because we really want this team to grow as a worldwide team" (Int #7), while another one emphasised that the international scope of Keychange allowed participants from peripheral or less-resourced areas to access networks and opportunities they otherwise might not have (Int #5). This sense of belonging to a community united by shared values, emotional investment and collective solidarity reshaped some participants' own perceived role in the industry:

> "Keychange enabled me to become part of a global movement for change (...). Every individual act of fighting for my right to be treated equally as a musician is understood now to be a fight for a greater cause, fought by a collective, and I'm not alone." (Int #7)

The current leadership programme developer noted that while some participants initially focused on personal career goals- which she deemed 'totally valid'- many remained engaged with the programme's diversity and inclusion aims. She underlined that "leadership needs to extend beyond individual aims" to impact the wider industry ecosystem. A team member similarly described Keychange's current focus as a "strategic move to empower people who want to empower others". This vision is echoed in the recent programme call emphasising leadership through collaborative projects addressing discrimination and exclusion, from small communities to the global music ecosystem (Keychange, 2025a).

4.5 A note on feminism in women's leadership development

Werner (2022) identifies gender equality feminism as central to Keychange's approach to change; however, interviewees expressed a range of perspectives on this framing. As Avdelidou-Fischer & Kirton (2016) observe, feminist orientations within networks can vary. Several participants voiced discomfort with overtly feminist labels, critiquing the way gender is foregrounded in industry language—where 'female' often precedes the role: female musician, female drummer, female innovator, or female leader. One participant explained:

> "I just want to be seen as a person in music—not as 'a woman in music' or 'female artist.' Just like any man, I'm simply someone in the industry who happens to be female." (Int #16)

Others critiqued the tone of certain programme elements, expressing discomfort with what they perceived as a performative take on empowerment, such as a "girl bossy nature of some of the speakers" (Int #17) or a "teaching" stand towards women and gender- diverse individuals, undermining their already acquired leadership and success. For example, Int#12 asked "Why is there an assumption that these women aren't already excelling?". Furthermore, interviewees underlined the complexity of working in silos, while excluding men from conversations can limit the broader impact of gender equity in leadership efforts:

> "You come out of Keychange with this courage, like you're ready to take on the world. But then you go and talk to, I don't know, this guy who's been running this festival for 30,000 years. And he doesn't care at all. Suddenly, you realise you're not right anymore. (Int #15)

These reflections point to the importance of being cautious not to reduce women's leadership initiatives in the industry to tools of empowerment framed solely through individualistic or postfeminist narratives.

5. Discussion: Extending leadership in the cultural and creative industries- from individual agency to collective direction

The experiences of Keychange participants reflect the efforts and relevance of the initiative in addressing gender disparities in the music industry and resonate with longstanding issues in leadership development. Themes emerging in 4.1 (imposter syndrome; marginalisation; feeling like the 'token female') highlight the crucial importance of "identity work" (Haslam et al., 2022), engaging with the question of who can be seen and accepted as a leader in a given environment - including by oneself. The imprints of such experiences point to a need, often overlooked in leadership discussions, that focuses on the contrasting necessity of "painful unlearning" (Schein, 1996) of engrained habits, self-image and gendered expectations. Concerns expressed by interviewees around whether individual empowerment can translate into broader sectoral change (4.5) speak to the importance of leadership in the music industry being enacted at a systemic as well as individual level.

Interviewees' narratives revealed a deeply relational approach to leadership—rooted in affect and collective agency—and shaped by shifting configurations (Gronn, 2009) between individual leadership formation and leadership as a collective achievement (Dovey et al., 2016). In this sense, Keychange can be understood as an activist manifestation of the collective turn in leadership (Crevani et al. 2007; Cullen-Lester & Yammarino, 2016), seen not as a fixed capacity but a reciprocal process of co-creating meaning, direction and collective resilience. This research extends the literature on collective leadership in single organisations (Denis et al., 2001) to explore its emergence across organisational boundaries and transnational systems. In doing so, the "locus of leadership" (Ospina et al., 2020) is discoverable not only within individuals or teams, but within the complex configurations of systems and relationships within which leadership is enacted, consistent with the conceptualisations of Gronn (2009). Leadership within such a system emerges as a property of a broader relational ecology and aligns with Drath et al's (2008: 642) conception of leadership as a phenomenon manifesting "wherever and whenever one finds a collective exhibiting direction, alignment, and commitment". This social aspect of leadership may appear dispersed or even disembodied, challenging traditional assumptions about who leads and how (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018), even as it shapes and is shaped by the individual agency of each participant. The deeper premise underpinning this approach is that a collaborative agentic model thrives in complex relational environments- such as social networks, creative communities, and cultural ecosystems- where coordination among diverse actors is both necessary and generative (Raelin, 2014).

This orientation invites reimagining leadership in the music industry through shared values, affective solidarity and genuine connections that may disrupt the linear demands of career progression and individual achievement (Martinussen et al., 2019). In its foregrounding of leadership as a shared, co-constructed practice rather than the domain of a singular leader, Keychange's approach does not disregard the role of the individual, as its shift towards designating members as 'Keychange Leaders' signifies. Rather, it suggests that the agentic networked leader is continually shaped through interactions and embedded in a networked configuration of people around a common purpose which is particularly important when discussed in relationship with women and gender-diverse individuals in the cultural and creative industries. Within this framework, leadership is not a top-down directive, much less a heroic exercise in charismatic self-legitimation, but a distributed and evolving practice, arising from the ways in which individuals i co-create meaning, navigate challenges, and build inclusive realities together. Such a reframing challenges established notions of leadership as hierarchical, title-based, or individually driven and allows for a dynamic interplay between individual initiative and systemic transformation.

Our findings also point to an understanding of leadership that unfolds as a shared and emotionally engaged process shaped by "affective atmospheres" (Brennan, 2004), authentic emotions, critical self-inquiry, validation and mutual recognition, directed toward fostering systemic change in the music industry (Fletcher, 2004; Ely et al., 2011). Findings pinpoint the value of affective becoming and networking as a distinctive way of supporting this kind of relational development that is commensurate with the more painful and emotional learnings and unlearnings entailed by pursuing transition to a more

equitable leadership paradigm. This chimes with the findings of other recent cultural sector research highlighting the value of psychosocial support afforded by the context-specific environment of a community of practice (Goodwin, 2020: 194). It also resonates to Day's (2000) classic but rarely addressed distinction between "leader development" and "leadership development", animating relationships and generating social capital rather than merely capitalizing human resources (Gilani et al., 2022). Feminist scholarship has increasingly highlighted affect as a relational and political force, not merely as a private experience, capable of shaping professional and political subjectivities and generating new forms of solidarity, resistance, and transformation—particularly in contexts where traditional leadership and power are being reimagined (Fotaki et al., 2017).

We conclude by acknowledging some limitations of this study. Firstly, as data collection primarily served evaluation purposes, interview questions were not structured around a predefined theoretical framework of leadership, which may have constrained the initial depth of conceptual engagement. However, this also allowed a more grounded interpretation of how leadership is constructed and experienced in the specific context. Secondly, as the analysis focuses on Keychange, findings should not be seen as representative of all women's and gender-diverse initiatives across the music industry. Finally, despite the international dimension of the initiative, the study does not investigate how leadership can be understood differently in diverse cultural and organisational contexts. Future research could build on this work by extending the analysis to other initiatives to better understand the networked configurations of leadership in music or other cultural and creative industries s.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of Keychange allows identification of three interrelated dimensions of women and leadership in the music industry, with broader relevance for the cultural and creative industries. These are around Female Leadership (women occupying leadership positions and/or exerting influence), Feminine Leadership (a distinctive, more collaborative model of leadership, contrasting with macho industry norms) and Feminist Leadership (forms of action and activism centred on gender equity). This builds on O'Brien's (2017) distinction between "feminine" and "feminist" leadership in the ultra-masculine Irish media industry. Keychange, in seeking to enhance female leadership in the music sector, has generated a paradigm of networked leadership that makes positive use of conventionally feminine attributes. This is rooted in affect, collaboration and empathy, and embraces an intersectional perspective. Its networked basis de-emphasises competitive ambition, and the testimonies of participants show it operating as a gendered technology of the female self (Carr & Kelan, 2024), an ethically rooted configuration of individual and collective agency within, and despite, the neoliberal context of the music industry.

However, while feminine leadership offers some tactical advantages for individuals looking to survive in a boy's club, it risks leaving the club intact. This begs the question of whether leadership initiatives such as Keychange equip women and gender-diverse individuals only to survive industry toxicity, or to eradicate it. There is a big distinction between enabling better experiences for individuals within the industry and changing the sector's fundamental gendered nature, a goal associated with an overtly political, feminist leadership project. Nevertheless, we note that some interviewees were reluctant to identify as feminists, out of concern not to be perceived negatively in the existing club, and perhaps—as Meijs et al. (2017) suggest—lacking faith in the power of collective action to change it.

Our conclusion is that lasting success in any of these three dimensions depends on parallel progress in the others, which is reflected in Keychange's (2024) strategy to align advocacy work around industry commitment on diversity with its networking and development work. Generating success for female leaders in the music industry, harnessing the benefits of feminine leadership capacities, and achieving cultural change in the sector are overlapping projects that need to be co-ordinated. However, it is simultaneously essential that these issues remain conceptually distinct and that their non-equivalence is asserted. The feminist project of achieving broader industry change is instantly undermined if it is perceived that female leadership = feminine leadership, or if women (or indeed men) become associated with only one style or capability. This makes it too easy for women leaders to be marginalised and change resisted. It also needs recognising that there is no ideal model of female leadership and no single

feminist agenda for change, either in the music industry or anywhere in the cultural and creative industries. Activist work must respond to multiple forms of diversity, especially when operating transnationally, and counter reductive interpretations of its purpose.

One further tension remains unresolved: the emotional labour of leading change within unjust systems still falls heavily on those most marginalised. As one artist noted, dedicating energy to gender equality came at the expense of her music career: "You can only put so much into it... This was 150% of my energy" (Int #9). Expecting those worst affected by inequality to drive reform creates a structural paradox. Dismantling privilege cannot be left to the privileged, but a creative sector that often trumpets its progressive values is shamed by the burn-out of minoritised individuals disproportionately tasked with its improvement.

In this respect, the plurality of leadership generated through networked approaches—a construction of leadership arising beyond and between individuals, made possible through commonality of purpose— offers at least a partial solution and warrants further critical attention. Moreover, the persistent toxicity in conventional leadership behaviours across the cultural and creative industries, and growing evidence of their personal and professional costs (Nisbett et al., 2025), add urgency to the exploration of alternative leadership models, especially when grown from minoritised positions within the sector. Yet such models and their tentative gains remain fragile unless and until long-term institutional commitment is forthcoming from within the industry, allowing cultural change to be mainstreamed. At stake is not only whether women can succeed as cultural and creative industries leaders, but the moral health of the industries they lead.

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