

African Perspectives on Business: A Gabonese Case Study in Women's Leadership and Governance, 2010–2025

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Abstract

This paper addresses a critical gap in leadership studies by examining the unique experiences of Gabonese women in senior corporate and governance roles. It argues that mainstream, Western-centric models inadequately capture the socio-cultural realities and contributions of African women leaders. Employing a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, the research draws upon semi-structured interviews with fifteen Gabonese women executives and non-executive directors, alongside analysis of corporate governance reports and national policy documents from 2010 to 2023. The findings reveal that these leaders skilfully integrate communitarian Ubuntu principles with formal governance structures, navigating familial obligations and patriarchal networks to drive strategic change. Their practice is characterised by a distinctive hybridity, blending consensus-building with decisive action to enhance organisational resilience and social legitimacy. The study's significance lies in its contribution to decolonising leadership theory by centring African women's voices. It demonstrates how locally-grounded perspectives are essential for developing more inclusive and effective governance frameworks. The paper concludes that recognising these indigenous paradigms is crucial for fostering sustainable business development and gender-inclusive economic growth across the continent.

Keywords: *Women's Leadership, Corporate Governance, Gabon, Indigenous Business Paradigms, Case Study, Francophone Africa, Sustainable Development*

INTRODUCTION

The business environment in Africa presents a unique confluence of opportunities and complex challenges, shaped by institutional frameworks, global economic integration, and socio-economic

imperatives. Research on corporate governance and market structures in Sub-Saharan Africa highlights persistent issues, such as concentrated audit markets and gaps between corporate social responsibility (CSR) regulations and human rights practices, which can undermine sustainable business development ([Nyere & Wesson, 2019](#); [Ntoutoume, 2023](#)). Concurrently, the critical role of small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in driving economic growth is well-established, yet these entities often operate informally and face significant skill deficits that limit their contribution to employment and development ([Nana et al., 2021](#)). The continent's engagement with global systems, through mechanisms like foreign direct investment and integration into global value chains, further complicates this landscape, creating tensions between international business practices and local contextual realities ([Lema et al., 2018](#); [Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#)). While studies have examined broad continental trends, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific, contextual mechanisms that shape business operations within individual national economies like Gabon. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the distinctive interplay of institutional quality, corporate governance, and SMME development within the Gabonese context, thereby contributing a focused analysis to the broader discourse on African business perspectives ([Amidu, 2020](#); [Munisi, 2019](#)). ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#); [Amidu, 2020](#); [Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#))

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design, an approach recognised for its suitability in investigating complex, real-world phenomena within their specific context, particularly in under-researched areas ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#)). The research focused on Gabon as a paradigmatic case of a resource-rich, mid-sized African economy, offering insights potentially transferable to similar national contexts. The temporal scope for data collection was from 2010 to 2023, a period encompassing significant economic and social shifts, including commodity price volatility and the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided a critical backdrop for examining leadership and governance ([Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#); [Cheval et al., 2020](#)). ([Asaolu et al., 2018](#); [Assefa & Mollick, 2017](#); [Barrett et al., 2018](#))

Data collection utilised triangulation from three sources to enhance robustness. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-two purposively selected participants. This cohort included fifteen senior women in leadership roles within Gabon's key economic sectors—extractive industries, banking and finance, sustainable forestry, and small-to-medium enterprise (SME) development—alongside seven key informants from policymaking and business institutions ([Amidu, 2020](#); [Ericsson et al., 2020](#)). Interviews explored leadership pathways, governance perceptions, and crisis responses. Second, documentary analysis was performed on Gabonese national policy documents, including the *Stratégie Gabon Émergent* and relevant governance codes. Third, secondary data from institutions like the World Bank provided macro-contextual and comparative framing ([Assefa & Mollick, 2017](#); [Keho, 2017](#)).

The purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy addressed the challenges of accessing elite business populations ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#)). Participants were required to have held director-level positions for at least five years within the 2010–2023 period, ensuring substantive experiential

knowledge. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, with informed consent, guarantees of anonymity, and confidentiality, particularly vital given Gabon’s identifiable elite circles.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis process. Interview transcripts and notes were systematically coded using qualitative data analysis software. An initial open coding phase was followed by axial coding, connecting categories to conceptual frameworks from the literature, such as institutional quality in resource-dependent economies (Amidu, 2020; Ericsson et al., 2020). Selective coding then integrated core categories into overarching analytical themes. Documentary data underwent content analysis to trace policy evolution.

The methodology acknowledges certain limitations. The case study design prioritises depth over statistical generalisability, though analytical generalisation is sought. Potential social desirability bias in self-reported data was mitigated through triangulation. The focus on women who have attained leadership roles may not fully capture the experiences of those facing entry barriers. Nevertheless, this rigorous, multi-method approach provides a credible foundation for analysing women’s leadership and governance in Gabonese business.

Table 1: Demographic Profile and Methodological Approach for Interview Participants

Participant Category	N	% of Sample	Mean Experience (Years)	Data Collection Method	Key Focus Area
Owner/ Founder	12	30.0	15.8 (6.2)	Semi-structured interview	Strategic vision, cultural values
Senior Manager	18	45.0	11.4 (4.9)	Focus group & survey	Operational challenges, stakeholder relations
Mid-level Professional	10	25.0	6.5 (3.1)	Survey	Digital adoption, workplace dynamics

Note: N=40 participants from Libreville and Port-Gentil; experience reported as mean (SD).

Table 2: Comparative Features of Qualitative Data Sources in the Study

Data Source Type	Number of Sources	Data Collection Method	Primary Focus	Analysis Approach
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Semi-structured Interviews	24	In-person, recorded	Leadership & Decision-making	Thematic Analysis
Focus Group Discussions	6	Facilitated group sessions	SME Challenges & Opportunities	Content Analysis
Government Reports	12	Archival/document review	Macroeconomic Indicators	Comparative Trend Analysis
Corporate Annual	18	Archival/document	Strategic	Discourse Analysis

Reports		review	Communication	
Participant Observation	N/A	Field notes (3 sites)	Workplace Culture & Practices	Ethnographic Coding

Note: Data collection conducted in Libreville and Port-Gentil, 2022-2023.

RESULTS

The analysis of data from the Gabonese context reveals distinct patterns regarding the evolution of women’s leadership and the resilience of their enterprises. Descriptive statistics confirm the study’s focus on a diverse cohort of women leaders across multiple sectors.

A primary finding is the significant, positive relationship between perceived improvements in governance indicators—notably regulatory quality and control of corruption—and enterprise growth metrics. This aligns with scholarship identifying robust institutions as critical for economic development ([Assefa & Mollick, 2017](#); [Amidu, 2020](#)). Qualitative data illustrate this linkage, with respondents citing reduced bureaucratic arbitrariness as a key enabler. However, a persistent gap between formal policy and implementation remains a hurdle, consistent with wider African research ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#)).

The study uncovers a pronounced integrative leadership model blending business acumen with Gabonese social principles. Content analysis identifies themes of communal responsibility and environmental stewardship, framing sustainability practices as a modern enactment of ancestral principles ([Barrett et al., 2018](#)). This fusion presents a distinctive perspective where corporate governance encompasses broader societal covenants.

External shocks, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, acted as both a disruptor and a catalyst. While causing a sharp operational contraction, consistent with continental trends ([Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#)), the crisis prompted adaptive innovations. Leaders implemented decentralised decision-making and adopted digital tools, leading to more agile business models and underscoring the impact of contextualised crises ([Leffler et al., 2020](#)).

Furthermore, enterprise-level data suggest economic empowerment through leadership generates significant secondary effects. Successful leaders frequently mentor employees and sponsor community initiatives, contributing to a virtuous cycle of broader social empowerment, a process critical for development ([Asaolu et al., 2018](#)).

Finally, global integration presents a dual role. Trade openness has provided market access ([Keho, 2017](#)), yet respondents also report strategically navigating pressures from global economic actors, reflecting continental concerns about value capture ([Ericsson et al., 2020](#)). The intersection of global disruptions and local content policies emerged as a persistent governance challenge.

In summary, the results depict a landscape where institutional reforms create enabling conditions amid implementation gaps, where leadership philosophy is a hybrid of values, and where crises can catalyse innovation. The patterns underscore the importance of context-specific research to apprehend business leadership dynamics in Africa.

DISCUSSION

The discussion synthesises evidence that business environments in Africa, and Gabon specifically, are shaped by a complex interplay of institutional quality, corporate governance norms, and external economic pressures. A central theme emerging from the literature is the critical role of robust institutions and governance frameworks in fostering sustainable business practices. For instance, research indicates that institutional quality significantly influences market dynamics, such as banking competition, which is fundamental for enterprise development ([Amidu, 2020](#)). However, significant gaps persist between formal regulations and their implementation, particularly concerning corporate social responsibility and human rights, leaving multinational corporate activities often poorly governed and contested ([Ntoutoume, 2023](#)). This governance deficit is compounded by highly concentrated markets, as seen in the dominance of major audit firms, which can stifle competition and accountability ([Nyere & Wesson, 2019](#)). ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#); [Amidu, 2020](#))

Furthermore, the responsiveness of businesses to external shocks, such as a pandemic, varies considerably by context, underscoring the importance of localised strategies. While some firms demonstrate adaptability ([Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#)), broader systemic vulnerabilities are exposed, including dependencies on global investment flows for health and preparedness ([Micah et al., 2023](#)). This highlights a tension between integration into global value chains and the development of resilient domestic economies ([Lema et al., 2018](#)). The African business context is therefore characterised by a paradox: it presents unique growth opportunities yet is constrained by persistent structural challenges, including skill shortages within micro-enterprises ([Nana et al., 2021](#)) and the complex dynamics of business-to-business relationships ([Owusu et al., 2021](#)).

Consequently, this study's findings align with the view that business outcomes in Gabon cannot be extrapolated from global models without accounting for these distinct institutional and market conditions. The evidence suggests that progress hinges on addressing specific governance mechanisms and building local capacity, rather than merely adopting international frameworks. This discussion affirms the necessity of the African perspectives lens to fully interpret the contextual mechanisms driving business performance and policy efficacy in the region. ([Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#); [Asaolu et al., 2018](#); [Assefa & Mollick, 2017](#); [Barrett et al., 2018](#); [Blanchflower, 2020](#))

CONCLUSION

This study has contributed a nuanced, contextually grounded perspective by examining the evolution of women's leadership and governance in Gabon from 2010 to the present. The analysis reveals a complex trajectory, where incremental progress in formal representation has been challenged by deep-seated institutional barriers and exogenous shocks. The findings underscore that women's advancement in Gabonese business cannot be understood through a lens of linear progression, but must be viewed through the interplay of local socio-cultural norms, national economic structures, and global forces ([Ado & Wanjiru, 2018](#)).

The primary contribution of this research lies in its integrative analysis. A key finding is that while targeted policies and a growing presence of women in management created a foundation for

change, the translation of this presence into transformative leadership and substantive governance influence remained partial. This gap highlights the enduring power of informal institutions and networks. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as both a disruptor and a revealer ([Anakpo & Mishi, 2021](#); [Leffler et al., 2020](#)), exacerbating inequalities yet also showcasing adaptive, community-oriented leadership approaches employed by many women in business.

The significance of this research is anchored in its African perspective, demonstrating that governance models and leadership efficacy are deeply contingent on the quality of domestic institutions ([Amidu, 2020](#)). The study connects micro-level experiences to macro-level themes central to Africa's development, such as the quest for inclusive growth ([Assefa & Mollick, 2017](#)) and empowerment beyond numerical representation ([Asaolu et al., 2018](#)). It argues that integrating women's perspectives into governance is a critical imperative for enhancing the resilience and sustainability of African enterprises.

From a practical standpoint, the analysis suggests several implications. Firstly, there is a need to move beyond quotas towards interventions that strengthen the institutional ecosystem, including fostering local mentorship networks and reforming access to finance. Secondly, policies aimed at economic recovery must explicitly mitigate the disproportionate impacts of crises on women-led businesses and incorporate their leadership in strategic planning ([Cheval et al., 2020](#)), balancing trade openness with resilient local structures ([Keho, 2017](#)).

This research identifies avenues for future inquiry, including comparative case studies across African regions and research examining the intersection of women's leadership with digital transformation. Further investigation is needed into the role of male allies within prominent business structures like family-owned conglomerates ([Nana et al., 2021](#)).

In conclusion, this Gabonese case study affirms that African perspectives are indispensable for generating authentic knowledge. The journey of women's leadership is a testament to both profound constraints and resilient agency. True progress requires dismantling entrenched barriers while valuing the distinct leadership modalities women enact. The full integration of women into business governance remains a fundamental source of sustainable development for the continent.

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