"I Make This Look Good"
Pathways, Successes, and Equity Issues Among Women in Choral Conducting

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Abstract

Women in collegiate choral conducting have built long, successful careers while navigating gender equity challenges, which are often compounded by intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Although existing research has explored their experiences, more in-depth qualitative inquiry grounded in gender equity-focused frameworks are needed. We employed a qualitative, multiple case study design to examine the successes, challenges, and equity issues faced by five women collegiate choral conductors. Guided by a critical feminist lens, we examined factors that empowered or challenged their careers, their experiences related to equity, and key elements of their success. Our findings provide an in-depth portrait of the support systems, challenges, and equity issues women choral conductors face as they navigate their personal and professional lives. We shared how their experiences aligned (or did not align) with prior research and highlighted implications for allyship. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender equity in music and offers actionable insights for fostering inclusivity within the field.

Keywords: choral conducting, collegiate conducting, gender bias, gender equity, women conductors

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Women in collegiate choral conducting have maintained long and successful careers, all while facing challenges related to gender equity. For the purposes of this study, we define gender equity as a multifaceted goal that extends beyond providing equal opportunities for individuals. It involves actively identifying, challenging, and transforming the structural, cultural, and institutional systems that perpetuate inequity. These equity issues may be further exacerbated by the intersectionality within their identity, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. While these equity issues are often associated with instrumental conductors (Bartleet, 2008; Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Jagow, 1998; Jones, 2010; Klena, 2020; Sheldon & Hartley, 2012), they also impact choral conductors—particularly within higher education (Bryan, 2016; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994; Van Weelden, 2003).

Women have been consistently outnumbered by men in collegiate choral conducting (Baughman, 2021; Farquhar-Wulff, 2023; Van Weelden, 2003), and the percentage of collegiate women choral conductors decreased from 32.95% to 25.90% between 2006 and 2020 (Farquhar-Wulff, 2023). Although women are more visible as choral conductors at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, their representation declines sharply at the collegiate level, even though more women have earned doctoral degrees in choral conducting than men (Stohlman, 2018). Even when women are hired for collegiate positions, they have often harbored an inherent fear of tokenization and have been led to question the nature of their hire (Bryan, 2016). Recent work in music education has expanded discussions of feminism and equity, including resources such as *The Oxford Handbook of Feminism and Music Education* (2025), which provides important context for understanding gendered experiences in the profession. To better understand the gender disparity in the choral conducting field, researchers can provide insight through investigating both the barriers women encounter and the factors that contribute to their success in pursuing and sustaining careers.

Role models and mentorship

Mentors can make a meaningful difference in the career trajectories of their mentees, whereasboth gender specific (Brenneman, 2007) and non-gender-specific (Gould, 2004) mentors have played an important role in shaping the careers of conductors. During graduate study, women are less likely to have the opportunity to be mentored by other women in their conducting programs (Farquhar-Wulff, 2023; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994; Stohlmann, 2018). Men often serve as mentors to women, although they may not consider or be aware of how to address issues of gender or equity as they pertain to their mentoring practices (Baughman, 2023; Mullan, 2014). Many researchers have expressed a need for more women to serve as conductors and role models (Baughman, 2021; Bryan, 2016; Gould, 2004; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994; Jackson, 1996; Jones, 2010; Quinn Sears, 2010). When a role model cannot be found, some women conductors have sought mentorship outside

their field or institution (Gould, 2001; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994).

Gender biases and stereotypes

Women band and choir directors at all levels have cited recurring instances of bias and stereotypes related to leadership style, socially constructed gender expectations, and physical appearance (e.g., Baughman, 2021; Brenneman, 2007; Bovin, 2019; Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Jones, 2010; Quinn Sears, 2010; Sears, 2014). Women conductors have shared numerous personal stories of bullying and discrimination from colleagues and students that have stemmed from such gender biases and stereotypes (Baughman, 2021, 2023; Bryan, 2016; Farquhar-Wulff, 2023). While these instances are often subtle and difficult to identify (Brenneman, 2007), women have overcome them by addressing such situations as opportunities to learn and by maintaining preparedness, confidence, and focus (Klena, 2020).

Leadership Style

Historically, leadership and authority have been linked to men and people with traditional masculine traits (Bartleet, 2008; Bryan, 2016; Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994; Mullan, 2014; Quinn Sears, 2010). Women have often been seen as having less authority over large ensembles (Baughman, 2021, 2023; Bryan, 2016, p. 11; Hansen, 2009). Assertive women are sometimes called difficult or too aggressive (Baughman, 2021; Bartleet, 2008). Leadership stereotypes lead women conductors to feel less respected by colleagues and students (Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Mullan, 2014; Quinn Sears, 2010). These biases may discourage women from joining the profession due to pressure to adopt masculine teaching identities (Lazarou, 2017; Jackson, 1996; Sears, 2014).

Gender Roles

Women have been expected to uphold socially constructed notions of gender roles (Baughman, 2021, 2023; Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Jagow, 1998; Jones, 2010; Quinn Sears, 2010). Researchers have found that women are perceived as exhibiting communal behaviors (such as attentive, supportive, soothing, helpful, and sympathetic), while men are perceived as exhibiting agentic behaviors (such as assertive, ambitious, and competitive) (Hansen, 2009; Weyer, 2007). Women have often been seen as too expressive, emotional, or without substance, and were often associated with professions that aligned with "typical reproductive or nurturing activities" such as elementary music (Gould, 2004, pg. 57). When women did not align with these expectations, they were perceived negatively and some were even addressed with profanity (Baughman, 2021).

Physical Appearance

Women have faced biases and stereotypes fixated on their physical appearance and attire, which have been frequently reported in the literature (Baughman, 2023; Bartleet, 2008; Kle-

na, 2020; Lazarou, 2017). For example, women have been complimented on their attire after a concert, while their male colleague was praised for his performance (Baughman, 2021). Some conductors have been encouraged to portray more "masculine" features to enhance authority over the ensemble (Bartleet, 2008). Women have also been instructed not to wear anything too overtly "feminine" or revealing or to make their gestures too delicate (Bryan, 2016; Hetzel & Norton, 1993/1994).

Purpose of this study

Women in collegiate choral conducting have maintained successful careers despite challenges related to gender equity. While some researchers have highlighted their experiences, most existing qualitative studies are limited to small samples or narrow contexts, which make it difficult to generalize findings across the profession. This study builds upon these nuanced, in-depth narratives of women's professional journeys in order to provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of their experiences in this field. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the successes, challenges, and equity issues of five collegiate women choral conductors. We asked: (1) What factors empowered or challenged participants? (2) What equity issues, if any, did participants face? (3) What did participants perceive as key to their success?

Method

We employed a collective case study design, exploring multiple instrumental cases to collect a robust set of data and analyze both within and across each case (Yin, 2006). To deepen the understanding of the experiences of women choral conductors, we adopted a variable-oriented approach to our study by looking for themes that cut across cases. We used a critical feminist lens as a framework (Silverman & Niknafs, 2025) to identify the specific conditions that shaped their professional journeys, so we may explain how these conditions interact with and influence emerging themes and patterns (Miles et al., 2019). To yield robust and reliable data, we limited our five cases to those defined by gender, occupation, and setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was a woman collegiate choral conductor employed at an institution accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM).

Cases and Participants

We determined that examining a single critical case would not provide sufficient evidence (Stohlmann, 2018). Therefore, we employed snowball sampling to recruit five participants, allowing us to analyze each case both within and across settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2006). We initially sent an email to eight collegiate choral conductors who identified as women from various geographical locations and with different levels of university experience. We had three women agree to participate, and we conducted their interviews. Afterward, we asked them to recommend additional women-identifying collegiate choral conductors to participate in our study. Based on their responses, we contacted three additional women,

and two agreed to participate. We felt it was essential to include women at the beginning, middle, and end stages of their conducting careers, representing various university sizes and locations throughout the United States, to achieve the most comprehensive dataset (Stohlmann, 2018). Because the collective cases of these women met our criteria, we determined that saturation had been achieved.

Case #1 – Claire (Pseudonym)

Claire was an Assistant Professor in her first year of collegiate teaching. She worked at an urban, state-supported, land-grant, research university located in the Southwestern region of the United States. She described herself as black/white, single, and having no school-aged children.

Case #2 – Lauren (Pseudonym)

Lauren was an Associate Professor in her sixth year of collegiate teaching. She worked at a small, rural, comprehensive liberal arts university in the Northeastern region of the United States. She described herself as Asian, married, and having no children.

Case #3 – Mary (Pseudonym)

Mary was an Associate Professor in her eighth year of collegiate teaching. She worked at a small, suburban, public liberal arts university in the Southeastern region of the United States. She described herself as white, married, and having no children.

Case #4 – Gwen (Pseudonym)

Gwen was an Associate Professor in her tenth year of collegiate teaching. She worked at a rural, state-supported university located in the Midwestern region of the United States. She described herself as white, married, and having one school-aged child.

Case #5 – Alice (Pseudonym)

Alice was a Professor in her 28th year of collegiate teaching. She worked at a large, urban public research university in the Northwestern region of the United States. She described herself as white, married, and having no school-aged children.

Procedures

Participant Consent and Engagement

With IRB-approved written consent from the five conductors, we conducted hour-long Zoom interviews. To supplement the formal interviews, we provided opportunities for follow-up via email. Participants also completed a brief questionnaire to share demographic details and relevant background information, which helped us further explore their identities and experiences. Additionally, we invited them to review their interview transcripts and offer any further insights they deemed relevant to the study, although the participants did not request any revisions or additions to the transcripts.

Data Collection Methods

Using a semi-structured interview approach, we incorporated predetermined broad topics while allowing informal conversations to develop naturally when appropriate (Patton, 2002). Our interview protocol was adapted from a similar study on women choral conductors (Bryan, 2016). Each participant took part in a one-hour Zoom interview, with follow-up communication via email for member checking, clarifications, and additional questions. Before each interview, we outlined the study's purpose and provided participants the opportunity to ask questions, ensuring adherence to the ethical principle of beneficence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Stohlmann, 2018). Interviews were transcribed using Temi, an advanced online speech recognition software. To ensure rigorous analysis, we employed data triangulation through the use of interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, researcher notes, and member checking.

Data Analysis

To analyze our findings, we followed Creswell's (2007) data-analysis spiral, beginning with open coding procedures (Miles et al., 2019) to identify initial concepts across transcripts. We derived codes inductively from participants' language and experiences, while also using theoretical memoing to capture emerging insights (Creswell, 2007; Shaw, 2020). As coding progressed, we refined, collapsed, and combined codes through iterative comparison. We were guided through our analysis by a critical feminist lens and a constant dialogue among researchers to ensure reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This process allowed us to move from descriptive codes to more abstract categories, ultimately grouping them into broad themes that reflected recurring patterns and relationships in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2016).

Trustworthiness and Positionality

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, we employed strategies such as member checking, data triangulation, and transparency. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy, and we used multiple data sources—interviews, questionnaires, follow-up corre-

spondence, and researcher notes—to support the validity of our findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our positionality as researchers—both as women and scholars in music—shaped our approach to this study and informed our interactions with participants. We made a conscious effort to remain aware of our influence on the data and to ensure that the participants' voices remained central to the analysis. By acknowledging these factors, we aimed to conduct this research in a manner that was both ethically sound and methodologically rigorous, giving due consideration to the perspectives and experiences of women choral conductors.

Findings

As we analyzed each case using a critical feminist lens, three themes emerged: pathway into the profession, navigating equity issues, and keys to success. These themes not only highlighted the varied experiences of our participants but also revealed the systemic patterns and strategies that shaped their professional journeys as choral conductors.

Pathway into the Profession

Our participants came from diverse backgrounds and were shaped by a wide range of support systems as they pursued their musical careers. When initially deciding to pursue a degree in music, Alice, Gwen, and Mary received encouragement from their families, while Claire and Lauren expressed that their families "didn't understand" what earning a music degree would accomplish. Despite these differences, all participants described formative musical experiences prior to college that inspired their decision to pursue a career in the field. Their varied academic paths—spanning multiple undergraduate and graduate degrees—demonstrate that there is no single route to a career in collegiate choral conducting.

Choosing a Position

When selecting positions in higher education, participants carefully considered the support systems available at prospective institutions. Claire, for example, evaluated the presence (or absence) of support for people of color and women during the job interview process. Mary faced the added complexity of having a "trailing spouse," noting that it seemed harder for women to get offered spousal hires than men, which significantly limited her options. For Claire, Lauren, and Mary, the potential to find a strong community of support was also a critical factor in their decision-making process.

Mentorship

Each participant had a unique experience with mentorship and role models along their path to becoming a choral conductor. Claire and Mary had supportive and encouraging mentors, both men and women, who were not only role models but also provided them with multiple opportunities for conducting and networking. Claire also noted that the environment of her doctoral program allowed her to excel: "I'm lucky. I was in a program that

didn't place a hierarchy on our previous knowledge, allowing us to all excel in our areas of expertise and then continue to specialize. So that was encouraging to me and allowed me to grow pretty fast."

Alice and Gwen, however, had somewhat discouraging mentorship experiences. Alice had both men and women as mentors, and found that the men "lacked warmth," which caused her to feel frustrated at times. She described this discontentment by sharing her thoughts during a typical conducting class: "I understand to a certain extent what you're talking about, but I don't know how to change the gesture to make you stop criticizing me in front of other people." Gwen also felt discouraged by her conducting mentors throughout her collegiate studies. For all three of her degrees, all of her instructors were men who disregarded any potential gender issues for women conductors, so she felt she lacked adequate representation and role models throughout her most formative years.

Lauren's case was unique in that she did not consider anyone to be her mentor. She described her choral experiences as "working under a tyrant" and was motivated by fear while singing in choirs. She explained, "I was singing always out of fear of humiliation or retaliation. It was never singing because it felt good." Lauren's lack of mentorship helped her shape her own philosophy: "Because my choral experiences were on the more negative side, I felt like 'there's gotta be a better way to do this.' And so I think that was probably the 'aha' moment." The diverse experiences with mentorship, ranging from empowering support to discouraging neglect, highlight the profound influence that mentors and role models, or the lack thereof, can have on the development, confidence, and leadership philosophies of women pursuing choral conducting.

Navigating Equity Issues

Participants encountered equity challenges stemming from various aspects of their identities—including gender, race, age, and motherhood—with gender-related inequities emerging as the most pervasive across their experiences.

Power Structures

The persistent underrepresentation of women in choral conducting was highlighted by our participants, who often described the field as a "good old boys club" where acceptance requires navigating entrenched gender norms. Several women shared that they had to work significantly harder to earn respect, as Gwen noted, "It's all men at the top," and Alice described the pressure to prove herself worthy of inclusion.

Participants described sexist behaviors from colleagues, students, and even parents, often in the form of microaggressions and intimidation. Gwen referred to her male conducting colleague as the "King of microaggressions" as he would say things to her like, "You spoke so well and even used a few big words," or "Good job, little girl." Alice experienced intimidation from her male conducting colleague who made unannounced visits to her rehearsals and gave her unsolicited, harsh feedback. Mary reflected on the internalized biases among

women themselves, stating, "Women have been the worst." These are only a few of the numerous examples each participant shared, which revealed how sexism in choral conducting is perpetuated through subtle and overt behaviors across multiple relationships and environments.

Participants revealed stark double standards and stereotypes in the perceptions of leadership. While domineering behavior in men has been normalized—described by Lauren as "male tyrant" behavior—similar assertiveness in women has been criticized as being "on a power trip." Lauren emphasized the need for men to adopt a more collaborative, traditionally "feminine" leadership style. Alice believed that women were innately better at community building, showing empathy, and had more agency to address emotions in music than men. Expectations for success were also entrenched in gender bias. Gwen and Alice shared that women often had to prove their competence repeatedly, whereas men were assumed to possess it naturally. Claire observed that women are expected to earn "the audacity" that men are automatically granted.

Expectations around physical appearance and attire added yet another layer of scrutiny to participants' professional identities. Rather than focusing solely on their musicianship, women were often instructed—explicitly or implicitly—on how to dress, reinforcing the notion that their presence needed to be managed or minimized. Alice recalled being told not to wear pants, so she deliberately wore them in defiance. Gwen and Mary described feeling pressure to appear smaller, more modest, or less assertive. Over time, however, many began to reject these constraints. As Gwen put it, "I think you should wear whatever the hell you want," reflecting a growing sense of agency and resistance to gendered expectations that distract from her work.

Intersectionality of Identities

The concept of intersectionality provides a critical lens for examining how overlapping social identities shape experiences of power and marginalization. Crenshaw (1998) argued that systems of oppression do not operate along a single axis such as race or gender but intersect to create unique forms of disadvantage for individuals who occupy multiple marginalized positions. Our participants described unique intersections of their identities, which included gender, race, age, and motherhood.

Race. For Claire and Lauren, the experience of often being the only person of color in their school or community added a profound sense of isolation. They spoke of encountering racism and tokenization, where their presence was often treated as symbolic rather than substantive. Claire highlighted the lack of institutional support for Black faculty, highlighting how universities often fail to provide the resources or community necessary for their success. These experiences underscore the compounded challenges faced by women of color in choral conducting, who must navigate both gendered and racialized barriers in predominantly white, male-dominated spaces.

Age. Gwen was the sole participant to share how she experienced age bias as a barrier. As a younger woman, she was often mistaken for a student or treated as inexperienced, regardless of her qualifications. Gwen shared the pressure she felt to prove her value to older professors and colleagues, constantly working to be taken seriously. Patronizing comments from older male colleagues, like "Good job, little girl!" not only diminished her authority but also contributed to lingering self-doubt. Her experiences revealed how age, when combined with gender, further undermined her confidence and credibility in leadership roles.

Motherhood. Claire and Alice reflected on the challenges faced by mothers in achieving a work-life balance. They emphasized the need to make the profession more sustainable for mothers, citing the lack of structural support, such as accessible childcare and flexible scheduling. Claire also noted that single mothers often carried a disproportionate service load requiring them to juggle professional responsibilities and caregiving without adequate institutional support. Although Gwen is a mother too, she did not discuss this part of her identity in her interview, which may reflect the complexity or sensitivity of navigating motherhood within professional spaces.

Emotional Toll

The emotional cost of navigating persistent sexism, double standards, and exclusionary leadership culture was profound. Many participants described the psychological burden of constantly having to prove themselves, suppress their reactions, and endure microaggressions in silence. Gwen's reflection captured this internal struggle:

> I never say anything to [her male colleague] because I just think this is such a deep-rooted issue beyond the relationship that he and I are having. There's just some deep trauma that comes out. And I'm not gonna change that person, so I just stuff it away.

This act of emotional suppression, driven by both a sense of futility and self-preservation, illustrates how systemic inequities cannot only hinder professional growth but also erode personal well-being over time.

Keys to Success

While navigating systemic challenges within the field of choral conducting, participants demonstrated remarkable strength, adaptability, and a clear sense of purpose. Their experiences revealed not only the barriers they encountered but also the strategies they enlisted to persist, thrive, and lead. Four subthemes emerged from the reflections on their professional successes: the importance of community support, the development of personal resilience, the commitment to serving as role models, and the drive to advocate for lasting change.

Community of Support

Participants emphasized the critical role of the community in navigating the challenges of being a woman in choral conducting. They found support through various sources: colleagues at their own institutions, peers at other schools, online support groups, and personal networks of family and friends. These connections provided encouragement, validation, and a sense of belonging in a field where many women often felt isolated. Having a community to lean on helped participants stay grounded and reminded them that they were not alone in their experiences.

Resiliency

"Resilience" was a recurring word used by participants as they described how they developed mental and emotional strength in response to adversity. They adopted a mindset of working harder and striving to "be the best" (Claire, Interview) in order to overcome bias and prove their worth. They found ways to stay motivated—through sticky notes, pep talks, and a determination to "shock people" with their success (Lauren, Interview). Rather than being defined by negative experiences, they used them as fuel to maintain focus on their mission and to build a more positive future.

Be a Role Model

Participants saw themselves as role models, not only for women, but for all conductors. They felt a responsibility to lead by example and to be visible in their leadership roles, especially for younger women entering the field. Alice spoke about the importance of "warning current female students" about the realities they might face while also modeling strength, authenticity, and perseverance. When discussing her confidence in serving as a strong role model, Claire exclaimed, "I make this look good!" Participants understood that their presence in leadership was a powerful form of representation, as they could show others what is possible and inspire the next generation of women to lead with confidence.

Be an Advocate

Participants embraced advocacy as a vital part of their professional identity. They called for increased awareness and proactive efforts to challenge stereotypes, reject tokenism, and promote intentional diversity and inclusion. Mary pointed out that women should not be hired to simply fulfil a quota, and she rejected the outdated notion that there is "only room for one woman." She instead championed collaboration and empowerment over competition. By speaking out, calling out inequities, and pushing for systemic change, they strive to make the field of choral conducting more inclusive and equitable for all.

Discussion

By using a critical feminist lens as a framework, we examined how gendered power structures and ideologies shaped the cultural narratives and lived experiences of our participants. We sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What factors have empowered or challenged participants while navigating their conducting careers?, (2) What issues related to equity (if any) have participants experienced?, and (3) What do participants perceive to be the key elements that contributed to their successes as conductors?

Empowering and Challenging Factors

Navigating a career in conducting presented both empowering opportunities and significant challenges for our participants. While supportive mentorship was a powerful catalyst for professional growth for some, it was not always guaranteed. Some conductors achieved their goals despite the absence of consistent or healthy mentorship, underscoring the importance of resilience and self-direction when navigating a career. Nevertheless, understanding the transformative potential of mentorship is crucial, particularly in fostering inclusive and equitable professional environments.

While there has been a charge for women to serve as mentors (Baughman, 2023; Brenneman, 2007; Stohlmann, 2018), men can also play a vital role as mentors and allies to women in conducting (Baughman, 2023; Mullan, 2014). Some may require guidance or increased awareness to do so effectively, though. Our findings underscore the need for intentional mentorship across all levels of choral conducting, which aligns with the implications found in prior literature (Baughman, 2021; Bryan, 2016; Gould, 2004; Jones, 2010; Quinn Sears, 2010). Men and women choral directors in both K-12 and collegiate settings as well as vocal and music education professors should be equipped with an awareness of gender equity focused strategies in their practices, including modeling inclusive leadership and addressing implicit biases in the profession.

Institutional policies around hiring, tenure, and evaluation have often perpetuated gendered expectations, while informal networks (i.e., "The good old boys club") reinforce exclusionary practices. Additionally, a perceived meritocracy further complicates equity efforts as women are expected to continually prove their competence while men benefit from assumed authority (Bryan, 2016). Despite these challenging power structures, the women in our study achieved success through a variety of paths. To cultivate a more diverse and accessible field, educators should expose students to the multiple pathways into the conducting profession (e.g., degree options, teaching experiences) and provide early opportunities for exploration and skill development (e.g., guest conducting gigs, clinics, and lessons). Beyond skill development, women can be encouraged to take on leadership roles by embedding equity training into teacher preparation programs. Professional organizations could also offer workshops on navigating hidden policies and advocating for oneself.

Equity Issues Experienced

Participants reported experiencing equity-related challenges that were mainly tied to their gender. These issues were not isolated to early career stages; rather, they emerged at various points throughout each individual's professional journey, regardless of the number of years of experience. Intersectionality further complicated their experiences, as many participants navigated overlapping identities and responsibilities such as balancing caregiving roles with the demands of a tenure-track position in a male-dominated environment while also carrying the emotional labor of proving their competence, mentoring students, and advocating for themselves. The narratives shared by women in this study closely mirror those documented in prior literature, reinforcing the persistent nature of systemic inequities in the field (Baughman, 2021, 2023; Bartleet, 2008; Fischer-Croneis, 2016; Jagow, 1998; Jones, 2010; Klena, 2020; Quinn Sears, 2010). Despite these challenges, participants expressed optimism about the future, noting that newer generations appear more aware and committed to fostering inclusive and equitable environments within the conducting profession.

Elements Contributing to Success

Participants identified several key elements that contributed to their success in the conducting profession. Central among these were personal determination and a strong internal drive to succeed, often in the face of systemic barriers (Klena, 2020). Many emphasized the importance of proactively seeking out supportive communities and networks, rather than waiting for mentorship or opportunities to present themselves. Success was also linked to a willingness to accept the responsibilities that come with leadership, including advocating for other women and serving as role models for all aspiring conductors, regardless of gender. Participants highlighted the need to encourage men to engage in equity work, suggesting that allyship can be cultivated through education and intentional dialogue (Baughman, 2023). Ongoing professional development, such as attending conference sessions, reading current research, and staying informed, was also seen as essential. Additionally, speaking up in real time when inequities arise was viewed as both a courageous and necessary act. These insights point to the potential value of future research exploring men's perceptions of allyship and their roles in advancing gender equity within the music profession.

Limitations

While offering rich, contextual insights into the experiences of these women conductors, these findings may not reflect the experiences of all individuals in the field across different cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, our findings relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by memory or personal interpretation. We were also limited by what the participants chose to share, which means some experiences may have been left out. We must also consider researcher bias, as the interpretation of these findings may have been shaped by our own positionalities and perspectives, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and rigor throughout the analysis. Finally, our study captures a specific

moment in time, and the evolving nature of equity discourse and professional practices in conducting research may lead to shifts that are not reflected in these findings.

Conclusion

The experiences shared by participants in this study highlight the complex interplay of empowerment, challenge, and resilience within the conducting profession. Despite facing persistent equity issues, these women demonstrated remarkable determination and leadership. Their success was shaped not only by personal drive but also by proactive engagement with the community and advocacy for others. As the field continues to evolve, it is essential to foster inclusive pathways into the profession, encourage allyship, and support future research that deepens our understanding of equity and mentorship in choral conducting. May the words of Claire—"I make this look good"—serve as a collective call to dismantle systemic barriers and create a future where every conductor can thrive without the need for resiliency against inequities.

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