

Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Persistent Gender Barriers to Women's Leadership Advancement

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ABSTRACT

As per the UN Global Compact Network India, in corporates, the marginalization of women in leadership roles remains a major global concern despite advancements in gender equality. The purpose of the study is to investigate the challenges to women's advancement in leadership positions due to gender disparities, with a focus on workplace biases, societal norms, and challenges related to work-life balance. The existing literature reviews indicate a notable research gap, highlighting the scope for exploring barriers limiting women's access to advanced roles. This study employed a quantitative approach, and collected data through a structured questionnaire from 100 working women in the private sector. The findings reveal that 60.4% of women perceived societal norms as a significant barrier, 66.7% reported expectations to choosing work-life balance over professional growth, and 64.7% experienced difficulties in balancing professional and personal life. Also, 31.4% of the participants reported experiencing gender discrimination in their leadership positions. These results indicate the prevalence of cultural and structural stereotypes that restrict the accessibility of women to higher roles. The study suggests that providing organizational interventions like awareness programs to challenge stereotypes, gender sensitivity training, transparent hiring and promotion practices and the enforcement of safe and inclusive workplace policies can make a difference. Moreover, providing alternative working practices, hybrid mode options, and robust parental leave policies is essential to enable women to effectively manage professional and personal responsibilities and advance equitably into leadership roles.

Keywords: Gender bias, inequality, leadership roles, barriers, work-life balance, working women

INTRODUCTION

Despite significant progress in gender equality, the marginalization of women in leadership roles remains a significant concern in India. Globally, out of 148 countries, India ranks 131st on the Global Gender Gap Index 2025, with a gender parity score of 64.4%, indicating modest improvements in workforce involvement and education but declines in political empowerment. At the corporate level, progress is inconsistent, like 23% of the organization reports 30 - 50% women in leadership roles, 12% exceed this, yet 56% have only 10 - 30% female leaders, and 9% report no women in leadership. Pipeline progression remains a critical barrier, with fewer than 30% of women were at the entry level, advancing to executive level positions, and mid-career dropouts driven by family responsibilities, inflexible work culture, and uncertain career paths. These patterns highlight persistent gender-based barriers to women's advancement in leadership (Women Leadership in Corporate India 2024 Report, n.d.)

Statement of the Problem

Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles due to systemic, societal, and workplace barriers. Stereotypes associating leadership with masculine traits, unconscious biases, and cultural expectations that put family responsibilities over career constrain women's advancement. Organizational challenges like restricted mentoring opportunities, networking, and biased promotion processes further restrict opportunities, (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

This study is crucial as it addresses these challenges, especially in the private sector, where gender bias remains less scrutinized. Studies shows that prejudices against women in workplace are still subtle and undisguised (V. Catchings LCSW-S, 2025), while societal norms still associate leadership with masculinity, limiting acceptance of women in such roles. (Smith, 2025). By exploring the lived experiences, this study aims to recognize structural, cultural, and societal factors that restrict women's leadership and contribute to policies that encourage inclusivity and diversity in decision-making making. This research builds on existing studies on gender disparities in leadership, especially within the private sector, and aims to fill knowledge gaps in the specific challenges faced by women. Moreover, it seeks to explore potential solutions to overcome these barriers. In the following parts, appropriate research will be reviewed, the study's methodology will be explained, the results will be presented and the implications for creating more inclusive leadership settings will be discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impacts of Gender Bias in Leadership Roles

Research across disciplines consistently demonstrates that gender bias remains a systemic barrier limiting women's access to leadership positions. Studies from the South Asian context point to striking underrepresentation, with women comprising only a negligible share of leadership roles despite forming the majority of the workforce in many sectors (Kumar et al., 2024). Similar patterns are observed in Asian corporate boards, where women's representation remains far below the threshold needed for meaningful diversity, reflecting the existence of gender stereotypes and tokenistic inclusion (Chaudhary & Suri, 2024). According to literature, one of the main causes of gender inequality is the "glass ceiling" an invisible structural barrier that keeps women from rising to high positions despite their skills. Literature also identifies the "glass ceiling", an unseen structural barrier preventing women from advancing into senior roles despite their qualifications, as a central contributor to gender disparities. Scholars note a tendency for women to be concentrated in supportive or administrative roles, while men disproportionately occupy decision-making positions, demonstrating how organizational cultures continue to privilege male leadership pathways (Shubha B. N., 2025). Similarly, the study 'The Voice of 96 Female Educators: Barriers and Opinions on Access to Leadership Positions' reveals that in the education sector, women perceive clear barriers to accessing leadership roles, including discriminatory institutional practices and limited pathways for career progression. Their experiences reflect how gender bias is embedded in organizational cultures, reducing women's opportunities for upward mobility and leadership participation.(Kouroutsidou et al., 2025)

Effect of Gender-Based Societal Norms on Leadership Opportunities

Studies emphasize that cultural expectations and patriarchal norms significantly shape women's access to leadership roles in India. Deep-rooted beliefs that associate women with domestic responsibilities influence perceptions of leadership potential and restrict women's acceptance in positions of authority (Mishra, 2023). Other scholars highlight how gender stereotypes and discriminatory hiring practices

perpetuate the glass ceiling and restrict women's professional visibility. These societal norms interact with organizational practices to create cumulative disadvantages, underscoring the need for structured interventions such as mentorship, inclusive policies, and institutional support systems to counter the effects of entrenched bias (Anveeksha, 2023).

The Nepalese political study further demonstrates that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's leadership participation, as leadership is culturally perceived as a male domain. Women leaders reported that societal expectations position them primarily within domestic and supportive roles, resulting in reduced acceptance and recognition in decision-making spaces even in the cases where they are officially elected. This reinforces how gendered norms systematically limit women's visibility, authority, and access to leadership opportunities. (Prasain, 2025)

Challenges of Work-Life Balance Restricting Women from Leadership Roles

An important thread in the literature relates to the gendered division of labor, wherein women continue to shoulder disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. This imbalance contributes to heightened stress, role conflict, and reduced opportunities for leadership advancement, a phenomenon widely described as the "motherhood penalty" (Khanam & Ishrat, 2024). Scholars argue that rigid work cultures, insufficient flexibility, and limited organizational support exacerbate these barriers. Secondary statistics also show that significant percentages of women lack access to leadership development opportunities and face inflexible work arrangements, particularly after maternity leave, indicating that workplace structures continue to fall short in supporting women's long-term career progression (Economic Times HR, 2025). Broader literature also links mentorship gaps, stereotyping, and unequal pay to persistent leadership disparities, suggesting that women's advancement is constrained by intersecting structural and cultural barriers (Hitendra Soni, 2025). A literature review says that because of women's lengthy workdays, lack of flexibility, and disproportionate caregiving obligations, women professionals continue to struggle to achieve work-life balance. Women are still disproportionately responsible for domestic chores, even when they work full-time, due to societal expectations and established gender roles. Most respondents were ambivalent or dissatisfied with organisational assistance, despite the fact that many of them showed a moderate level of pleasure with their work-life balance. Women have identified time management, boundary-setting, and flexible work schedules as important coping mechanisms. (Sharma, Vashisht, et al., 2024)

Strategies to Assure Women's Participation in Leadership

A growing body of literature highlights practical strategies to enhance women's access to leadership roles. Core recommendations include inclusive leadership practices, mentorship and sponsorship programs, equitable promotion systems, and family-friendly laws in employment sector that promote work-life balance (Hitendra Soni, 2025). The significance of organized mentorship programs that assist women in navigating organizational politics and gaining visibility within leadership pipelines (McCall, 2024). Some studies also emphasize the importance of advocacy from senior women leaders to counteract internalized biases, such as the Queen Bee syndrome, and create supportive environments for emerging women leaders (Shubha B. N., 2025). Collectively, these strategies underscore the necessity of structural changes that address both organizational structures and cultural attitudes to promote equitable representation of women in leadership. A recent study 'Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions' conducted in 2024 recommends institutional reforms such as adopting inclusive hiring and promotion practices, implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, and cultivating

supportive workplace cultures to counteract structural bias and enable women's fair advancement into leadership roles. (Wetterö et al., 2021)

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a quantitative descriptive methodology to provide a thorough grasp of the subject and generate measurable insights from barriers that women form private sector experience in leadership advancement. The population consisted of women employed in private sector organizations in Kerala, with hundred participants chosen through a non-probability convenience sampling method. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data, which included demographic details (age, marital status, education, designation, income) and items measuring experiences of gender bias, societal expectations, and challenges in work-life balance. While secondary data were gathered from books, journals, research articles, and internet sources, Primary data was gathered directly from respondents.

DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

Finding 1: Higher Educational Qualification & Leadership Advancement

A large proportion of participants in this study had advanced degrees, with 47.1% holding graduate degrees and a significant proportion possessing postgraduate qualifications (41.2%). Despite this, many women continued to face persistent barriers like discrimination of gender (31.4%), restrictive societal norms (60.4%), and trouble managing work-life tasks (64.7%). The data shows that deep-rooted structural and cultural factors have a significant part in restricting their participation in decision-making, even though they possess the necessary qualifications.

The previous studies show similar pattern, indicating that women remain underrepresented in leadership opportunities even with increased access to higher education (Kumar et al., 2024), and Shubha B.N 2025 also highlights that qualified women are still confined to mid-level roles.

Finding 2: Gender based discrimination in leadership roles

The study shows that nearly one-third of respondents experienced gender-based discrimination in leadership roles. This highlights that continued discriminatory practices in organizations restrict women from accessing leadership positions. This discrimination often manifests in biased evaluations in promotion practices and omission from key decision-making processes.

These findings align with previous research carried out in South Asia, which identify that gender bias is a major challenge in organizational settings for women (Chaudhary & Suri, 2024). Likewise, Kouroutsidou et. al. 2025 suggest that perceived disparities in gender and lack of transparency in promotions play as significant obstacles in women accessing leadership opportunities

Finding 3: Societal Norms & Leadership Opportunities

60.4% of respondents reported that societal norms are a major barrier to women's advancement. The expectations of society reinforce traditional gender roles, primarily as caregivers, and limit their acceptance in decision-making positions. This will affect women's confidence and opportunities in leadership roles, even if they have the necessary skills and qualifications.

This result is consistent with previous research, which says the impact of patriarchal values on women's leadership participation in India (Mishra, 2023). Prasain 2025 points out that deeply rooted cultural norms continue to be associated with leadership masculinity, thereby limiting women's authority and representations.

Finding 4: Societal Expectations on Women

The findings show that 66.7% women believed that society expects women to put their family's needs over their work, which holds back most of the women from leadership roles that require more time in the workplace and is a double responsibility.

This relate with one of the existing literatures on the 'motherhood penalty', which talks about how women's career is affected because of the assumptions by people about caregiving responsibilities. (Khanam & Ishrat, 2024). The same suggestion was brought into light by Economic Times HR (2025) that says women mostly face challenges in getting leadership role opportunities after getting married or motherhood because of cultural norms and inflexible work structures.

Finding 5: Work-life balance as a hindrance to professional advancement

The study shows that 64.7% women have faced challenges in balancing work and life, which is the byproduct of a lack of institutional support, flexibility, and strict work schedules. This difficulty in maintaining a work-life balance might affect the opportunities of women to be in executive roles as well. A previous review by Khanam and Ishrat indicates that inflexible work environments and the advancement of women in the workplace are impacted by the absence of family- friendly policies

Finding 6: Organizational support systems' significance

Overall, the findings reveal how the women's leadership advancement and factors like gender bias, discrimination, societal norms, work-life imbalance and family expectations are interconnected. These issues persist despite the participation of women in education and employment, which highlights the necessity for support from organization

These findings are supported by the existing literature by Hitendra Soni (2025), which highlights the significance of gender-sensitivity training, fair promotion practices, mentorship programs and inclusive workplace policies to promote women's progress in leadership roles.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION**1. For Employers and Management**

- To combat stereotypes and promote inclusive workplace cultures, conduct regular gender-sensitivity training, workshops, and awareness programs
- By implementing structured hiring criteria, a diverse panel of selection and mentorship programs can reduce bias and ensure that equal professional development can be made fair and transparent
- Create safe and inclusive work environments by enforcing stringent anti-harassment policies, ensuring transparent performance evaluations, and providing equal access to networking and leadership development opportunities.

2. For Government and Policy Makers

- Formulate and enforce gender-inclusive labor policies that promote women's leadership participation across sectors.
- Mandate flexible work arrangements, work-from-home options, and robust parental leave policies to support women in balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
- Monitor and regulate organizational compliance with gender equality and workplace safety standards through effective policy implementation and accountability mechanisms.

3. For Family and Society

- Encourage shared caregiving responsibilities within families to reduce the disproportionate burden for women and to support their career progression.

- Encourage favourable public perceptions of women in leadership positions through community-level awareness initiatives and public discourse.
- Support women's leadership aspirations by questioning conventional gender standards that prioritize family roles over professional growth.

This study highlights that women's leadership participation remains significantly influenced by gender bias, societal expectations, and challenges in balancing professional and personal roles. Despite growing awareness and the introduction of equality-focused policies, systemic barriers and cultural attitudes continue to restrict women's advancement into leadership positions. Achieving true gender equity necessitates more than just representation; it calls for inclusive organizational cultures, supportive work environments, and proactive leadership development initiatives that empower women to thrive. The findings highlight the necessity of collaborative endeavours from policymakers, organizations, and society to dismantle gender-based barriers and create sustainable pathways for women's equal participation in leadership.

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