

The Feminine Edge: Women's Leadership, Inclusion, and Sustainability in India

Mr. Kapil Kumar¹, Dr. Shalini Singh², Manjeet Goswami³

¹Assistant Professor, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut

²Assistant Professor, Parul University, Vadodara, Gujarat

³P.G. Student, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut

Abstract

This paper explores the evolving role of women in leadership, with a focus on sustainability, inclusion, and human-centered leadership in the Indian context. Drawing on global and regional sources such as the *Deloitte Women in the Boardroom (2022)* report, the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2022)*, and the *European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025)*, the study examines structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. Concepts like the “glass ceiling” and “sticky floor” are used to frame persistent gender disparities in organizational hierarchies. Using a qualitative methodology, the research analyzes secondary data and global reports to identify leadership traits commonly associated with successful women leaders — including empathy, collaboration, and strategic foresight. The study also highlights the underrepresentation of women in senior roles in India, despite incremental progress in some sectors. The findings suggest that empowering women leaders is not only a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for building resilient and inclusive organizations. The paper concludes by calling for further interdisciplinary research and policy interventions to support diverse leadership pipelines in India.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Gender Equality, Sustainability, Inclusive Leadership, Human-Centered Leadership, Organizational Diversity

Introduction

Indian women have come a long way in the last fifty years, breaking down traditional barriers and changing what it means to be a leader in many areas. Women used to be on the edges of making decisions, but now they hold important positions in business, politics, academia, and civil society. This goes against long-held male norms and changes the story of power and progress. This transformation is not merely symbolic; it reflects a deeper societal shift toward gender equity and inclusive development. But this journey is not going in a straight line. Even though women have made a lot of progress in their academic and professional lives, they still have a hard time getting into leadership positions, especially in business and politics. Deep-seated cultural attitudes, rigid workplace structures, and limited flexibility at the senior level often make it hard for them to move up. The COVID-19 pandemic made these weaknesses even more obvious, hurting women more than men by making jobs less secure, making caregiving more difficult, and limiting their access to economic opportunities. Because of how quickly the economy and the environment are changing, more and more people are calling for organizations to use strategies that are both sustainable and open to everyone. Here, having women in leadership roles

becomes a key factor. Women leaders have shown a special ability to deal with complexity, encourage teamwork, and support approaches to sustainability that focus on people. However, there is still not a lot of real-world evidence about their contributions, especially in the Indian business world. This research explores the intersection of gender, leadership, sustainability, and inclusion by examining how women leaders in India influence organizational practices and drive sustainable change. By focusing on “The Feminine Edge”, this study seeks to illuminate the transformative potential of women leaders in shaping a more equitable and resilient future for India.

Review of Literature

John Maxwell famously stated that leadership is simply influence — nothing more, nothing less (**Kruse, 2013**). The key question then becomes: how can a leader effectively influence others while maintaining a positive attitude rooted in a consistent set of values and behaviors? Such influence should foster cooperation aligned with the organization’s strategic goals and support its ongoing renewal (**McKinsey & Company, 2022**). In this context, women’s leadership must emphasize guiding organizational outcomes through distinct yet constructive approaches. A human-centered leadership model should empower women to demonstrate assertiveness, decisiveness, and persuasiveness by cultivating core competencies that prioritize empathy, nurturing, soft skills, informal interpersonal communication, and collaboration — all hallmarks of a participative leadership style (**Syed & Murray, 2008**). Women possess a strong ethic of care, along with well-developed skills in negotiation and conflict resolution. Aligned with the principles of modern human-centered leadership, they are often viewed as more transformation-oriented than their male counterparts. Female leaders tend to prioritize trust-building and team cohesion, making their leadership style inherently more people-focused. Their approach often integrates qualities such as creativity, craftsmanship, storytelling, and empathy — traits that foster collaboration and dialogue, including with male colleagues (**Deloitte Global Boardroom Program, 2022**).

Although many CEOs and executives advocate for greater female representation in senior management and board roles, a broader cultural transformation and long-term strategic vision are still needed to fully support women’s career advancement and leverage their educational and professional capabilities (**Deloitte Global Boardroom Program, 2022**). To thrive in leadership, women must set ambitious goals and actively cultivate advanced competencies. In today’s competitive landscape, leadership — particularly within entrepreneurial contexts — plays a pivotal role in driving organizational success and innovation (**Baltazar & Franco, 2023**). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2022), women leaders significantly influence all levels of economic activity — micro, mezzo, and macro — by driving innovation, fostering job creation, and enhancing competitiveness. Scholars such as **Bhatt (2015)** argue that the demand for women’s leadership has grown in response to the complex and turbulent transformations shaping today’s world. Leadership, as DeRue and **Ashford (2010)** suggest, is a socially constructed process, shaped by interactions and shared meaning. Within this framework, women leaders are often seen as more effective than their male counterparts in promoting team cohesion, building trust, encouraging cooperative learning, and facilitating participative communication (**Post, 2015**). Their leadership style emphasizes inclusion and collaboration, focusing on the process of engagement rather than solely on outcomes. Women leaders tend to prioritize frequent, positive interactions with team members, reinforcing a culture of openness and mutual respect.

Women’s leadership demonstrates a strong capacity to overcome structural barriers within organizations,

particularly those rooted in India's cultural context (**Chatwani, 2015**). Chatwani outlines three key hypotheses regarding women in management in India: first, that women often adopt a masculine leadership style characterized by assertiveness; second, that women managers have distinct needs compared to men, such as maternity leave; and third, that women bring a unique leadership style marked by interactivity, empathy, and a focus on work-life balance. While the first two hypotheses reflect structural and perceptual challenges, the third presents a promising avenue for redefining leadership through a more inclusive lens. To explore this emerging paradigm, this study emphasizes a human-centered leadership model grounded in the "3 H's" — Heart, Head, and Hands — as proposed by BCG (2021). This approach underscores emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and practical execution. Moving forward, two key developmental priorities are identified: first, expanding the pool of women equipped and empowered to lead; and second, fostering a leadership culture that actively promotes gender equity and supports the advancement of women in leadership roles.

In recent years, the conversation about gender and leadership has become more complicated. It used to be mostly about structural barriers, but now it's more about psychological and systemic factors, like how women are thought to lack motivation, confidence, or leadership skills. Despite growing awareness, the gender gap in leadership remains a persistent challenge. Scholars often use figures of speech like "sticky floors" and "glass ceilings" to talk about the powerful but invisible barriers that women face in their careers. The "sticky floor" refers to unfair work practices that keep women in lower-level jobs where they can't move up (EIGE, n.d.). The "glass ceiling" refers to the invisible barriers that keep women from achieving top leadership positions.

Around the world, efforts to promote equality between men and women have sped up. In order to make corporate boards more diverse, the European Union launched the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020). Similar differences still exist in India. To quote the Prime Database Women on Boards Report (2023), only 17.6% of board seats in NSE-listed companies are held by women, and only 5% of CEO positions are held by women. Also, India is ranked 127th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023. This means that there are big gaps between men and women when it comes to economic participation and political power. These numbers make it clear how important it is to change both structures and cultures right away. Getting rid of gender inequality in leadership requires more than just tearing down institutional barriers. It also requires creating welcoming spaces that help women gain confidence, leadership skills, and access to positions of power. In India's fast-paced and changing economy, giving women more power is not only the right thing to do, it's also necessary for innovation, resilience, and long-term growth.

Objective of the Study

- To explore how women leaders in India influence sustainable and inclusive organizational practices.
- To identify key traits and challenges of human-centered leadership among Indian women in corporate and institutional roles.

Research Methodology

To achieve the primary objective of this study — exploring the role of women in leadership with a focus on sustainability and inclusion in India — we adopted a qualitative research methodology. **Jemielniak and Ciesielska (2018)** say that qualitative research has been used for a long time in organizational studies, especially those that focus on people. This methodology is well-suited for capturing the nuanced

experiences, values, and leadership styles of women in diverse organizational contexts. Our research draws upon both global and India-specific qualitative data sources. Internationally, we reviewed key reports such as *Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective*, *Women in Business 2021: A Window of Opportunity*, and *Women's Entrepreneurship Report: From Crisis to Opportunity*. These reports were selected based on the credibility of their data and the relevance of their samples to our research focus. For the Indian context, we incorporated findings from the Prime Database *Women on Boards Report* (2023), NSE Leadership Diversity Index, and the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2023) to understand the current landscape of women's leadership in Indian organizations.

To lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork, the study started with an extensive literature review. The best practices and success stories of Indian women leaders were then examined, with a focus on those who have aided in inclusive corporate cultures and sustainable business practices. The percentage of women in leadership positions, their leadership philosophies, and the organizational results linked to their leadership were all included in the unit of analysis. Additionally, we compared case studies from a few Indian businesses that are well-known for encouraging sustainability and gender diversity. These examples were selected to show how women leaders overcome societal and structural obstacles and how their leadership fosters innovation and long-term organizational resilience. This methodology's main goal is to raise awareness of the changing characteristics of Indian women leaders, including their abilities, difficulties, and influence, while highlighting a human-centered leadership model based on sustainability, empathy, and teamwork.

Result and Discussion

This study started with an analysis of the Deloitte *Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective* (2022) report, which looked at over 176,340 director positions in 10,493 companies in 51 countries. With a focus on Asia-Pacific, North and South America, Europe, and the Middle East and Africa (EMEA), the report offers a thorough analysis of gender diversity on corporate boards. The report provides a more comprehensive vision for advancing gender diversity in leadership by broadening its sample to 72 countries. According to the report's findings, sectors including financial services, consumer business, technology, media and telecommunications, production, energy and resources, and life sciences and healthcare had the highest percentage of women on boards. Perhaps as a result of their dynamic nature and international exposure, these industries seem more open to inclusive leadership models. Women are still underrepresented in leadership roles in India. Only 17.6% of board seats and 5% of CEO positions in NSE-listed companies are held by women, according to the Prime Database *Women on Boards Report* (2023). This discrepancy draws attention to the societal and institutional obstacles that still prevent women from holding senior decision-making positions. According to qualitative findings, women leaders in India frequently exhibit a human-centered leadership style that prioritizes cooperation, empathy, and long-term strategic planning. These characteristics fit the "3 H's" model, which promotes inclusive and sustainable organizational practices: Heart, Head, and Hands. The capacity of female leaders to cultivate trust, create cohesive teams, and incorporate social and environmental objectives into business strategy is becoming more widely acknowledged. But problems still exist. Particularly in traditional and family-run businesses, the "sticky floor" phenomenon—where women are concentrated in lower-level roles because of invisible constraints—remains common. Women's upward mobility is further hampered by cultural norms surrounding caregiving, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and flexible work schedules. Success stories from Indian women leaders show

tenacity and inventiveness in the face of these obstacles. Businesses are more likely to experience improved performance, employee engagement, and long-term growth if they actively promote gender diversity and inclusive leadership.

In conclusion, even though data from India and around the world show some progress in women's leadership, more work is obviously required to remove structural obstacles and advance human-centered leadership models. In addition to being a matter of equity, empowering women leaders is a strategic necessity for creating organizations that are resilient and forward-thinking.

Conclusion

Organizations must take intentional and persistent action to remove obstacles to women's leadership and make significant investments in their professional development in light of the complex issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been progress worldwide, with a number of nations approaching or exceeding the 30% threshold for female leadership representation, emerging economies like India still face cultural and structural barriers that impede this progress. Using data from India and global standards, this study emphasizes how urgent it is to advance gender parity in leadership. Organizations with diverse and inclusive leadership teams are more resilient, competitive, and better able to handle challenging and unstable situations, according to data from international reports and success stories. Women's leadership integration contributes to long-term sustainable advantage in addition to improving performance in the short and medium term. It is crucial to acknowledge and develop the special skills of female leaders in order to foresee and address future issues. This study has mapped important characteristics that fit into a human-centered leadership model, including empathy, teamwork, and strategic foresight, through a comparative analysis of leadership narratives. These results highlight how crucial it is to develop inclusive cultures and leadership models that respect emotional intelligence and collaborative decision-making.

In the end, promoting women in leadership roles is not just about representation; it is a strategic necessity for creating morally sound, creative, and forward-thinking companies.

Further Implications and Limitations

This study adds to the expanding body of knowledge regarding women's leadership in India, especially as it relates to inclusive organizational practices and sustainability. The study emphasizes both advancements and ongoing difficulties in attaining gender parity at senior levels by referencing international reports and data unique to India. But because this study only uses secondary data sources and qualitative analysis, it might not adequately represent the complex dynamics and real-world experiences of women leaders in a range of industries. Future studies should examine leadership at various organizational levels, such as C-suite positions, entrepreneurial endeavors, and public sector leadership, in addition to board-level representation. There is a need to investigate how leadership models can be redefined to incorporate feminine competencies such as empathy, collaboration, and ethical foresight — traits increasingly recognized as essential for sustainable governance. Furthermore, a more thorough analysis is needed of the cultural and societal elements affecting Indian women's access to leadership positions. More detailed information about the obstacles women encounter can be found in studies that concentrate on behavioral biases, intersectionality (such as caste, class, and religion), and regional disparities. Longitudinal and interdisciplinary research approaches would be particularly valuable in tracking changes over time and assessing the impact of policy interventions and

organizational reforms. Another important direction is the development of frameworks that support inclusive leadership pipelines — including mentorship programs, flexible work policies, and leadership training tailored to women’s needs. Such initiatives can help address the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon and ensure that women not only enter but thrive in leadership roles.

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