

## Navigating Gender Bias: Empowering Women Leaders to Overcome Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

This review paper delves into the persistent challenges that women confront while assuming leadership roles and proposes effective strategies to surmount these obstacles. The aim of this study is to comprehensively examine the multifaceted challenges faced by women leaders and provide actionable insights to foster their success. Utilizing a narrative literature review, a broad spectrum of sources including research articles, case studies, and reports were analysed. The results underscore the prevalence of gender bias, stereotype threat, and unequal access to opportunities as critical challenges impeding women's advancement in leadership positions. Through the examination of successful interventions and best practices, this review paper identifies a range of strategies to mitigate these challenges. These strategies encompass organizational initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership development workshops, fostering inclusive work environments, and promoting equitable policies that address work-life balance. In conclusion, this review paper presents a comprehensive analysis of challenges women face as leaders and provides recommendations to empower them to overcome these hurdles. By shedding light on the systemic issues hindering women's leadership progression and proposing pragmatic solutions, this paper aims to contribute to the advancement of gender equality in leadership domains.

**Keywords:** *Leadership, Women, Gender Equality, Challenges, Interventions*

In recent decades, the strides towards gender equality have been remarkable, yet the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles remains a persistent and concerning issue across various industries and sectors. Women constitute a significant portion of the workforce, yet their representation dwindles as they ascend the corporate and organizational hierarchy. The representation of women in leadership positions is a topic of global significance, reflecting the broader struggle for gender equality and empowerment. The Indian context presents a unique blend of challenges due to its complex cultural, historical, and societal fabric.

A historical overview of the women's movement and the emergence of feminist theories provides a foundation for understanding the structural and cultural factors that have shaped women's leadership experiences. Gender inequality in the workplace manifests in various ways, including job segregation, wage disparities based on gender, and instances of bias.

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Working women have persistently confronted not just the horizontal division of roles, but also the assignment of gender-specific jobs to both men and women.

Despite the increasing number of women entering the workforce, their advancement into management positions has not kept pace, particularly at the senior management level where their representation remains minimal. Although women are graduating and entering managerial roles, there exists a bottleneck in the middle management tiers. As per the United Nations publications addressing the "Women's Challenges of 2000," women constitute half of the global population and contribute to two-thirds of the world's labor, yet their income is disproportionately low, amounting to just one-tenth of the total, and their ownership of property is significantly less, standing at less than one-hundredth (Qadir, 2019).

This review paper delves into the multifaceted challenges that women encounter as leaders and explores the strategies and interventions that can help mitigate these challenges, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape.

### ***Challenges Women Encounter in Leadership***

Numerous barriers impede women's progress into leadership roles. Gender bias, both explicit and implicit, continues to influence perceptions of women's competence and suitability for leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This bias often leads to the "double bind" phenomenon, where women leaders are seen as too assertive when displaying leadership traits and not assertive enough when they do not (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Moreover, societal expectations of women's roles as caregivers and homemakers further exacerbate the challenge of striking a balance between leadership responsibilities and family commitments (Ely et al., 2011). Research suggests that these challenges contribute to the well-documented phenomenon of the "glass ceiling," where women face obstacles in reaching the upper echelons of leadership (Powell & Graves, 2003).

The glass ceiling, acting as an obstacle for women's advancement, encompasses three categories of barriers: individual, institutional, and societal hindrances (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). The group of eligible women suitable for elevation to executive roles is relatively limited, resulting in challenges in promoting women. Nelson and Burke (2000) reported that as much as 82% of companies indicated that the absence of comprehensive managerial skills and direct experience in the line of work significantly influenced their decision not to advance women. However, an alternative study revealed that certain enterprises possess a substantial pool of qualified women but choose not to consider them for the position. Another explanation lies in the fact that existing senior management positions are occupied by men who tend to favor the promotion of other men resembling themselves (Van Vianen & Fischer, 2002).

The unique health concerns of women often create challenges in addressing, sharing, or managing them within the workplace. (Narendran & Mathur, 2010). Numerous corporations link success and accomplishment with traits traditionally associated with masculinity. These qualities encompass assertiveness, aggressiveness, and the capacity for task-focused leadership (Jogulu & Wood, 2006; Envick, 2008). Conversely, women are often subjected to stereotypes that expect them to embody qualities such as modesty, quietness, selflessness, and nurturing tendencies (Eagly & Carl, 2003). These traits might sometimes be perceived as unsuitable for executive roles. Organizations tend to seek leaders who can execute decisions, accept critique, and prioritize the company's well-being at all costs (Nelson & Levesque, 2007).

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According to Duevel et al. (2015), while women perceive themselves as on par with men, they tend to rate their effectiveness lower than their male counterparts. This is evident in situations where both men and women are presented with leadership roles—men often display strong eagerness to assume these positions, whereas women tend to delay until they feel fully prepared for such responsibilities. Multiple researches have also mentioned the lack of mentorship to women in organizations which lead to them being unaware of opportunities or do not have the proper channels of communications to go through in order to approach leadership objectives. Others have pointed out that there is a gap in different sector and levels of formal education due to several stereotyped notions that women find themselves lacking in comparison to their male counterparts.

Female leadership is not a concerning issue in any single sector or industry. Women leadership is lagging behind in all the sectors of society, including politics, business, management, architecture, and so on. There is an interplay of colluding hinderances in stopping women from reaching their top most potentials as well as in them being able to access opportunities to upskill themselves to be at par with their competitors for different positions. The privileged section more often than not does not even consider the existence of such issues (Hardy, 2019).

### ***Challenges to Women Leadership in India***

The subject of women's leadership in India is an emerging theme. Indian women encounter many similar challenges as their counterparts worldwide, including utilizing their education in professional settings, managing the balance between work and family responsibilities, and striving for equal privileges as men. Additionally, the career journey in India faces distinctive cultural obstacles, including societal pressure to prioritize marriage over a career, stereotypes associated with caste, and a scarcity of networking avenues. However, as traditional India gradually transforms into an economic powerhouse, it also presents evolving opportunities for Indian women. With the aid of mentoring and other career advancement tools, the progress of women's leadership in India is contributing to shaping the future for women in the country (Smetana et. al., 2018)

The simultaneous engagement in unpaid domestic tasks, such as nurturing and educating children, alongside professional commitments place an increased burden on women. Businesses exhibit reluctance in hiring women due to concerns that women's maternity leave might adversely affect their operational efficiency. Policies that prioritize the well-being of women are pivotal in attracting and retaining talented women professionals and enhancing their overall effectiveness in the workplace. Although a significant number of male supervisors in India do not perceive a need to implement measures to enhance women-friendliness within their organizations, several multinational corporations monitor gender diversity ratios due to global mandates (Narendran & Mathur, 2010).

Advanced positions require extended working hours, substantial travel both short and long distances, and participation in late meetings. Furthermore, engaging with numerous individuals for business purposes can sometimes be frowned upon by society, resulting in a considerable challenge in preserving important family connections due to such a hectic schedule (Aswathappa, 2005).

### ***Strategies for Overcoming Challenges to Women Leadership***

Efforts to counter the challenges faced by women leaders require a multi-faceted approach. Organizations can implement mentorship and sponsorship programs to provide women with

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guidance, support, and opportunities for skill development. These initiatives can help women overcome barriers by offering insights into the unwritten rules of the workplace and facilitating networking opportunities.

Individuals of all genders within the workforce have a role in establishing a workplace that is both welcoming and favourable for women. The implementation of comprehensive workplace policies will grant women equitable prospects and just recognition. Guaranteeing an environment free from bias and discrimination will significantly boost women's confidence, a change that can be corroborated by their achievements (Banker, 2023).

Additionally, policies aimed at promoting work-life balance, such as flexible scheduling and parental leave, can alleviate the conflict between professional and personal responsibilities (Ely et al., 2011). Organizations that cultivate a culture of diversity and inclusion foster an environment where the unique perspectives and strengths that women bring to leadership roles are valued (Kalev et al., 2006).

Promoting diversity in gender and leadership styles holds strategic significance for corporations. It is imperative for companies to ensure that their recruitment, performance evaluation, and career advancement mechanisms are impartial regarding gender and are centred on performance, avoiding any hindrance to women's professional growth. For Indian women managers, a robust education, coaching, family support, effective communication skills, and continuous learning are indispensable. In the contemporary landscape, employers should initiate programs to recognize the advantages women can offer to their enterprises and foster awareness within organizations regarding the vital role played by women leaders to counteract gender stereotypes.

Human resource policies and initiatives need to be designed not only to facilitate the inclusion of women in management at entry-level positions but also to expedite their steady progress in their careers. Empowering women leaders should involve equipping them with training and structured mentorship to effectively fulfil their leadership roles and evolve within these positions. Establishing supportive business practices that enable both women and men to strike a balance between the demands of leadership and their familial responsibilities is also crucial (Singh & Prasad, 2014).

### ***Future Directions for Research on Women in Leadership***

Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the nuanced intersections of gender with other factors such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as these can compound the challenges women face. Investigating the impact of specific interventions, both within organizations and at a policy level, will provide valuable insights into their effectiveness in promoting gender diversity in leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this comprehensive review underscores the continued relevance of studying women in leadership roles. It recognizes the progress made while acknowledging the persistent challenges that warrant ongoing attention. By fostering awareness, advocating for change, and conducting further research, society can move closer to achieving gender equality in leadership positions. Women continue to confront an array of challenges as they strive to achieve leadership positions, often facing systemic biases and societal expectations that hinder their progress. However, research and initiatives designed to empower women leaders are gaining traction, offering hope for a more equitable future.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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