

Women in Leadership Positions: A Bibliometric Analysis for Career Equality and Work-Life Inclusion Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

The study's goals are to map the intellectual landscape, identify important themes and contributors, and assess theoretical frameworks that help women overcome obstacles to leadership positions and acquire the skills and qualifications that make them successful leaders. This study examines the articles evolution from 2000 to 2024 utilizing data sources from Scopus, with an emphasis on the relationship between women's leadership roles, professional advancement, and work-life balance. To visualize co-citation networks, identify significant authors and institutions, and detect emerging research trends, bibliometrix (R), a bibliometric tool, is employed. Based on 64 articles analysis, the literature has a main focus on women's specific skills aid in organizational leadership positions access and credibility building. This article seeks to fill that gap by developing a holistic model which makes clear contributions to the management of women inclusivity at leadership levels. This study adopts a systematic bibliometric approach. It provides a comprehensive overview of the existing literature and identifies also gaps in research on work inclusion and intersectional challenges faced by women access to leadership positions.

Keywords:

Women; leadership; work-life inclusion; career equality; bibliometric analysis.

1. Introduction

Companies and institutions are focusing on gender diversity and inclusion in leadership roles (Kaur & Arora, 2020). Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions throughout a range of industries, despite growing awareness (Schifilliti & La Rocca, 2024). There is comparatively little research on how leadership affects women's work-life participation and attaining gender equality in professional development (McKinsey, 2024). Even while the literature on women in leadership is expanding, little is known about their professional progression paths and the obstacles to inclusion they encounter. The necessity for women to build great credibility is one important but frequently disregarded issue that affects their capacity to obtain and thrive in top executive roles. Inadequate support for work-life integration, cultural norms, and institutional hurdles are frequently related to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles (Bella & Sentamilselvan, 2023). Beyond obvious obstacles and a lack of chances, women who aspire to senior leadership positions face additional challenges due to invisible barriers such as implicit biases, work-life balance challenges, and lack of access to mentorship. Research has demonstrated the value of gender diversity in leadership and its beneficial effects on governance, decision-making, and organizational innovation (Kin & Starks, 2016). There are still a lot of unanswered questions regarding the factors that influence women's credibility and skills and how they relate to professional advancement. The necessity for customized approaches to diversity, equity, and

inclusion is further highlighted by the growing conversation on intersectionality, which reveals that women from marginalized groups experience exacerbated disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1989).

The purpose of this article is to bridge the gap in women's leadership research between theoretical frameworks and real-world implementations. The study examines five crucial areas: corporate governance, intersectionality, work-life inclusion, barriers to career advancement, and women's core competencies, including risk-taking, strategic direction, and conflict resolution. It does this by combining the results of 64 scientific articles and examining major themes found through bibliometric clustering. These observations not only draw attention to the ongoing difficulties, but they also reveal chances to promote inclusive leadership settings. The project aims to map the academic ecosystem surrounding these subjects and develop a theoretical framework that can be verified by additional research by examining citation patterns, significant works, and new trends.

2. Research method and data analysis

2.1. Method

A quantitative framework for analyzing the volume of literature in a particular topic is provided by bibliometric analysis, which also offers an unbiased method of organizing and interpreting data (Öztürk et al., 2024). Researchers can learn more about the most important authors, organizations, and nations influencing a certain field—such women's leadership in business—by using methods like citation and co-citation analysis (Lim & Kumar, 2024). These techniques show thematic trends related to gender inclusion and career development in addition to highlighting the top cited papers and journals (Du et al., 2022). Additionally, bibliometric methods such as Bibliometrix aid in locating recurrent co-authorship trends and fruitful research collaborations. A thorough grasp of the importance of particular studies and their connections to new issues in the area is made possible by the combination of citation, co-citation, and bibliographic coupling. For example, citation analysis measures the influence of journals, articles, or researchers, whereas co-citation analysis makes complicated relationships between different studies easier to understand by showing how often two papers are referenced together (Taparia & Lenka, 2024). Keyword co-occurrence analysis, which finds research hotspots by examining the connections between recurrent keywords in papers, is another useful method. This approach identifies key areas of interest, like career equity, gender inclusion, and women's leadership, then identifies groups of highly cited publications that are associated with these topics. By monitoring research output and citation patterns over time, Bibliometrix helps identify important areas for further study and directs academics to find new topics and important gaps in the literature.

2.2. Data Source

The data gathering procedure in bibliometric research consists of several crucial stages, beginning with the selection of relevant keywords and then conducting searches in acceptable academic databases. Scopus, a widely used database, excels in tracking citations across its huge collection of articles, allowing scholars to assess how frequently a specific work has been mentioned (Al Ryalat et al., 2019). This tool is useful for doing a thorough examination of research impact, finding trends, and mapping intellectual networks across fields of studies. Scopus integrates citation data, allowing researchers to see how their work interacts with the larger academic community. This citation monitoring not only identifies influence topics, but it also provides knowledge transmission paths across diverse investigated domains. Scopus'

collect comprehensive bibliometric data and offers precise citation tracking, making it a valuable resource for understanding knowledge generation processes and the interconnections within scholarly research. Scopus' dual role places it at the forefront of technologies that enable in-depth analysis of research impact and cooperation within the scientific community.

2.3. Search strategy

We started by using the most pertinent criteria, those offered by Scopus, to determine which terms and keywords should be included in the search in order to guarantee a targeted and thorough search. By carefully choosing our search terms, we can focus on the most relevant literature in the topic and help to reduce the inquiry's scope. We were able to improve the accuracy of our search by using Scopus's criteria, which guarantee that the data that is retrieved corresponds with the study's scope of interest. Because even a single keyword's inclusion or exclusion might significantly affect the original pool of inputs, producing either a more comprehensive or narrower set of results, this stage was essential. To find a single keyword that fits with the primary focus of this study, a search was done on the Scopus database. The search "women AND leadership" OR "gender AND equity" OR "women AND credibility" OR "women AND career" AND "women AND inclusion" led for a 215 document results after journals selection. After analyzing the research topics and scope of each article, a manual selection process was applied to retain only the most relevant studies for our research. This process reduced the initial pool of 215 articles to a final selection of 64.

2.4. Data processing techniques

Throughout the analysis of 64 publications, as depicted in Figure 1, the annual scientific production chart reveals an initial period of stagnation followed by a gradual rise in scholarly activity. Research interest notably accelerated post-2016, culminating in a peak in 2023-2024. This exponential growth highlights the increasing relevance of the field in academic discourse.

Figure 1:
Number of papers per year (2016 -2024)

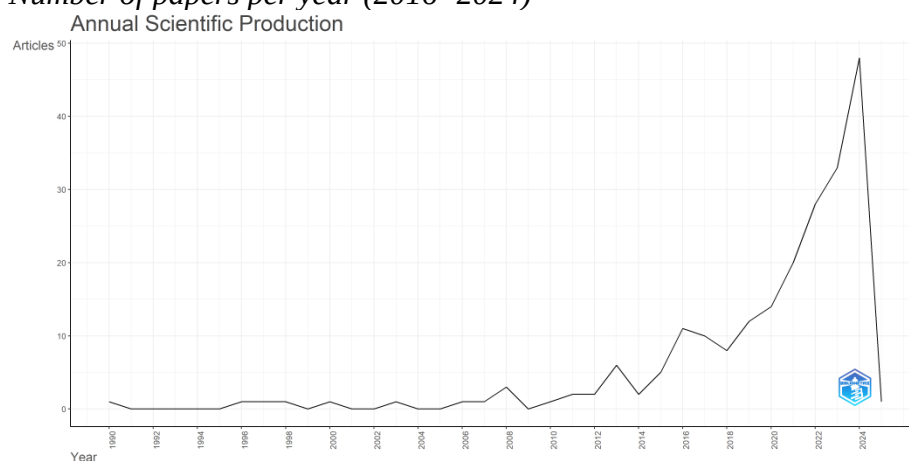
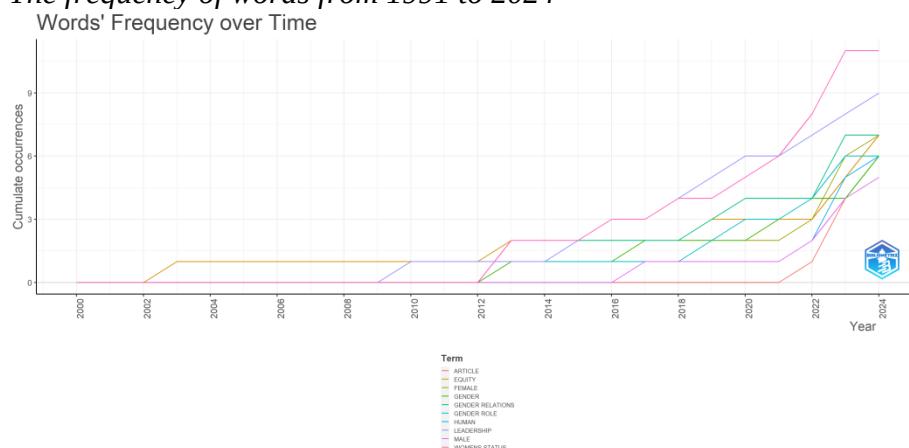


Figure 2 illustrates the authors' keywords and trending topics, offering a tangible evolution of 10 keywords from 2016 to 2024, which may shed light on aspects related to the three dimensions of the present study: women's leadership, career development, gender equity and inclusion. Starting around 2010, several terms, including "gender", "leadership", and "women status", begin to see a gradual rise in frequency. Alongside attempts to address gender

inequity and representation in leadership positions, this era represents the beginning of a growing interest in gender dynamics and leadership roles. The graph clearly demonstrates an upward tendency for several phrases between 2016 and 2020, including “leadership”, “gender relations”, and “gender role”. The concurrent rise in popularity of these terms suggests that scholarly investigation and discussion of gender equality, women’s leadership roles, and gender dynamics in the workplace have intensified. Terms like “leadership”, “gender”, “women status”, and “equity” see high cumulative increases after 2020, marking the most notable spike. This increase is a result of global efforts that support diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as gender parity programs and laws that support women in leadership roles. In 2024, the graph reaches a minor plateau, especially for popular terms like “leadership” and “women status”, indicating that although these subjects are still very relevant, the rate of new mentions may be leveling down. This pattern emphasizes how important these subjects remain as main tenets of current study and discourse.

Figure 2:
The frequency of words from 1991 to 2024



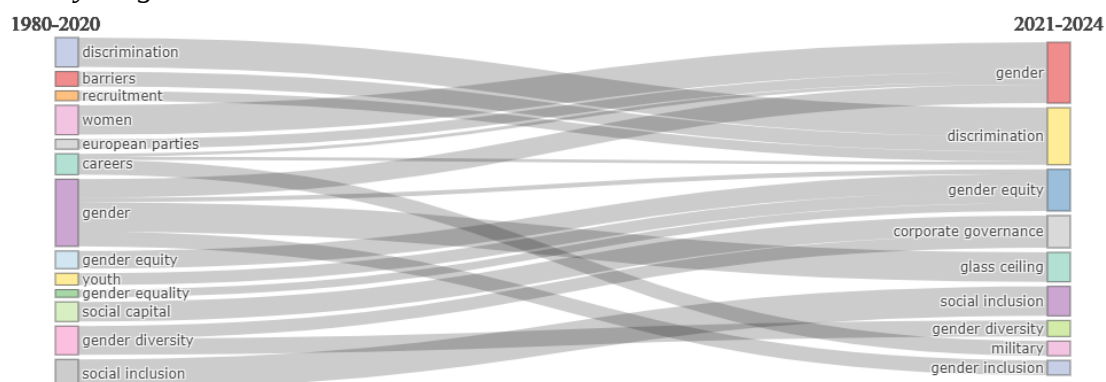
As demonstrated by the shift from 1980–2020 to 2021–2024, the Sankey diagram (Fig. 3) charts the development of themes across the decades and indicates a dynamic growth in focus and goals. Early conversations focused on fundamental ideas like gender, discrimination, and hurdles, which set the stage for comprehending systemic injustices and how they affect women’s roles in a variety of contexts. A rising awareness of gender differences in leadership, professional opportunity, and social integration was reflected in the emergence of issues like careers, recruitment, and social inclusion during this time. These previous themes have developed into more focused fields of study by the 2021-2024 timeframes.

Discrimination and gender remain prominent, indicating their continued importance as central concerns in gender studies. Nonetheless, new areas of focus have surfaced, like corporate governance and gender equity, which emphasize a change in emphasis toward addressing leadership positions, representation, and justice in institutional and organizational contexts. This development highlights a greater focus on observable results, like eliminating obstacles to leadership and promoting governance frameworks. Earlier concerns about barriers and careers naturally led to a sharper focus on the difficulties women have in rising to top leadership positions, which is reflected in the emergence of the glass ceiling as a distinct subject. The rise of the military as a research topic is a noteworthy trend in the modern period. This indicates a broadening of the focus of gender equity conversations to new and important

domains and reflects rising attention to gender inclusion in historically male-dominated industries, such as defense and security. Although the idea of social inclusion has persisted throughout both eras, it is now related to current debates over gender dynamics in leadership positions. This consistency demonstrated a persistent interest in creating inclusive institutions while acknowledging the interconnectedness of social and professional aspects.

In conclusion, the progression from 1980-2020 to 2021-2024 represents a shift from board discussions on gender inequality to more nuanced explorations of leadership, governance, and inclusion while foundational issues like gender and discrimination remain relevant, the emergence of themes such as glass ceiling and corporate governance reflects the evolution of research priorities in response to contemporary challenges.

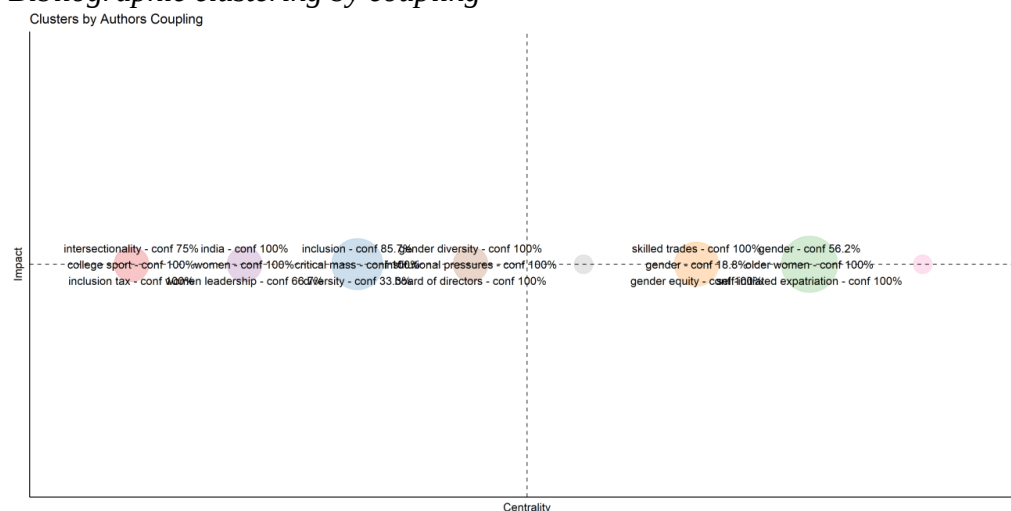
Figure 3
Sankey diagram



2.5. Coupling analysis and bibliometric clustering

To group scholarly articles according to their common references, a bibliographic coupling analysis was carried out. A complex landscape of gender diversity and inclusion research is revealed by the clusters by authors coupling map, with unique themes emerging across a range of impact and centrality levels. We can gain a better understanding of the clusters' contributions, relationships, and the research areas they represent by classifying and numbering them.

Figure 4
Bibliographic clustering by coupling



The **first cluster** (left side) comprises topics with high impact but low centrality, indicating influential but rather isolated fields of research. These issues are critical in developing specific elements of gender study, yet they are isolated from larger scholarly conversations. One notable issue in this cluster is intersectionality, which investigates the related nature of gender and class. In academic settings, intersectionality is crucial for understanding the varied experiences of women in leadership roles, as women from marginalized backgrounds face more complex challenges than their white or male counterparts (Crenshaw, 1989). Although it is frequently used in particular circumstances, this concept provides profound insights into systemic inequality and lays the framework for understanding overlapping barriers. This cluster analysis also identifies reoccurring themes regarding women's hurdles, providing a regional dimension to these issues. For example, underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is a long-standing issue in Indian organizations, compounded by cultural norms and organizational impediments that prevent women from obtaining leadership positions. While formal policies are shaped to support gender equity (Clavero & Galligan, 2021), informal practices and local cultural attitudes often prevent women from ascending to leadership positions. In addition to that, scholars, as Smolović Jones et al., (2021), indicate that industries remain predominantly male and resist to gender equity initiatives.

Women face in the corporate and in the institutional sectors significant hurdles. Significant hurdles are reflected throughout gender bias, decision-making exclusion, and limited access to senior opportunities development. Cluster 1 highlights challenges that women face while a focus is emphasized on achieving a critical mass to strengthen their influence on a governance level. That shows the importance of investigating for a deeper integration between governance and inclusion research. In addition to that, Lucia and Padgett (2021) support previous advancements by shedding the light over invisible barriers that drive women to navigate their careers through a "labyrinth". In this regard, Lucia and Padgett (2021) research findings illustrate the way gendered expectations and implicit obstacles continue to prevent women from accessing leadership positions. Bibliometric cluster outcomes convey with the literature review analysis as they indicate the prominent presence of cultural barriers that prevent women's advancement in a male-dominated industries.

Cluster (2) shows a high impact and a strong centrality of research themes. These themes connect gender diversity research to governance, leadership, and organizational performance. Cluster 2 depicts research key areas that explore how gender diversity influences corporate governance practices. Such practices reflect the importance of human and social capital in enhancing organizational effectiveness. Thereafter, practices, that embrace gender diversity, lead for improved decision-making, better conflict resolution, and for improved governance effectiveness. For making such practices viable, fostering inclusive environments in contemporary organizations enable active women participation for engaging their valuable contribution with boards' competencies. Thus, studies emphasize the importance of board composition, and women characteristics' in driving better governance outcomes. It is important to note that Cluster 2 represents the epicenter of gender research, where diversity, inclusion, and board governance converge. These research topics are influential and interconnected. They form the foundation of scholarly discourse on how gender diversity translates into tangible organizational value.

Cluster 3 encompasses emergent topics with moderate centrality and growing impact. These topics reflect the expansion of gender diversity research into underexplored themes and areas of research. The **skilled trades** theme explores women's participation in non-traditional sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and technical trades, addressing equity in historically male-dominated fields (Bridges et al., 2020). Human and social capital levels in the skilled trades within this cluster underscore women critical role in providing an added value for corporate governance frameworks. For Becker (1993), diverse and skilled boards tend to perform better as they can draw on a wider range of experiences and insights. In tandem with human and social capital, the networks and relationships that individuals cultivate – plays a significant role in facilitating better governance system outcomes. Coleman (1988) highlighted the importance of social capital in creating trust and fostering collaboration within organizations. Women's engagement in networks of influence is frequently constrained, which limits their capacity to use social capital in the same manner as males.

Moving beyond equality, the **gender equity** research emphasizes fairness in opportunities and outcomes, particularly addressing systemic and institutional barriers. This cluster signals the future of gender diversity research. By addressing underexplored “zones” such as skilled trades, generational equity, and leadership, it expands the scope of inquiry, reflecting a broader and more inclusive understanding of gender dynamics. Moreover, the underutilization of human capital among women in leadership roles limits their contribution to corporate governance or to top managerial positions. The analysis of Cluster 3 demonstrates that while significant research has been conducted on corporate governance and gender diversity, the interplay between human and social capital remain critical in determining the effectiveness of governance structures and managerial positions. Therefore, the literature consistently supports the notion that more inclusive corporate governance leads to better organizational outcomes, but achieving this requires not only legislative change but also shifts in organizational culture to value and leverage change but also shifts in organizational culture to value and leverage women contributions. The author's coupling map reflects a maturing and increasingly nuanced research field. **Cluster 1** brings forward high-impact but niche themes like intersectionality and women leadership that enrich specific areas of gender research. **Cluster 2** forms the foundation, connecting topics like gender diversity, inclusion, and governance to

broader academic discussions. **Cluster 3** highlights emerging frontiers in research, where themes like skilled trades and expatriation demonstrate the field's expansion into new territories.

When taken as a whole, these clusters demonstrate a research landscape that strikes a balance between breadth and depth, tackling both fundamental issues and examining novel avenues to promote gender equity, leadership, and inclusion. According to the bibliometric analysis of the top 10 authors for the 64 publications that were chosen, the corresponding articles have helped to fill in the theoretical and research gaps, but before doing so, it is crucial to perform a quadrant theme analysis and thematic representation, which will help identify authors who are situated at the nexus of niche themes and motor themes, hence offering a more focused area of inquiry.

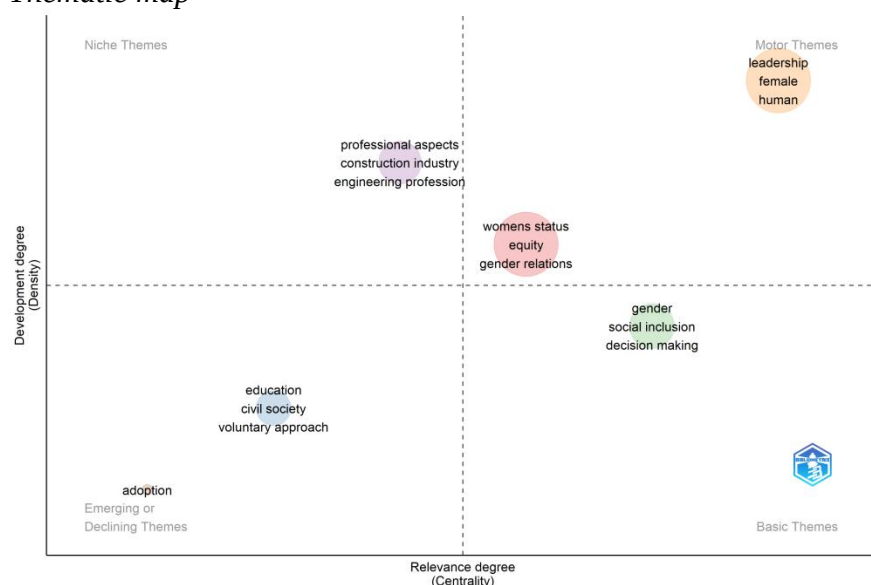
Table 1
Top 10 authors

Authors	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
Darvin, L.	3	0.92
Kossek, EE.	3	1.17
Aibar-Guzman, B.	2	0.50
Bamberry, L.	2	0.58
Bridges, D.	2	0.58
Das, S.	2	0.67
Fletcher, T.	2	0.67
Gaston, L.	2	0.83
Jha, S.	2	0.67
Keaton, ACI.	2	2.00

2.6. *Quadrant themes and thematic map depiction*

The thematic map shows a developing field where basic themes offer fundamental support and motor themes propel progress. While emerging or decreasing themes draw attention to areas that could warrant improvement or reexamination, niche themes provide specialized insights. The accompanying graphic, which is made up of these quadrants, depicts a dynamic and changing research environment that reflects the difficulties associated with gender equity and inclusion in contemporary situations. Every quadrant provides a “story” about the field’s present situation and potential future paths.

Figure 5
Thematic map



At the forefront of this map are the **motor themes**. They include themes related for leadership, female, and human. These **motor themes** are both greatly developed and central, serving as the driving forces behind modern research. A crucial area of attention highlights the revolutionary role that women play in **governance** and in **decision-making**. Themes of “female” and “human” highlight how inclusive and human-centered gender equity discourse is, showing a change in perspective toward seeing diversity as an essential element of corporate transformation and leadership. These topics further the discussion by establishing workable plans and guiding choices that deal with structural injustices.

Topics like professional aspects, the construction business, and the engineering profession are all included in the category of **niche themes**. These provide specialized insights into particular businesses and are well developed but less related to the larger conversation. Research here emphasizes the gender disparities that still exist in male-dominated fields, where women are still confronted by structural obstacles, workplace norms, and underrepresentation. For example, by addressing **particular issues in professional domains**, these themes, while not often central, provide crucial richness to the field. The **main themes** (basic ones) – including gender, social inclusion, and decision-making – serve as the foundational pillars of study. These subjects, though less developed, are crucial to the broader academic discourse, constituting the ground upon which more sophisticated conversations are created. While “social inclusion” concentrates on incorporating underrepresented groups into societal structures, “gender” covers a wide range of identities and their implications. “Decision-making” highlights the importance of “inclusive” governance by examining the significance of gender diversity in leadership processes. These fundamental ideas offer crucial frameworks that aid in the development and maturity of the profession.

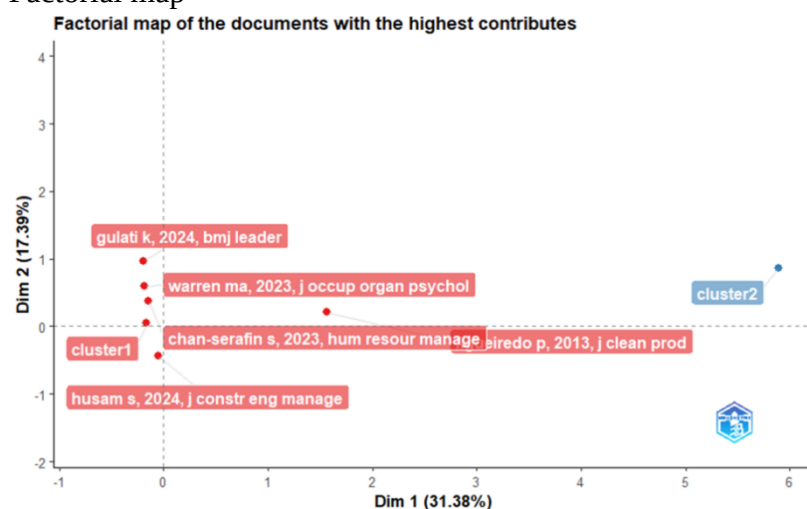
In the **lower-left quadrant**, rising or declining topics such as education, civil society, voluntary approach, and adoption suggest areas that deserve further investigation or reconsideration. Education and civil society focus on the societal and institutional frameworks that determine gender equity, while the voluntary approach reflects rising interest in non-

mandatory approaches to address gaps. The field depicted in the thematic map is dynamic and constantly changing. With an emphasis on revolutionary solutions, the motor themes address the fundamental problems of inclusion and leadership, spurring creativity and action. After studying the literature and completing the quadrant analysis, it appears that the struggle for gender equality in leadership roles is still one of the most serious concerns in modern businesses. Despite growing awareness and policies promoting gender parity, women continue to challenge systemic obstructions to senior leadership positions. Combined with cultural expectations and work-life balance issues, the path to career equity and inclusive leadership has proven to be a maze that requires further research. This subject emerges at the crossroads of career equity, work-life inclusion, and leadership dynamics, providing insight into how businesses might create equitable routes for women to lead while tackling the complexity of modern work-life integration. Upon the depiction of the top ten authors, the factorial map of documents (Fig. 6) depicts the spatial distribution of key articles based on highest contributions to the research field. It is mapped also across Dimension 1 and Dimension 2 that account for a significant proportion of the variance in the analyzed data.

Gulati et al., (2024) likely explore leadership themes with a focus on inclusion and equality, reflecting the proximity to the central axis. Warren et al., (2023) provide insights into psychological and organizational dimensions of leadership; this work appears pivotal to the field. Chan-Serafin et al., (2023) emphasize human resources perspectives on diversity and equity in leadership, making it a cornerstone of the cluster. As for Husam et al., (2024) article, it is positioned slightly lower, and it focuses on leadership and gender equity in male-dominated industries such as construction. Cluster 2, located further along Dim 1, represents articles that contribute uniquely to the field. Figueiredo et al., (2013) document likely bridges sustainability and gender diversity themes, marking its distinct relevance. Its separation from Cluster 1 indicates a new or less interrelated perspective compared to the central group.

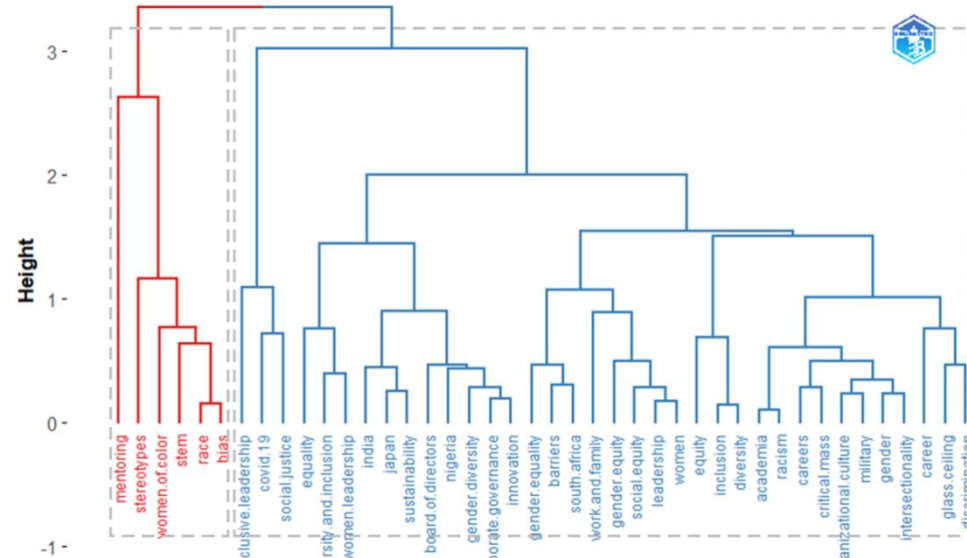
Future research can integrate these contributions with central themes to create an understanding of leadership and inclusion. The factorial map highlights the critical contributions shaping the field, with a strong focus on leadership, diversity, and equity within organizational contexts. Articles in Cluster 1 form the backbone of research, while Cluster 2 offers new perspectives that could expand the field's scope. The map suggests opportunities for deeper integration of outlier themes into the central discourse, particularly around niche or industry-specific applications of leadership and equity.

Figure 6
Factorial map



The hierarchical dendrogram presents the interconnection between themes within gender equity research, dividing them into clusters that collectively highlight foundational themes. At the central of the red cluster, **mentoring**, **stereotypes**, **race** and **bias** foundational themes are depicted. These foundational themes emphasize the systemic and cultural barriers that continue to hinder gender equity in leadership and professional advancement. The need of mentoring becomes clear as a crucial tactic for getting past these barriers, offering women essential assistance while negotiating work settings that are influenced by deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes. This cluster also draws attention to the particular difficulties that women of color encounter when racial and gender biases interact, creating particular and noteworthy barriers to attaining equity. These terms serve as a reminder of the widespread effects of both explicit and implicit prejudices as well as the need for focused initiatives to remove these obstacles.

Figure 7
Thematic map representation for women leadership positions



The blue cluster forms the heart of the dendrogram. It comprises themes such as leadership, diversity and inclusion, social justice, and equality. Themes like diversity and inclusions underscore making rightful environments that value gender differences, and improving decision-making processes. Regional studies, including research focused on India, Nigeria and Japan, provide insights into cultural and geographic dimensions of gender equity. Such studies demonstrate the importance of local norms and structures contributions for posing women possible opportunities. Themes like work and family and sustainability also examine the wider ramifications of gender inclusion by tying career progress to individual obligations and the good of society. While career obstacles and discrimination draw attention to the widespread disparities in workplace practices, the glass ceiling continues to serve as a potent metaphor for the imperceptible barriers that keep women from achieving top leadership positions. This conversation is enhanced by the inclusion of intersectionality as a theme, which focuses on the complex realities of people navigating several overlapping identities, including gender, race, and socioeconomic class. A clear picture of the state of gender equity research today is provided by the dendrogram.

The blue cluster acts as the catalyst for advancement, linking global viewpoints, leadership, and inclusiveness to concrete results, while the red cluster establishes the groundwork by recognizing long-standing obstacles. Peripheral themes provide critical insights into the systemic challenges that underpin the broader discourse. Together, these clusters present a cohesive narrative that balances the identification of obstacles with the exploration of opportunities. The themes converge to highlight the pressing need for inclusive strategies that address intersectionality, dismantle structural inequities, and foster environments where diverse perspectives are not just represented but valued.

After analyzing the 64 articles, it becomes evident that women's leadership is a fundamental factor for achieving career success and attaining top managerial positions. However, the literature review reveals a gap in identifying the key determinants of women's credibility and competencies that drive their career progression. Therefore, further investigation is essential to explore the interconnections between leadership and the specific competencies that enhance women's career within the corporate sector.

3. Literature review

The subject of women in leadership has attracted considerable attention in both academic research and professional discussions. However, the existing literature still reveals critical gaps, particularly in understanding the intricacies of career progression and work-life inclusion for women. Based on the outcomes of the bibliometric analysis and the insights from the six identified clusters, this literature review highlights key findings from multiple studies that address the barriers women face in leadership roles. These studies focus on challenges related to career advancement, the importance of credibility in senior positions, and the influence of gender and organizational culture. Consequently, this literature review will be structures around the **three clusters**, with a focus on identifying existing research gaps and establishing a theoretical framework that addresses these gaps comprehensively.

3.1. *Barriers to career progression for women*

3.1.1. *Structural and cultural barriers for women's career progression*

Numerous studies have highlighted the structural and cultural barriers that impede women's access to leadership positions (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). These obstacles, which create an unequal playing field for career advancement, are frequently based on gender bias and preconceptions (**Cluster - 1**). For instance, women, especially those from minority groups, have a difficult time finding mentorship, sponsorship, and other vital support networks that help them develop as leaders, according to McKinsey's Women in the Workplace study (McKinsey, 2024). Similarly, based on Eagly and Carli's (2007) research on the "labyrinth" of leadership, Ito and Bligh (2024) underscore the idea that women's career paths to top management are fraught with obstacles, including discrimination, work-life balance challenges, and limited access to networks of influence. These studies regularly show that, despite the removal of official barriers like discriminatory laws, informal barriers like implicit biases about women's leadership qualities still exist. The term "glass ceiling" refers to both apparent and imperceptible barriers that keep women from achieving senior leadership roles (Glass & Cook, 2016). Initiatives to bridge the gender gap in leadership have emerged in spite of these enduring obstacles. For example, businesses are putting diversity and inclusion initiatives that aim to eliminate unconscious prejudice and provide fair chances for leadership development into practice more frequently (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

According to recent studies, "male allies" play a crucial role in promoting gender parity in the workplace and creating a shared accountability culture for tearing down systemic obstacles (Brown & Patel, 2024). There are still difficulties, though, especially in light of the growing intersectional issues, which cause women from marginalized or minority groups to face even greater disadvantages. The growing conversation on equity emphasizes how critical it is to have a comprehensive approach that tackles the systemic and cultural barriers preventing women from rising to positions of leadership. Furthermore, there is ongoing discussion about the function of policy interventions like gender quotas and leadership representation targets. Although some contend that quotas might hasten advancement, others warn about their possible unforeseen repercussions, such tokenism or the weakening of merit-based occupation (Fernandez & Clark, 2023).

3.1.2. *Work-life balance and women inclusion*

The topic of work-life balance and its impact on women's career advancement is another important theme in the literature (DeSimone, 2020; Mustapa et al., 2018). Beyond conventional talks of work-life balance, the idea of work-life inclusion highlights the necessity for businesses to establish settings that accommodate both personal and professional obligations. According to research by Abdulrahman and Amoush (2020), a lot of women in leadership positions struggle to balance their personal and professional life, which can hinder their capacity to grow or give their all in their leadership responsibilities. Women who are able to manage numerous responsibilities are better able to multitask, prioritize, and make decisions - all of which are critical leadership skills.

According to **the spillover theory (Staines, 1980)**, experiences in one area of life, like work, can have a beneficial or bad impact on another area, like family. This notion is especially pertinent to women because their home lives can be directly impacted by their professional success or stress, and vice versa. It has been demonstrated that work-life inclusion tactics, such flexible scheduling and all-inclusive childcare assistance, help women better manage

these demands. Studies from Archer and Kam (2022) suggest that companies that implement inclusive policies see better retention rates of women in leadership and a more balanced representation of genders across managerial levels. However, many businesses continue to neglect incorporating complete work-life inclusion frameworks into their leadership development programs, even in the face of the increasing understanding of the significance of these policies. Cultural resistances, limited organizational resources, and deeply ingrained stereotypes about women's roles in the workplace and at home continue to hinder progress (Nguyen & Hassan, 2023). Work-life integration programs show that cultivating an inclusive and flexible culture can result in increased productivity, long-term retention, and employee engagement (Johnson & Smith, 2021). Moreover, while large multinational organizations may have the resources to implement these strategies, SMEs often struggle to provide similar support due to budgetary and structural constraints.

3.1.3. Intersectionality and male-dominant organizational culture

According to the literature review, understanding women's experiences in leadership requires an awareness of intersectionality (**Cluster 1**) (Nelson & Piatak, 2021; Richardson & Loubier, 2008). According to Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is the term used to describe the overlapping social identities, such as gender, race, and class that give rise to particular experiences of privilege or oppression. According to a research by Booysen and Nkomo (2010), the combined effect of these biases frequently results in women of color being passed over for leadership positions. Women in leadership experiences are significantly shaped by the culture of the organization. Businesses with male-dominated leadership teams frequently uphold marginalizing norms that prevent women from advancing in their careers (Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020). By implementing gender-inclusive policies, companies can either strengthen or break down these obstacles, according to research by Marine et al. (2017). Intersectionality provides a lens through which organizations can create diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that are more successful, even as it draws attention to the additional obstacles that women in leadership must overcome. Leadership evaluation standards should also take intersectionality into account. Women from varied backgrounds who may exhibit equally effective but unconventional leadership styles are unintentionally marginalized by traditional assessments, which frequently prefer masculine leadership attributes (Corpuz et al., 2020). Rethinking leadership standards is necessary to address this, acknowledge different contributions, and eliminate prejudice in hiring and promotion procedures. Businesses may provide more equal opportunities for all women to succeed in leadership positions by incorporating intersectionality into organizational strategy and leadership paradigms.

3.2. Women competencies and requisites for gaining leadership positions

3.2.1. Corporate governance and gender diversity

Board of directors' diversity has become a central topic in corporate governance research (**Cluster 2** - corporate governance and gender diversity). A diverse board offers distinctive resources, allowing companies to connect a broader range of skills, ultimately enhancing their competitive advantage. Particularly, gender diversity is acknowledged as a driving force behind better governance, efficient decision-making, and the development of intellectual capital—a crucial intangible resource in the knowledge-driven economy of today (Nadeem et al., 2017, Tiwari et al., 2024). Rich combinations of experiences and cognitive viewpoints define diverse boards, which work as a collective knowledge base. With this makeup, the board is transformed from a conventional monitoring body into a vibrant knowledge-sharing platform where strategic problems are discussed and creative solutions are developed

(Paolone et al., 2024). By contributing unique abilities and encouraging heightened awareness of the implications of decisions, women's participation in governance frameworks enhances board discussions (Kim & Starks, 2016). Recognized as a hidden source of wealth development, intellectual capital is heavily reliant on the diversity and experience of board members. The ability of the board to create value and maintain competitive advantage depends heavily on the human capital of its directors, which includes their training, expertise, and judgment (Barney, 1991). The human capital theory supports knowledge-based viewpoints by highlighting the strategic value of knowledge that is hard to duplicate and transmit, such as gender diversity and cultural competency (Carter et al., 2010).

But there are drawbacks to introducing diversity as well. Due to the inclusion of contrasting opinions, increased heterogeneity may impede decision-making and possibly result in cognitive conflicts brought on by disparate evaluations of strategic situations (Hambrick et al., 1996). Although cognitive diversity fosters innovation and creativity, it also raises integration costs and disagreement risks, which might make it more difficult to reach a board consensus (Milliken & Martins, 1996). Gender diversity exemplifies this contradiction. On the one hand, it encourages creativity and innovation, strengthening the governance role of the board (McInerney-Lacombe et al., 2008). On the contrary, it can delay deliberations and exacerbate divisions, especially in competitive situations needing rapid replies (Hambrick et al., 1996). Thus, variety is a "double-edged sword" that forces boards to weigh the advantages of creative thinking against the drawbacks of delayed decision-making and possible disputes (Milliken & Martins, 1996). In summary, companies looking to stay competitive in a knowledge-based and dynamic economy must have a diverse range of directors on their boards. Although it promotes better governance and increases intellectual capital, it also has drawbacks that must be judiciously managed to avoid cognitive conflicts and delayed decision-making. Through strategic agility, companies that successfully leverage the strengths of diverse boards stand to gain a substantial competitive advantage.

3.2.2. *Women conflict resolution as a core competency*

Boards' diversity extends beyond idiosyncratic competencies to include essential governance competencies such as conflict resolution and risk-taking (**Cluster 3**). Conflict resolution is one of the key skills recognized for women's leadership (Pullen & Vachhani, 2021). According to studies like those by Banks et al. (2021) and Zivkovic (2022), women frequently contribute distinctive viewpoints to conflict resolution by embracing strategies that prioritize inclusivity and teamwork. Female directors use emotional intelligence and empathy to mediate conflicts and reconcile opposing points of view, bringing a nuanced approach to conflict resolution (Eagly, 2012). For handling cognitive conflicts, known by divergent viewpoints or strategic visions, board's members need to establish productive discussion to avoid governance dysfunctions. In this regard, women improve the boards' capacity to agree on strategic matters by encouraging candid communication and lowering conflict, which supports organizational stability and unity (Bear et al., 2010).

Additionally, it has been demonstrated that their participative leadership style makes it easier to integrate other viewpoints, which results in more creative and experienced solutions (Terjesen et al., 2009). According to Eagly (2012), women leaders tend to use more transformational leadership styles, which can be very successful in resolving conflicts since they emphasize empathy, understanding, and building team cohesion (Zivkovic, 2022). This method improves their capacity to reach agreements inside organizations and handle difficult

interpersonal situations. As a result, emotional intelligence is often emphasized as a critical element of successful conflict resolution. As agents, managers are supposed to operate in their principals' best interests, according to the agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). However, the traditional structure of organizations has often prioritized male-dominant leadership styles and hierarchies, creating a mismatch between the behaviors valued by agency theory and those typically exhibited by women (Ain et al., 2021).

Upon Ain et al., (2021) findings, female directors participation in corporate boards attenuates agency costs, which correlated with conflicts of interest. Adams and Ferreira (2009) explore the way women in leadership positions, particularly on boards; can impact agency-related issues like governance and conflict resolution. Upon their research findings, Adams and Ferreira (2009) underline that a gender-diverse boards to have better monitoring and advisory roles, suggesting that women leaders may have unique competencies that align with the reduction of agency costs through improved monitoring and a balanced decision-making. This finding has been validated by Kossek and Buzzanell (2018) stating that women leaders help minimizing opportunistic behaviors. In addition to that, Ely et al., (2011) argue that women are adept at managing stakeholder interests and resolving interests and resolving conflicts through negotiation and relationship-building, which helps reduce information asymmetry. In such stream, women in leadership, through their transparency and fairness actions, contribute to better governance practices that can mitigate the risks associated with agency theory (Ain et al., 2021). In a practical way, open channels are created for feedback and for fostering trust. Such channels help resolving conflicts not just at an agent-principal level but also among team members and other organizational stakeholders, thereby reducing agency costs associated with miscommunication or misaligned objectives.

3.2.3. *Women strategic direction and decision-making*

A strong sense of strategic direction is fundamental for women aiming to climb the leadership ladder. Women leaders frequently provide a variety of experiences, viewpoints, and methods to the formulation of strategies, which aids in the creation and exchange of information (Cluster 3). According to Pierli et al. (2022), women leaders are becoming more and more acknowledged for their capacity to create long-term plans and strategies that complement corporate objectives. Women frequently take a collaborative approach to strategic direction, creating settings where information is freely exchanged and utilized to inform choices (Bierly et al., 2009). According to Pierli et al. (2022), this capability is improved by the capacity to take into account other points of view, enabling more thorough and inclusive strategic planning. Furthermore, the ability to network and share knowledge is mentioned as a crucial component of strategic leadership (Vera et al., 2022).

The Knowledge-Based View (KBV) thesis, as advanced by Grant (1996), asserts that information is a vital resource for obtaining a competitive advantage and is essential to organizational decision-making and strategic direction. In order to achieve their strategic objectives and establish themselves as leaders, women's ability to build supporting networks is crucial (Van Helden et al., 2023). These networks function as repositories of data, expertise, and prospects that facilitate professional growth and strategy development. According to Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), the process of creating knowledge is social and participatory. Women leaders improve the processes of knowledge conversion (from tacit to explicit) and its strategic application by encouraging inclusivity and utilizing the tacit knowledge within their teams. Since it stresses exploiting group expertise and encouraging team learning, a strategic

leadership style is very compatible with the KBV and can stimulate the creation of novel strategies and solutions (Vera et al., 2022). According to the KBV hypothesis, knowledge production, transfer, and utilization are important factors that influence an organization's performance and success. The KBV theory offers a framework for analyzing women's leadership roles and how their distinct approaches to strategic direction and decision-making give their businesses knowledge-based advantages. Women's decision-making is frequently typified by a focus on transformation leadership (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022), in which data is collected from multiple sources and subsequently converted into action. Ladkin and Patrick (2022) also emphasized the notion that women tend to make relationally oriented decisions, attempting to incorporate other points of view in order to arrive at well-rounded conclusions. This can result in a more thorough application of the organization's expertise, which is consistent with the KBV's focus on efficiently utilizing intellectual capital. In conclusion, women can improve an organization's knowledge base by prioritizing a collaborative approach to strategy, which eventually leads to more creative strategic decision-making (Kanadli et al., 2018).

3.2.4. Women risk-taking and their role in leadership

When it comes to leadership, the transaction costs theory (TCT) highlights how risk-taking and decision-making can affect the effectiveness of organizational transactions and the distribution of resources. The TCT, which was first proposed by Coase in 1937 and then developed by Williamson in 1985, looks at the costs of conducting economic transactions or exchanges with an emphasis on topics like knowledge asymmetry, negotiation, and enforcement. Risk-taking behavior in the context of women's leadership is frequently seen as more measured and calculating than that of their male colleagues, which is in line with the ideas of minimizing transaction costs. While traditional stereotypes portray women as risk-averse, recent studies reveal that female directors often adopt a calculated and strategic approach to risk. They balance the need for innovation and growth with prudent risk management, ensuring that decisions align with long-term organizational goals (Adams & Funk, 2012). In TCT terms, women leaders are likely to focus on reducing risks that are associated with opportunism and information asymmetry (**Cluster 3**).

By promoting communication and building trust, women help mitigate the bounded rationality (limited information available for decision-making) that is a core concern of TCT, leading to more efficient and smoother transactions. Hodgkinson & Healey (2011) argue that women often aim to create trust-based partnerships, both internally with their teams and externally with stakeholders. This trust-building approach reduces the likelihood of opportunistic behavior and reduces the need for complex contracts and enforcement mechanism, which are typical transaction costs in organizations. In such scheme, women leaders approach risk with a higher degree of caution and seek to reduce uncertainties in organizational transactions (Kirsch, 2022). This risk-averse approach is often related to creating stability and sustainability, which plays a key role in reduction transaction costs. For Soni (2022), women take calculated risks when they are well-informed and when risks align with their values and long-term goals.

Furthermore, although women may handle risk differently than men, this difference does not necessarily indicate a lack of aptitude, according to Balachandra et al. (2019). Rather, women tend to take more measured and careful risks, which is a style that works better for responsible leadership and long-term organizational viability. To put it another way, women's risk-taking

tactics frequently center on striking a balance between prospective benefits and drawbacks, developing flexible and adaptive techniques that lessen the need for ongoing renegotiation or restructuring—actions that can increase transaction costs. Women leaders improve the efficiency of organizational exchanges by lowering transaction costs through relational risk management. In order to lower the expenses related to monitoring, enforcement, and conflict resolution, their strategy typically focuses on preventive risk management, creating settings where truthful communication and understanding become a ritual.

3.2.5. *Women credibility and career advancement*

Credibility is considered as an essential element in women's leadership trajectories (Steele et al., 2024). Credibility entails an arrangement of competence, integrity, and the agility to inspire trust among colleagues and subordinates (Williams Jr. et al., 2023). Ibarra et al., (2014) study point out that, in leadership roles, women must navigate a complex landscape where their authority is questioned more frequently and making credibility a more pressing issue for women than for men. Unlike men, women are often required to prove their competence repeatedly (Briggs et al., 2023; Moscatelli et al., 2020). From this perspective, an inclusive organizational environment provides a fair integration of differences (Nishii & Rich, 2013) and where objective performance evaluations are perceived. An organizational environment that inspires employees to act and engage authentically, drawing upon their expertise and identity without fear of negative repercussions, can enhance inclusivity and performance. **The social identity theory** (Tajfel, 1982) suggests that when members of a group perceive that they are treated with fairness and trust, and without prejudice, it fosters greater acceptance among individuals. This fair treatment helps reduce stereotypes and discrimination within the organization.

In such a context, admittance to leadership positions is not constrained by social categories like gender, race, or other identity symbols. Instead, it is based on the appreciation of individual distinction and capability. Women's credibility is tied to their capacity to assert themselves in traditionally male-dominated environments (Martin & Phillips, 2017). The theory highlights in what way equitable treatment within an organization can create a more open pathway for women to assume roles of influence and leadership. In this vein, **the social identity theory** provides insights about the relationships between a leader's identity and gender (Kirk et al., 2017). In the same stream, Sandberg's (2014) underlines the way self-advocacy and assertiveness, traits often deemed less favorable in women are critical for establishing the needed credibility to progress into managerial positions. Conversely, when women show traits such as aggressiveness, they often face the risk of being perceived as overly unlikable. This perception creates additional challenges, as it conflicts with traditional gender norms and where women behavior is expected to be more communal and cultivating. Such biases can obscure their access to leadership. Consequently, traits, that are crucial for effective leadership, may, paradoxically, become obstacles for women aspiring to senior positions, making their ascent more complex and oppressed with challenges.

4. **Research gaps and conclusion**

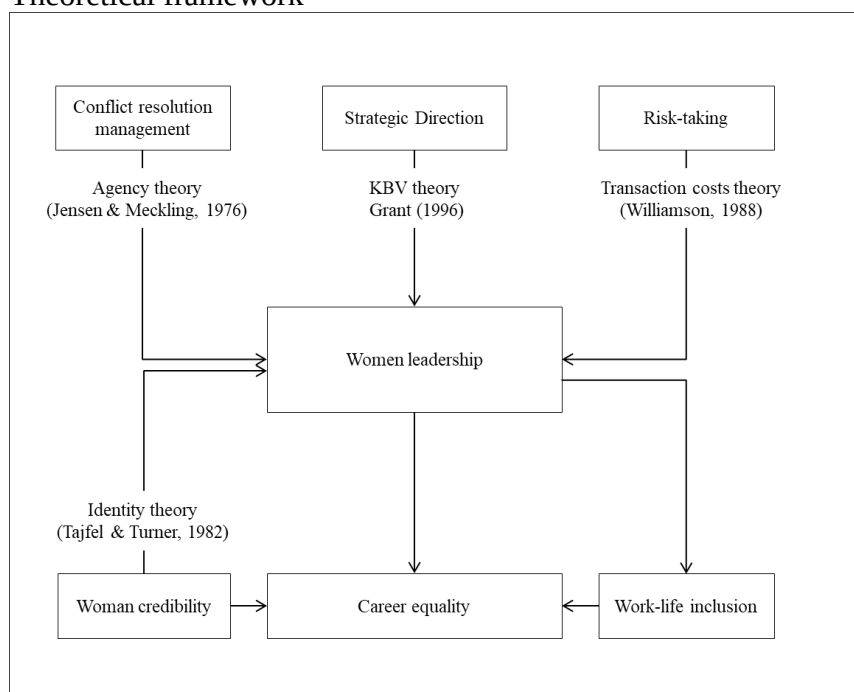
4.1. *Theoretical gaps*

Women in leadership literature review made significant strides in underlining the barriers competencies, and contributions of women in managerial roles. Nevertheless, theoretical gaps remain unaddressed and limit the understanding of the venues that women follow to access to leadership positions. On a first hand, while the "glass ceiling" concept and structural barriers

has been extensively studied, there is a lack in exploring women backgrounds and expertise in relation with access to leadership positions. Existing scientific literature centers on challenges faced by women. In specific cultural contexts, these challenges overlook the way overlapping identities create compounded barriers to leadership. Such view is supported by Eagly and Carli (2007) who indicated that women are often assessed more critically than men. In addition to that, identified challenges are exacerbated when gender intersects with other identities. This, it is noticeable that women, often, face higher enquiry and are required to prove permanently their capabilities compared to men (Briggs et al., 2023). While research recognizes women importance, rare are the studies which focus on women's credibility and competencies in leadership roles. This creates a gap in understanding how credibility is built as for its determinants which remain insufficiently explored.

Moreover, the KBV and the social identity theory provide insights into understanding the role of diversity and identity in leadership. However, these theories application to understand how women leaders enhance organizational innovation, knowledge sharing and decision-making remains underdeveloped. While the KBV emphasizes the unique contributions of women leaders in fostering inclusive knowledge have yet to be comprehensively theorized. Finally, while studies recognizes the importance of women for accessing leadership positions, theoretical models integrating conflict resolution, strategic direction and risk-taking concepts with leadership development are limited. Based on these findings, four theoretical perspectives have been identified in the study of women's access to leadership positions.

Figure 8
Theoretical framework



4.2. Research gaps

While developments have been made in endorsing gender diversity and inclusion, several practical gaps persist, hindering the effective implementation of strategies and practices to support women in leadership roles. Conflict resolution role, perceived as a core competency

in women's leadership, remains unexplored in practice. Eagly (2012) and Bear et al., (2010) encourage researches about the way women leaders excel in managing cognitive conflicts and encouraging consensus through collaboration and emotional intelligence. At the same time, organizations are not yet to fully embrace participative leadership styles that value inclusivity and conflict mediation as critical assets in the governance system. Practical efforts to redefine risk-taking contexts and incorporate women's attitudes into decision-making processes remain also limited. Risk-taking behaviors in women's leadership are often misinterpreted or undervalued in practice. A woman's calculated approach to risk is frequently overshadowed by stereotypes that represent them as overly risk-averse. This bias prevents organizations from fully appreciating the value of women's risk management strategies, which focus on long-term sustainability and stability (Adams & Funk, 2012).

In conclusion, the gaps identified in theoretical and practical fields accentuate the need for an integrative research. Theoretical advancements should focus on understanding women's credibility, and the interplay between work-life inclusion and leadership. Concurrently, companies must address the practical barriers to implementing inclusive policies and leadership models that leverage women's competencies. This levels the playing field and promotes equitable career progression (Kossek & Lee, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the multiple challenges and opportunities for women's entry to leadership positions, integrating findings from a thorough literature review and bibliometric analyses. The findings underscore ongoing structural and cultural barriers, such as implicit prejudices, intersectional disparities, and work-life balance issues, which continue to limit women's career advancement. Despite these challenges, the study emphasizes the transformative power of gender diversity in leadership, notably through skills like conflict resolution, strategic direction, and risk management.

The theoretical review reveals significant gaps, including the underexplored intersections of gender with cultural contexts, as well as the need for deeper understanding of how women's credibility and unique leadership styles contribute to organizational success. Practical gaps, on the other hand, point to the inconsistent implementation of diversity and inclusion policies, and the undervaluation of women's approaches to risk-taking and decision-making. Ibarra et al., (2014) argue that organizations must foster cultures of inclusivity and provide opportunities for women to develop and display these competencies effectively. On another note, while competencies such as conflict resolution, strategic direction, and risk-taking are essential, they do not develop in isolation. The organizational environment plays a critical role in shaping women's leadership pathways.

The recurring subject highlights the necessity of rethinking leadership as a harmony between corporate inclusion and professional equity. It draws attention to how crucially organizational support networks and women's special skills cross to create long-lasting leadership paths. Future studies can better understand how women leaders contribute to the creativity and resilience of their businesses while navigating complicated organizational environments by concentrating on this issue. In addition to adding to the expanding conversation on gender equity, this study's advancement of research and practice in these areas places women's leadership as a strategic necessity for businesses looking to realize their full potential in a knowledge-driven, dynamic economy. The developing theme provides a road map for

academics and professionals to work together to break down obstacles, establish inclusive leadership environments, and unleash the unrealized potential of female leaders.

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