European Economic Letters
ISSN 2323-5233
Vol 15, Issue 4 (2025)
http://eelet.org.uk

Best Practices for Gender Inclusion in Leadership Roles

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1. Introduction

In today's evolving professional landscape, the imperative for gender inclusion in leadership roles has never been more critical. Despite growing awareness, women and gender-diverse individuals continue to face systemic barriers that limit their access to leadership opportunities across industries. Gender inclusion in leadership is not merely a matter of equity—it is a strategic advantage that fosters diverse perspectives, drives innovation, and enhances organizational performance. Embracing inclusive leadership practices means creating an environment where individuals of all gender identities feel valued, empowered, and equipped to succeed. This requires a deliberate commitment to dismantling biases, ensuring equitable policies, and cultivating cultures that support diverse leadership pathways. As organizations strive to build more inclusive and effective leadership structures, understanding and implementing best practices for gender inclusion becomes an essential step toward achieving long-term success and social progress[1].

Gender diversity is the variation of gene within a species. In work parlance it means equitable proportion of male and female employees in a workplace. The Gender gap should be as low as possible so as to reduce inequality to bare minimum.

Article 14 of the constitution of India embodies the idea of equality expressed in the preamble. It lays down the general principle of equality before law and equal protection shall be secured to all persons within the territorial jurisdiction. The Article 15 relates to prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of Religion, race caste and sex. The Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment[2].

1.1 Need for Gender Diversity in Work Place

Gender diversity in the workplace is essential for fostering innovation, enhancing decision- making, and driving sustainable growth. A diverse workforce that includes individuals of all gender identities brings a wide range of perspectives, experiences, and problem-solving approaches, which can significantly improve creativity and adaptability within teams. Research consistently shows that organizations with higher levels of gender diversity tend to outperform their less diverse counterparts in terms of profitability, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction. Beyond the economic and performance benefits, gender diversity is also a matter of social responsibility and fairness. It challenges traditional stereotypes, promotes equal opportunities, and reflects a commitment to human rights and dignity. Moreover, a gender- diverse work environment helps attract top talent, especially among younger generations who increasingly prioritize inclusion and equity in their career choices. In an era where global competitiveness hinges on innovation and collaboration, promoting gender diversity is not just the right thing to do—it is a strategic imperative that positions organizations for long-term success[3].

Diversity can help the bottom line, and diversity is sustainable only in an inclusive culture. An inclusive workplace is one where more of today's diverse workforce is engaged. According to studies cited by Scientific American, organizations with inclusive cultures have greater innovation, creativity and bottom line results.

The case for a gender-inclusive workplace includes all of these benefits:-

(a) Returns: Catalyst found significantly higher returns in Fortune 500 companies with more women at the top and on their boards of directors. McKinsey found that, in a group of publicly

traded European companies, those with gender diversity in leadership experienced higher return on equity, operating profit, and stock price.

(b) Talent Pool: According to the U.S. Department of Education, women earn more undergraduate and graduate degrees than men. The pool of educated workers has and will continue to have lots of women. It's simple: To have the most skilled and talented workforce, a business must attract and retain women as well as men.

(c) Women's Market: The women's market is key to many industries. Women make 41% of purchasing decisions. Women-owned businesses have a huge impact on our economy. Women control trillions of dollars of wealth and influence more than 85% of retail decisions.

1.2 Very Few Women in Leadership Roles

Though the organisation are moving towards an inclusive environment but the numbers of women at the top are not changing. In India, women make up 42% of new graduates, but only 24% of entry-level professionals. Of these, about 19% reach senior-level management roles. Women hold only 7.7% of board seats and just 2.7% of board chairs. Women leaders are missing across sectors. To gain momentum and drive change, women need to "lean-in" and they are doing so—at least more than before. Hiring, retention and growth of women—all are a big challenge. When 42% of new graduates are women, only 24% of entry-level jobs held by them[4].

Either women are being pressurised to opt out of the workforce or they are simply not being hired. The "double burden" syndrome – the combination of work and domestic responsibilities – weighs heavily. Women remain at the centre of family life, with all the attendant constraints (maternity, child-rearing, organising family life, care of the elderly, etc). The impact of the constraints may vary from one country to another, depending on the support offered (infrastructures such as daycare centres, tax policies that encourage women's participation in the labour force, etc.), but on average women continue to devote more time than men to domestic tasks.

Despite significant progress in gender equality over the past decades, women remain starkly underrepresented in leadership roles across most sectors and industries. This persistent gap is a reflection of deep-rooted structural barriers, cultural biases, and institutional practices that hinder women's advancement to top positions. From unequal access to professional development opportunities and mentorship to challenges balancing work and family responsibilities, women often face a "glass ceiling" that limits their career progression. Stereotypes and unconscious bias also play a major role, with leadership qualities traditionally being associated with masculine traits, which can result in women being overlooked for promotions or leadership-track projects[5].

Additionally, the lack of female role models in senior positions can discourage younger women from aspiring to leadership roles themselves. This underrepresentation not only undermines gender equality but also deprives organizations of the diverse perspectives and leadership styles that women bring. Addressing this imbalance requires intentional strategies to promote inclusivity, mentorship, equal opportunities, and organizational cultures that value and support women's leadership potential[6].

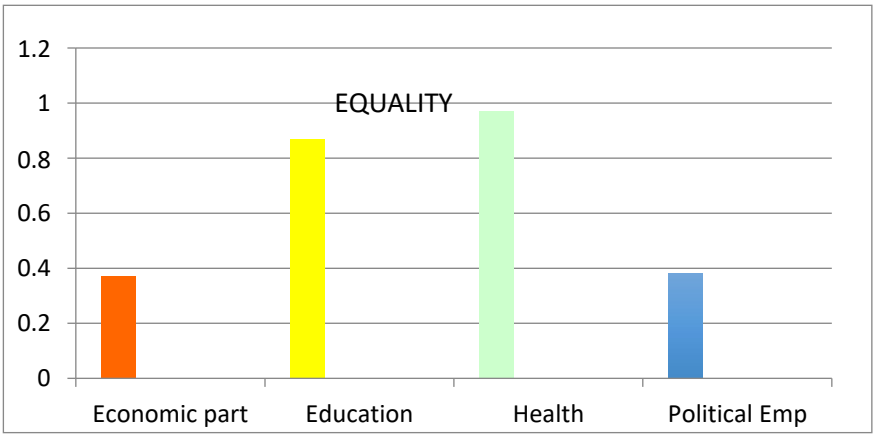
1.3 Statement problem

India has a way too much to do to reduce the gender gap. In the Global Gender Gap Report 2015, India ranked 108 out of the 145 countries who participated in in the survey. The survey has indicated the gender gap index. This index benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, education and health criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups. The rankings are designed to create greater awareness among a global audience of the challenges posed by gender gaps and the opportunities created by reducing

European Economic Letters
ISSN 2323-5233
Vol 15, Issue 4 (2025)
http://eelet.org.uk

them. The score of Indias' gender gap index was 0.664, owhere a score of '0' meant 100% and '1' meant 100% equality. The survey was carried out on four parameters viz:-

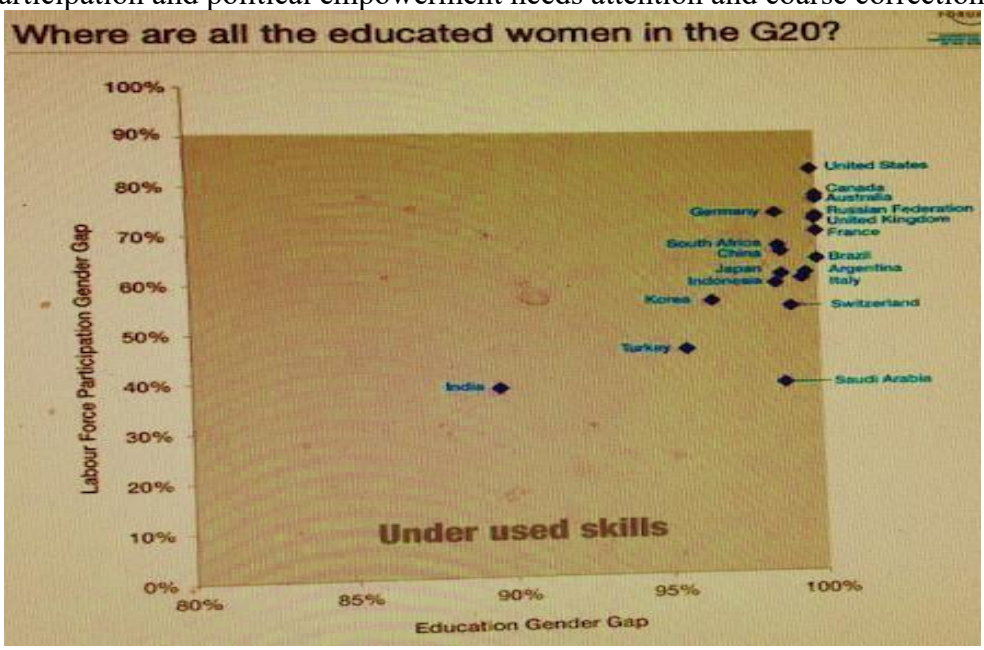
(a) Economic participation and opportunity
(b) Educational attainment
(c) Health and survival
(d) Political empowerment



Gender Gap Index On Four Parameters

The parameters of economic participation included aspects of labour force participation, women in senior positions and wage parity for similar jobs. The parameters of political empowerment included aspects of women in parliament and women in ministerial positions. The education included literacy rate and enrolment in primary secondary and tertiary education. The health parameter included the criterion of sex ratio and the healthy life expectancy.

Though the gender gap in health and education is not apparently worrisome but the wide gap in economic participation and political empowerment needs attention and coarse correction.



Though the gap in education between men and women has reduced drastically, still very few women are able to assume leadership roles in the corporates. "What are the best practices adopted by companies which provide a level playing field to men and women and which encourage women to assume leadership roles".

1.4 Aims and objectives

Aim: To explore and analyze the best practices for promoting gender inclusion in leadership roles within organizations, and to identify the key challenges women face in attaining these positions.

Objectives:

1. To examine and document effective strategies and practices adopted by organizations to promote women into leadership roles.
2. To assess the internal and external challenges that hinder women's advancement to leadership positions, including organizational culture, societal norms, and structural barriers.
3. To evaluate the role of mentorship, professional development programs, and inclusive policies in supporting women's leadership development.
4. To investigate how organizational leadership perceptions and biases impact women's career progression.
5. To propose actionable recommendations for organizations aiming to foster a more gender-inclusive leadership environment.

1.5 Research Questions

2. What are best practices for placing women in leadership roles in organizations?
3. What challenges women face in achieving the leadership roles?

2. Review of literature

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has been a central focus of gender and organizational studies for decades. Numerous scholars have examined both the structural barriers and potential solutions to closing the gender leadership gap.

Eagly and Carli (2007) introduced the metaphor of the "labyrinth" to describe the complex and often indirect paths women must navigate to attain leadership roles, highlighting how biases, stereotypes, and institutional structures form invisible obstacles to women's advancement. Similarly, **Ridgeway (2001)** emphasized the impact of gender stereotypes on leadership perception, noting that leadership is often unconsciously associated with male characteristics such as assertiveness and dominance, thereby disadvantaging women who may be perceived as less suitable for such roles[7].

A number of studies have highlighted organizational best practices that can help overcome these barriers. According to **Catalyst (2020),** implementing mentorship and sponsorship programs specifically targeted at women can significantly enhance their visibility and access to leadership opportunities. These programs provide guidance, support, and crucial networking opportunities that women might otherwise be excluded from. Furthermore, Sandberg (2013) emphasized the importance of internal confidence and self-advocacy, arguing that while external factors play a role, women must also be encouraged to "lean in" and assert themselves in leadership tracks[8].

Policies that promote flexible work environments and parental leave have also been shown to improve gender inclusion. **Hewlett and Luce (2005)** found that many high-potential women left the corporate pipeline due to inflexible work schedules and lack of work-life balance. Their research suggests that organizations adopting family-friendly policies are more successful in retaining and promoting female leaders.

Institutional support and leadership commitment to diversity are also crucial. **According to Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013),** diversity initiatives must go beyond numbers and quotas to address the underlying cultural dynamics that inhibit inclusion. They advocate for leadership development programs that are specifically designed to address the experiences and needs of women, allowing

for authentic leadership expression and identity development[9].
Despite these promising strategies, challenges persist. According to a report by **McKinsey & Company (2021)**, women—particularly women of color—are significantly more likely to experience microaggressions, be overlooked for stretch assignments, and receive less feedback compared to their male counterparts. These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive inclusion strategies that go beyond representation to ensure equity in daily organizational practices[10].

In summary, the literature emphasizes that promoting women into leadership roles requires a multifaceted approach that addresses systemic challenges, provides structured support, and fosters inclusive workplace cultures. While progress has been made, sustained effort and intentional action are necessary to achieve genuine gender parity in leadership.

The study on gender diversity by Marcus Noland, Tyler Moran, and Barbara Kotschwar for the Peterson Institute for International Economics released earlier this year says there is a positive correlation between the presence of women in corporate leadership and performance "in a magnitude that is not small." The " Women on Boards" study performed by MSCI is more concrete in declaring the benefits of gender diversity."Companies in the MSCI World Index with strong female leadership generated a Return on Equity of 10.1% per year versus 7.4% for those without," the study states[11].

The objective of this study is to identify organizational best practices for placing women in leadership roles. This literature review provides context for the topic and its relevance. The conversation regarding diverse workforces has evolved throughout the past 70 years. Requirements created by equal employment opportunity legislation stimulated change while framing diversity as a compliance concern. In recent years, corporate considerations regarding diversity have advanced from legal compliance to workplace inclusion. This shift in organizational priorities can be attributed to a growing understanding of diversity's direct and indirect implications for business results. The study will be undertaken on coceptual and Emperical literature available on the subjects[12].

Conceptual Literature. The study will cover the historical socio cultural practices prevelent in India and how the Indian Society has evolved especially with respect to the staus of women. The mandates of the Constitutional provisions on equality and provisioning of equal opportunity irrespective of caste, creed, colour and race will be revisted. The legislation governing corporates on employment of women in senior position would be an area of study.
The concepts on best management practices, workplace diversity, gender diversity in the workforce, barriers to women in leadership in business, and organizational gender diversity initiatives will be examined. This section will discuss material/publications, etc. in the Indian context, which may be of relevance to the area of diversity in the workplace. The study will examine, in particular, what the Indian Government and Private Companies have done to address the issues of gender diversity and how they have worked to reduce the gender gap , e.g., Kellogs, have done over recent years by way of addressing the area of diversity and equality in the workplace.

Empirical Literature. The data from various organisations would be collected to study how women in leadership roles have impacted the orgaisations growth. Empirical studies on gender diversity in leadership roles offer crucial insights into both the challenges women encounter and the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at promoting gender equity.

A study by **McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org (2021)** provided quantitative data from over 400 companies and 65,000 employees, revealing that women, especially women of color, are underrepresented at every level of corporate leadership. The study found that although women make up 48% of entry-level employees, only 24% occupy C-suite positions. The research also highlighted the "broken rung" at the first step up to management as a major contributor to this imbalance, indicating a structural flaw in promotion practices that disproportionately affects women.

Hoobler, Lemmon, and Wayne (2014) conducted a longitudinal study across multiple U.S. organizations to explore how supervisor support influences the career advancement of women. Their findings revealed that perceived supervisor support significantly predicted women's promotion rates, suggesting that leadership backing and advocacy are critical for female career progression. The study also emphasized the negative impact of stereotypical beliefs that women are less committed to work due to potential family responsibilities[11].

In a randomized field experiment, **Bohnet, van Geen, and Bazerman (2016)** demonstrated the role of structured processes in reducing gender bias during hiring and promotion. The researchers introduced "blind" evaluation methods in a public policy school's recruitment process and found that when evaluators assessed candidates jointly using standardized criteria, the gender gap in hiring was significantly reduced. This supports the practice of implementing unbiased recruitment and promotion procedures as an effective method to increase women's representation in leadership roles.

Beeson and Valerio (2012) surveyed over 2,000 senior executives to identify what leadership qualities are most associated with promotions. While male and female executives were found to have similar leadership competencies, women reported significantly fewer opportunities to demonstrate these skills in high-stakes roles. The study concluded that organizations must intentionally offer stretch assignments and high-visibility projects to women to ensure they are considered for top leadership roles[12].

Empirical evidence also suggests that mentorship and sponsorship programs can be highly effective in advancing women's leadership. In a multi-national study by **Goleman and Boyatzis (2017)**, organizations that implemented structured mentorship programs saw a 20- 30% increase in female promotions to senior roles. The data emphasized the importance of not only mentorship but also sponsorship, where senior leaders actively advocate for the career advancement of women.

Furthermore, **Diehl and Dzubinski (2016)** conducted qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of women in leadership. Their interviews with female leaders across sectors uncovered persistent barriers such as exclusion from informal networks, lack of access to decision-making circles, and implicit biases that question women's leadership legitimacy. These findings reinforce the need for systemic cultural change within organizations[13].

3. Research methodology

Research supports that businesses which have a inclusive policy and have created equal opportunities for women and men have benefited more than the businesses who have not. A study by sodexo revealed that their business units with gender-balanced management were 13% more likely to deliver consistent organic growth and 23% more likely to show an increase in gross profit. Encouragingly, in FY14 71% of gender-balanced groups saw positive operating profit during the last three consecutive years, versus 60% for others.

This study will addresses a gap in the literature by identifying the organizations which have a gender inclusive policy and encourage worthy women for leadership roles. The selected organizations will be assessed in order to understand their approach to gender diversity, and a final, summative list of best practices will be deduced.

The primary date will be collected by means of interviews of women leaders in corporates, questionnaire to be filled by various companies which have inclusive policies. Case study method will be adopted for few companies to understand the mandates on gender diversity and inclusive policies.

RESEARCH DESIGN: This study seeks to identify best practices. Therefore, the case of companies with best practices will be deduced especially from where renowned women leaders have emerged.

What is the study about?
Studies in the past have revealed that corporates women in leadership roles outperform the corporated which do not have women in decision makng roles. The study will examine the companies which have developed best practices towards creating a gender diverse environment and have an inclusive culture to foster women in leadership roles.

Why is the study being made?
As professional it is incumbent to build on the professional body of knowledge and share the findings and experiences to benefit the society at large. The study will develop an understanding on corealtion between women in leadership roles and better corporate performance. The study would unravel the potential the women have and the impact it can have on economic performance if the company and the nation at large.

Where will the study be carried out?
This study seeks to identify best practices. Therefore, the case of companies with best practices will be deduced especially from where renowned women leaders have emerged.

What type of data is required?
The data required will be primary as well as secondary. The primary data will be collected by way of personal and telephonic interviews and questionnaires.

Where can the required data be found?
The required data will be found with the companies with best practices in gender diversity and inclusion.

What periods of time will the study include?
Since the case study method will be used, which requires intensive investigation of the business units, a sufficiently longer period will be used. A ten years period will be sufficient as it will also indicate how the business units have eveolved.

What will be the sample design?
Deliberate sample design with purposive and non-probabilistic sampling method will be used.

What techniques of data collection will be used? How will the data be analysed?

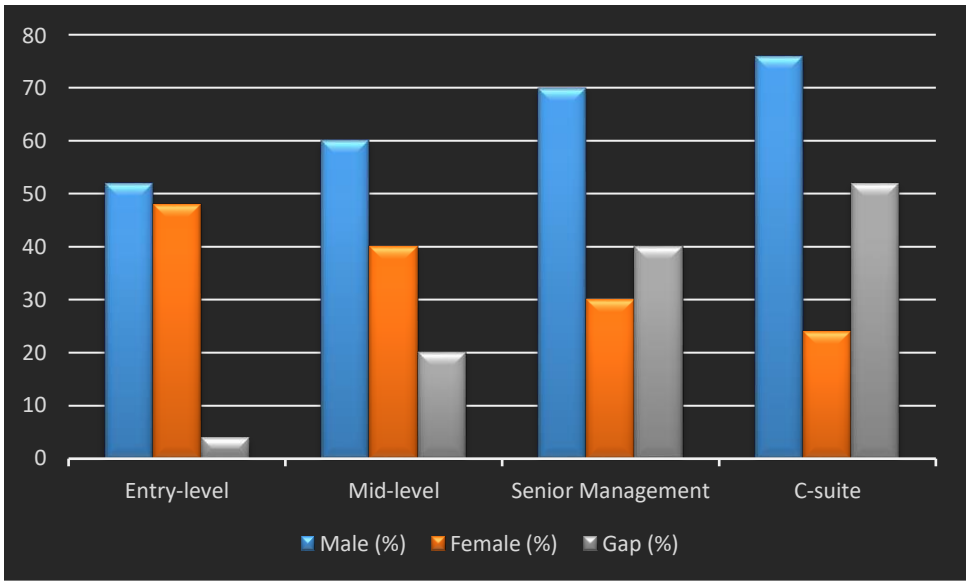
TYPE	METHOD	TECHNIQUE
Library Research/internet Research	(i) Analysis of historical Records (ii) Analysis of documents	Recording of notes, Compilation of statistics

Field Research	(i)Mail Questionnaire (ii)Personal Interview (iii) Focused Interview (iv)Group interview	Identification of attitude of respondednts would be analysed on the subject Use of a detailed schedule with open and closed questions.In focus interview focus on particular effect would be given A group will be interviewd

4. Data analysis and Interpretation

Type	Method	Technique	Analysis	Interpretation
Library/Internet Research	i) Analysis of historical records (ii) Analysis of documents	- Recording of notes - Compilation of statistics	Secondary data was collected from academic journals, government publications, and organizational records. Historical trends and statistics were extracted and organized.	Showed slow but steady progress in policy development for gender inclusion, but actual leadership representation of women remains low. Common barriers include lack of mentorship and gender bias.
Field Research	i) Mail Questionnaire (ii) Personal Interview (iii) Focused Interview (iv) Group Interview	- Attitudes analyzed via closed and open-ended questions - Use of detailed schedules - Thematic focus in interviews	Quantitative data from questionnaires analyzed using percentage and frequency. Qualitative responses coded into themes using content analysis.	Respondents highlighted key challenges like work-life conflict, lack of opportunities, and unconscious bias. Group interviews emphasized the need for inclusive
				Policies and leadership development programs.

Category	Male (%)	Female (%)	Gap (%)
Entry-level	52	48	4
Mid-level	60	40	20
Senior Management	70	30	40
C-suite	76	24	52



The data analysis reveals a consistent decline in female representation as organizational hierarchy increases, highlighting a significant gender disparity in leadership roles. At the entry- level, the gender distribution is relatively balanced, with women constituting 48% of the workforce compared to 52% of men. This balance suggests that organizations are hiring men and women in nearly equal numbers at the initial stages of employment, indicating a strong pipeline of potential female leaders.

However, this balance begins to shift at the mid-level, where female representation drops to 40%, creating a 20% gap compared to male counterparts. This stage marks the onset of gender disparities, likely due to a combination of factors such as limited access to mentorship opportunities, unequal exposure to career-advancing projects, and work-life balance challenges that disproportionately affect women. These barriers become even more pronounced at the senior management level, where only 30% of positions are held by women, compared to 70% by men. This stark 40% gap underscores the presence of structural and cultural barriers—such as unconscious bias, lack of sponsorship, and rigid workplace norms—that hinder the upward mobility of women within organizations.
The disparity reaches its peak at the C-suite level, where only 24% of executive roles are occupied by women, leaving a significant 52% gap. This dramatic decline from entry to executive level illustrates a clear “leaky pipeline” effect, where organizations lose female talent at various stages of career progression. It indicates that despite the growing emphasis on gender diversity, women continue to face substantial obstacles in reaching top leadership positions.

In conclusion, while gender diversity initiatives may have succeeded at the entry level, they are not translating into equitable leadership representation. Organizations must therefore implement more robust and targeted strategies—such as bias-free evaluations, leadership development programs tailored to women, and transparent promotion pathways—to close the leadership gap and foster a more inclusive corporate culture.

5. Discussion and findings

The study aimed to explore the best practices for placing women in leadership roles and to understand the challenges they face in achieving such positions. Through both secondary research and field data collection, several key themes and findings emerged that highlight systemic issues and potential solutions related to gender inclusion in leadership.

The analysis of historical records and documents indicated that, while numerous policies have been introduced to promote gender equity, these efforts often fall short in practice. Despite the presence of diversity and inclusion frameworks in many organizations, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership, especially at the senior and executive levels. The field data supported this observation, showing a significant gender gap that widens progressively from entry-level positions to the C-suite. This pattern suggests that the issue is not merely about hiring more women but about ensuring they are supported and promoted through the leadership pipeline.

One of the major findings was the existence of a “broken rung” in career advancement. Many women reported difficulties in moving from junior to mid-level roles due to a lack of mentorship, sponsorship, and high-visibility projects. The survey and interviews revealed that women often face implicit bias and are perceived as less committed due to caregiving responsibilities, regardless of their performance or qualifications. Additionally, cultural and organizational norms often exclude women from informal networks and decision-making circles, further limiting their opportunities for advancement.

However, the research also uncovered several best practices that have proven effective in addressing these challenges. Structured mentorship and sponsorship programs, transparent performance evaluations, and inclusive leadership training were frequently mentioned as strategies that significantly improved women’s chances of reaching senior roles. Organizations that adopted unbiased promotion processes and provided flexible working conditions were more successful in retaining and advancing female talent.

Another significant finding was the importance of leadership commitment to diversity. In companies where top executives actively supported and modeled inclusive behavior, gender diversity was better integrated into the organizational culture and strategy. On the other hand, in environments where gender diversity was treated as a compliance task rather than a strategic priority, progress was minimal or superficial.

In summary, the findings indicate that while awareness of gender inequality in leadership is growing, substantial work remains to be done. Barriers such as unconscious bias, lack of structural support, and cultural inertia continue to impede women’s progress. Effective interventions must go beyond surface-level policies and address the deeper systemic and attitudinal issues that prevent women from reaching their full leadership potential.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and the multifaceted challenges they face in attaining such positions. Despite progress in promoting gender diversity at the entry level, significant gaps remain as women advance through the organizational hierarchy. The findings reveal that structural barriers, unconscious bias, lack of mentorship and sponsorship, and exclusion from informal networks are among the primary factors hindering women's leadership progression. However, the research also identifies a range of effective practices—such as transparent promotion policies, inclusive leadership development programs, and strong executive commitment to gender equity—that can help bridge this gap. For meaningful and sustainable change, organizations must move beyond token efforts and embed gender inclusion into their strategic vision, culture, and daily operations. Only then can workplaces become truly

equitable, allowing women to contribute and thrive at all levels of leadership.

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