



Review Article

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# Women's Leadership Progression in India: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda on Enablers, Barriers, and Emerging Trends

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades participation of women in the Indian workforce has significantly expanded, supported by increment in economic liberation, urbanization, educational attainment, and access to professional employment. Regardless of all these gains, senior managerial, executive, and strategic leadership positions are less represented by females across sectors. This systematic review examines the literature on women's career progression toward leadership positions in India, focusing enablers, barriers, and emerging trends. The study integrated evidence from studies across various sectors such as, public institutions, entrepreneurship, corporate organisations, banking, healthcare etc. The study is based on the PRISMA framework and a total of 20 studies were included from several databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Emerald, and SpringerLink. Results indicate that career continuity challenges, structural barriers, organisational practices, and socio-cultural expectations influence women's career progression. Issues like unequal access to mentoring or sponsorship, limited networking opportunities, work & family pressures, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and gender stereotypes were also observed persistently. At the same time, leadership development programs, inclusive organisational culture, entrepreneurship ecosystems, digital transformation, policy reforms, and flexible work arrangements are creating new opportunities for advancement. Findings also suggest that gender-diverse leadership is positively associated with governance quality, organisational performance, and innovation. The study concludes that improving women's leadership representation in India is an economic necessity and social equity imperative. To create equal leadership pathways and to gain sustainable progress, coordinated actions by policymakers, organisations, educational institutions, and society.

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity among the people at leadership positions is still a debatable topic in organisations and amid policy makers. The key focus of aspects of diversity is gender representation, still some studies highlight the underrepresentation of women at leadership or managerial roles. To achieve long-term sustainability, increased innovation, and improved decision-making skills, various organisations globally prioritise inclusive leadership teams (Hoyt & Simon, 2017). However, India

is experiencing rapid shift in social dynamics, economic growth, massive talent pool, and enhanced growth in the economic front. Despite all these upliftments, the number of women leaders is still low. In the past 30 years, new job opportunities for women have opened up significantly due to urbanization, economic liberalization, accessibility of higher education, and digitalization. In recent scenarios, women are successful in all the sectors like, healthcare, banking, education, law, public administration, media,

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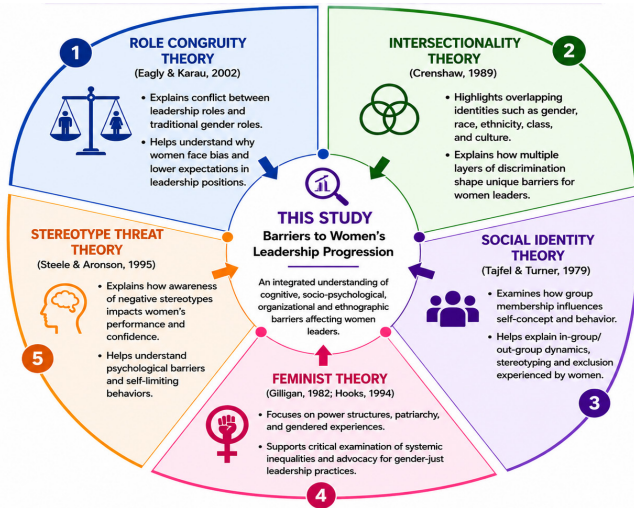


Fig 1: Theory Integration Wheel

business, politics etc. Some of them hold leadership positions in politics, academia, and business. Despite all these achievements, women are still overburdened with family and societal responsibilities, which shows default in the functioning of the system. It is still very difficult for the women employees to move up in the hierarchy (LinkedIn & TQH, 2024). Factors such as skill set, education, exposure, less career gaps, and clear path for advancement, are involved to achieve leadership position. Attaining it will

never be considered as a single step process, it's a journey altogether, and for women this journey is full of challenges, which includes institutional norms, family and child caretaking, societal expectations, and mobility limitations. Although, journeys of male employees towards leadership positions vary a lot as compared to females (Singh & Durga Prasad, 2014).

Women face challenges at various levels of their career progression. They often perform operational roles and support, at the entry level, as compared to more strategic decision-making roles, which creates difficulty in performing executive roles. Hence, it results in less promotions and restrain them to take leadership positions. Continuous career trajectories, informal networking, or long working hours, are majorly influenced by the promotion system. In an organisation, more masculine culture can influence the perceptions of authority and competence (Cubillo & Brown, 2003). There are various stereotypes associated with a person at a leadership position, which people judge on social and psychological levels. It includes decisiveness, assertiveness and authority, which indicates that these traits must have been attained by a male person. On the contrary, caring and community-oriented traits are associated with females, which highlights a concept of "double bind". According to this concept researchers highlighted that women with collaborative mind-set will not be considered as a potential candidate for a leadership position while, if they

Table 1: Studies Included in the PRISMA-based Systematic Review

Author	Year	Methodology	Barrier Identified
Cubillo & Brown	2003	Qualitative analysis	Glass ceiling barriers
Govt. of India	2006	Policy report	Patriarchy, discrimination
Weeden	2005	Secondary data analysis	Work-life balance
UNNATI/IDRC	2009	Qualitative study	Patriarchal norms
Madsen et al.	2011	Program evaluation	Organizational culture
Mahapatra & Gupta	2013	Qualitative interviews	Organizational stereotyping
Singh & Durga Prasad	2014	Exploratory study	Work-life balance
Awang-Hashim et al.	2016	Review study	Glass ceiling
Hoyt & Simon	2017	Social-psychological framework	Stereotype threat & implicit bias
Maheshwari	2021	Literature Review	Institutional & socio-political
Singh	2022	Review of 64 studies	Socio-economic
Islam et al.	2023	Interviews	Socio-cultural
Page et al.	2024	Empirical study	Institutional
Banker	2024	Empirical study	Organizational constraints
Sahay et al.	2024	Empirical study	Gender bias
LinkedIn & TQH	2024	Large-scale survey	Organisational biases
Kumar et al.	2025	Survey	Gender inequality

are assertive, they may also face social backlash (Hoyt & Simon, 2017). These concepts change people's perspective about themselves, their decision-making skills, their leadership styles and ultimately their willingness to take on roles at higher hierarchy.

Societal expectations are still very much important in Indian context, expectations such as child rearing, elderly care giving, and household chores are still expected to be done by women. It is expected from them to balance it all with their career pathway, which is not a fair sharing of roles and responsibilities. There is already a lot on their plate and leadership positions demand prolonged working hours, relocation, continuous presence even if there is family emergency, or travelling. This results in the decisions of avoiding taking up leadership roles, slower career trajectories, career breaks, and leaving jobs abruptly and makes it difficult to reach the leadership position (Singh, 2022). As leadership positions require experience and a steady career, it becomes more challenging for women to reach and be eligible for taking up executive roles. There are sectoral differences as majorly women work in academia, finance, banking and healthcare sectors at the middle management levels. They still lack the administrative and executive position. The alternative route is entrepreneurship, with setting autonomous leadership roles (Maheshwari, 2021). In India, intersectionality also plays a major role in women's career progression. Tier III and IV cities are more traditional as compared to Tier I and II in healthcare facilities, professional networks and workplace culture. Similarly, class, caste, education, marital status and language also influence the eligibility of leadership positions (Singh, 2022).

Now-a-days organisations are inclined towards creating a more inclusive environment by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), flexible working hours, work from home, women leadership development, formal mentoring, and returnship programs. These programs help women to get more jobs, but the presence of women in leadership roles is still growing very slowly, as per the recent corporate data (LinkedIn & TQH, 2024). Studies suggested that women in leadership positions have favorable correlation with the performance of the organisation, especially in an inclusive work environment (Sahay *et al.*, 2024). Advancement in women leadership roles still needs to be achieved, subject matter of research should also cover various unexplored sectors, areas, or barriers, to attain a complete picture. This study focuses on cross-sectoral comparison, identification of recurring themes, and acknowledgement of multiple barriers.

### Theoretical overview

Figure 1 illustrates the key theoretical lenses that inform the studies on barriers in the women's career progression in leadership pathway.

In the past years, a lot of research was conducted on women leadership, career progression, and glass ceiling. Based on inclusion and exclusion criteria 20 studies (see Table 1) were selected from 2003-2025.

A study conducted by Cubillo and Brown (2003) highlighted the role of women at leadership positions in academics through qualitative analysis. Findings identified glass ceiling barriers that restrict horizontal and vertical mobility. A report by the Government of India (2006) explored the impact of policies on women empowerment. The report identifies gaps in implementation and analyzes gender equality. Findings showcase continued discrimination and inequality among women, with wage disparities and less participation in the workforce. Weeden (2005) analysed flexible working hours and wage outcomes in the labour market, and introduced the concept of "flexiglass ceiling", which depicts the relationship between flexibility and women empowerment, whether it truly affects women empowerment. The study also addresses policies related to work-life balance. The study by UNNATI/IDRC (2009) reported participation of women in local politics of Rajasthan. It concludes that women candidates are still underrepresented despite the constitutional policies, due to socio-cultural barriers like societal restrictions and patriarchy. Madsen *et al.* (2011) studied the women at leadership positions in the education sector, it concluded that till now there are limited women at leadership roles but the number of women having jobs in academia increases. Mahapatra and Gupta (2013) also examined women in the education sector, a qualitative analysis was performed in the Indian context, highlighting the drastic transformation of women in society. The study showcases the role of women to overcome socio-cultural barriers and attain leadership positions. The study by Singh and Durga Prasad (2014) analysed women's challenges at managerial roles. The research focuses on "leaking pipeline" which means the dropping out situation of women before reaching to a leadership position, this drop out is due to challenges in work-life management. Awang-Hashim *et al.* (2016) also investigated challenges faced by women at managerial level with gender disparity majorly in higher education. The study highlighted male dominance in higher education, "glass ceiling", gender bias, and structural inequalities. Hoyt & Simon (2017) studied socio-psychological perspectives of women in leadership roles. It focuses on challenges like gender perception, contextual influences, and stereotypes influence on women's career progression and opportunities. Gender differences were also highlighted in the research as they depend on societal norms as compared to the potential of the individual. These norms demand women to follow societal beliefs rather than following the leadership roles, as they are aligned to masculinity which creates cognitive barriers among women. A study by Maheshwari (2021) highlighted a systematic review on internal and external



barriers for women in leadership roles. Internal barriers like self-perception, stereotypes, and gender bias issues, whereas external barriers are institutional, cultural, and socio-political factors. Singh (2022) performed exploratory research focused on the women's leadership roles in developing countries like India and Asia. The study highlighted religious, socio-economic, and cultural factors that affect women's leadership roles, highlighting that women's leadership roles are shaped by communal belief systems and religion. Women are expected to balance between modern and traditional expectations. Islam et al. (2023) also analysed women's participation in leadership roles in higher educational institutions. The findings suggest more organisational, personal, and socio-cultural barriers through qualitative methods like in-depth Interviews and focus groups. Organisational barriers are poor promotion practices, and recruitment biases. Personal barriers are low confidence and family responsibilities. Socio-cultural barriers are communal expectations and gender norms. Page et al., (2024) studied organisational and structural barriers in women leadership roles that influence gender biases across levels in a hierarchy. The study highlights the "tickle-down effect," which means higher the number of women at managerial level, motivates women at lower levels to enhance performance to achieve managerial positions. The study by Banker (2024) also examined leadership roles at higher education institutions (HEIs). Focus of the study was on the institutional dynamics, leadership styles and structures over participation. The study highlights that women in higher education institutes are not limited to academia but extends to academic engagement, apply innovation in academia, and intellectual simulation. Sahay et al. (2024) examined female leadership in the Indian context, focusing on the organisational and personal barriers. Findings indicate that women's participation in leadership roles has a positive impact on organisational outcomes, despite having top managerial positions. The report by LinkedIn & TQH (2024) examined women's leadership trends in the corporate sector of India, by utilising a high amount of data. Findings showed 24% in 2016 to 27% in 2024 enhancement in women representation to take up jobs. However, 17% to 19% increase in women taking up leadership positions. Persistent gender gaps, structural barriers, and limited career progression opportunities were also observed. Kumar et al. (2025) evaluated the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives on sustainable development goals in Northern India. The study focused on gender equality as one of the key SDGs. The findings showed a 78.6% improvement in socio-economic indicators. CSR initiatives contributed to rural development and sustainability.

**Objectives**

- To identify studies related to women's career progression through PRISMA framework

- To deduce various themes from the selected studies
- To identify the challenges and areas of development in women's leadership progression

**Research Methodology**

The research is based on the PRISMA framework for replicable, transparent, and systematic review processes. It is used for the reduction of selection bias through structured processes for identifying, screening, determining eligibility, and including evidence. The study is focused on women's career progression into administrative, entrepreneurial, managerial, executive, academic, and public leadership positions. Various academic databases were searched for the studies included, which includes conference papers, peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, policy reports etc.

**Compiled by Author**

The research included recent studies and past studies for conceptual grounds. Firstly, the review process includes finding relevant studies by searching databases with keywords and zero records duplicacy. Secondly, for relevance abstract and titles were checked. Thirdly, based on the inclusion criteria, full text articles were shortlisted, and lastly 20 studies were finalised for the final sample of the study (see Fig 2).

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The study included research focused on women's career progression, advancement, promotion, or leadership. Researches carried out in India or countries with similar economic and social landscape were shortlisted. All these

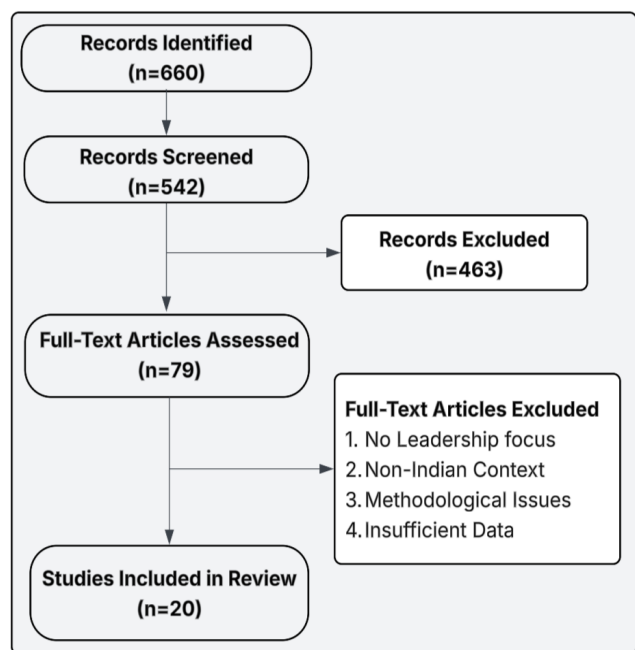


Fig 2: Study Selection Process (PRISMA)

**Table 2:** Search Strategy

<i>Component</i>	<i>Description</i>
Databases Used	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Emerald, SpringerLink
Additional Sources	Government Reports, LinkedIn Reports, NCAER Reports, Institutional Publications
Search Period	2003–2025
Search Keywords	Women leadership India, women career progression, female executives India, women managers India, women in leadership positions, gender diversity leadership India
Document Type	Articles, Reviews, Reports, Conference Papers
Geographic Focus	India (with relevant global comparative studies)
Final Included Studies	20 Studies

researches are articles, reports, reviews, and conference papers from peer-reviewed journals or institutions, and are in English and published between 2003 and 2025 (see Table 2) Included studies must have meaningful evidence from originality, existing literature review, and theoretical frameworks. Studies focused on women's career progression in leadership roles, sectors such as corporate settings, healthcare, education, education, entrepreneurship, or public administration. Duplicate entries, papers without full-text, lack of actual evidence, not written in English and research with gender issues focused on other than professional or organisational settings were excluded for the study.

### Thematic Findings

The research leads to various themes such as expectation of the society, challenges faced in the organisation, leadership representation gap, stagnant mid-career, new opportunities of career and sectoral differences. Societal expectation includes difficulties in relocation, marriages and child rearing. Challenges like evaluation biases, limited opportunities, networking, and lack of sponsorship are the organisational barriers for women's career progression. Higher number of women in workforce but less women in senior leadership roles highlights representation gap. Due to childcare and limited career growth opportunities, many women leave or become stagnant at the mid-career level. Findings show that new career opportunities such as entrepreneurship, flexible working hours, work-from-home, digital careers. Sectors like governance, finance, and manufacturing have higher numbers of male employees and education and health sectors have more females.

### Research Gaps

Research focusing on the career of Indian women is limited, lack of sectoral comparison, less studies in Tier-2 & Tier-3 cities, intersectionality (caste, class, disabilities and regional) studies are limited, insufficient quantitative research on promotion in women's career, and lack of digital and hybrid leadership careers.

## DISCUSSION

The study helped to understand the challenges faced by women in their career progression, and trends and factors helped in their journey of becoming leaders in their respective fields in India (Catalyst, 2020; Nair & Pandey, 2023). In the current context, women's participation in the workforce (managerial and executive staff) is less, despite the enhancement in literacy levels of women in organizations in India (McKinsey & Company, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). This highlights that it is very difficult for women to reach higher in the levels of hierarchy, even with all the skills and education required for the job role. The systematic review highlights the challenges faced by women in their career progression, these challenges are both negative and positive, also indicates the efforts made by the organisations to boost women participation in leadership roles (Terjesen & Singh, 2008; Khandelwal, 2020). Special programs for women leaders, programs for mentor and sponsorship, DEI strategies, opportunities for women returning back to work, and flexible working hours (Sabarwal, 2015; Deloitte, 2022). These programs help to identify talent among women for leadership roles if these programs are executed smoothly (Hewlett, 2013; NASSCOM, 2022). Majorly, in Indian society flexible and hybrid work schedules have more relevance (Baporikar, 2021; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004).

The review indicates the vital role of household/ childcare responsibilities, hour-long travel time, and safety issues in shaping the career pathways of Indian women in the past (Radhakrishnan, 2009; Sharma & Dhar, 2020). Such working conditions demand lower physical presence, and help overcome these traditional constraints, resulting in more accessibility to leadership positions among Indian women (ILO, 2021; Mishra & Thakur, 2023). Additionally, review of literature highlights the lack of female role models (Ibara *et al.*, 2013; Chanana, 2022). It is also recorded that women at senior positions in government institutions, business, universities and entrepreneurship, tend to analyse old beliefs and expand



the horizon of opportunities for other females (Nair, 2020; Vyas & Bhatt, 2021). This can create a trickle-down effect, in which visibility of females at senior levels of hierarchy, inspire other members of the organisation to develop an environment for more female leaders (Khandelwal, 2020; Catalyst, 2020). The review indicates that less number of women leaders is not due to lack of skills, education, motivation or capabilities of women employees (Eagly & Carli, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2023). The issue lies in the structural barriers, male dominant leadership board, and societal pressure of responsibilities, which causes hindrance in female employee's career development (Ibarra et al., 2013; Sharma & Dhar, 2020; Nair & Pandey, 2023). However, a degree of interdependency was observed among these factors which creates accumulative effect and makes it more difficult for the women to move forward for the executive roles as compared to males (Bhattacharya & Sahay, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2024), specifically in Indian society (Khandelwal, 2020; Vyas & Bhatt, 2021).

In recent scenarios, the education level of women has grown significantly due to digitalisation, and the thought process of new employees changes the whole process of workflow. Similarly, organisations also are more inclined towards having diversity in the working staff (NASSCOM, 2022; ILO, 2021; Deloitte, 2022). Despite all the challenges, tangible results can be achieved with the right approach by the higher authorities, which can create a smooth pathway for the succeeding employees (Sabharwal, 2015; Mishra & Thakur, 2023). Findings suggest that the enhancement of women leaders is dependent on two factors i.e., underappreciated potential, and ingrained restrictions (Catalyst, 2020; Chanana, 2022). It is equally important to acknowledge the problems faced by women leaders, as they are deeply rooted in the societal norms, organisational setup, and political shortcomings that developed over time (Radhakrishnan, 2009; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Moreover, change is not impossible (Terjesen & Singh, 2008; Nair, 2020). In terms of leadership roles, India can easily transform the number of women at leadership positions as we acquire enough resources to facilitate such transformations, to achieve equality between different genders for leadership roles (Baporikar, 2021; Hewlett, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in India is not indicative of lack of skills, education, or motivation, but rather tends to be a combination of complex structural barriers which also includes personal and societal constraints (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Mskinsey & Company, 2023). Despite an increase in the literacy rate and digitalization strengthening the capabilities of the female workforce, women persistently encounter the 'glass ceiling barriers' imposed by

stereotyped societal structures and conventional domestic obligations (Ibarra et al., 2013; Sharma & Dhar, 2020). The present study emphasizes that the transformation is attainable through intentional and organizational changes. By rectifying structural deficiencies, the nation's leadership dynamics can be reshaped and attain the sustainable development goal of gender equality.

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