Women Leadership and It's Barriers : a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Women leadership has become a prominent topic in recent decades. Many women have attained leadership positions in various fields, including business, politics, and government. However, women continue to face numerous obstacles in achieving leadership roles. This article examines the barriers to women leadership across various sectors based on literature from the past five years. The objective is to identify trends in barriers across sectors and countries, as well as changes in barrier trends over time. Researchers identified, analyzed, evaluated, and interpreted findings from twenty-six research articles published between 2020 and 2024 using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. The results indicate that the overarching barriers to women leadership across countries and sectors are gender inequality, lack of opportunities from organizations, and family responsibilities. Thus far, no significant changes in barrier trends have been found in each sector over the past five years.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, attention has been given to the importance of women's leadership across various fields. As the world continues striving for gender equality, the role of women in positions of power and leadership has become a primary focus. However, awareness about the benefits of having women in leadership roles is still perceived as lacking.

Discussions about barriers to women's leadership careers are closely tied to gender equality theory. Gender equality is a broad concept that encompasses equal enjoyment of rights, opportunities, and resources by all individuals, regardless of gender. This includes equality in education, healthcare, economic participation, political representation, and social involvement.

The movement for gender equality has evolved over centuries. In the 19th century, women activists began advocating for rights such as suffrage, employment, and education. In the 20th century, feminism emerged as a strong social movement, sounding gender equality across various domains. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, the opportunities for women leaders across sectors only 30%.

Global Gender Gap Report 2023 by the World Economic Forum also stated that the number of women leaders increased from 31.1% in 2016 to 32.6% in 2022 but declined to 32.2% in 2023. The sectors with the highest number of women leaders are healthcare, education, and government.

(Van Spall et al., 2021) noted that one of the primary barriers women face is limited access in opportunities for growth and professional advancement. These limitations often stem from systemic biases and societal expectations that disadvantage women in career progression. Additionally, women frequently encounter a lack of mentorship and sponsorship, which are crucial for navigating the complexities of leadership roles and advancing their careers (Pincha Baduge et al., 2024).

Another significant barrier is the prevalence of gender biases and stereotypes that continue to shape perceptions of leadership (Gödderz & Calanchini, 2023). Women in leadership positions often experience unfair scrutiny and are held to higher standards compared to their male counterparts, making it more challenging to gain recognition and respect for their leadership abilities (Almalki et al., 2024). Furthermore, societal expectations for women to fulfill traditional gender roles create additional obstacles for those aspiring to leader positions, as they often face skepticism and resistance.

Several studies also suggest that a lack of family support for women's careers becomes a hindrance for female leaders aiming to achieve higher career levels (Harris et al., 2021)(Almalki et al., 2024).

These barriers not only impede individual women's progress but also result in a lack of diversity in leadership, which in turn has broad implications for organizational performance and innovation.

Research on the effectiveness of women's leadership has yielded mixed results. Some studies indicate no significant differences in leadership effectiveness between men and women. Others suggest that women's leadership can be associated with better organizational performance, particularly in terms of innovation and employee satisfaction (Ciappei et al., 2023).

This study aims to examine the barriers faced by women leaders across various sectors based on scholarly literature from the past five years. The goal is to compare the barriers to women's leadership based on year, country, and organizational sector, and to determine whether there have been changing in trends of barriers faced in each sector over time. This will help identify appropriate solutions to address these issues effectively.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a systematic literature review approach based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (see Figure 1). The articles were selected through a series of filtering stages.

First, the researchers selected ScienceDirect as the academic database and used the keywords women leadership and barriers, resulting in 16,672 articles. The researchers then narrowed the selection to articles published within the last five years (2020–2024), eliminating 9,776 articles.

Second, further screening reduced the dataset to 6,896 relevant articles. Articles with restricted access were excluded at this stage, leading to the elimination of 4,539 articles.

Third, the researchers excluded 2,320 articles due to content inconsistencies with the keywords and removed 11 duplicate articles. Ultimately, 26 articles were deemed suitable for analysis in this study.

The analysis process involved categorizing the papers into several domains: publication year (see Figure 2), country (see Figure 3), and organizational background (see Figure 4).

Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram of Articles Included in the Systematic Literature Review
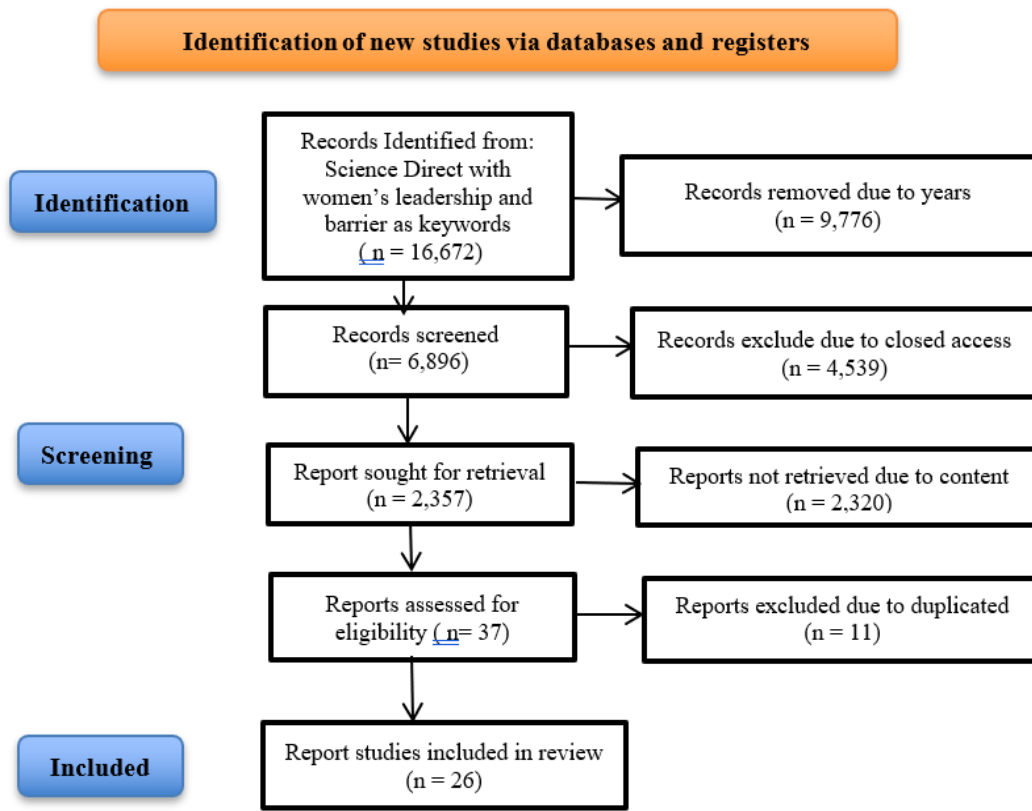
Identification of new studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records Identified from: Science Direct with women's leadership and barrier as keywords (n = 16,672) → Records removed due to years (n = 9,776)

Records screened (n= 6,896) → Records exclude due to closed access (n = 4,539)

Screening

Report sought for retrieval (n = 2,357) → Reports not retrieved due to content (n = 2,320)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n= 37) → Reports excluded due to duplicated (n = 11)

Included

Report studies included in review (n = 26)

Figure 2: Number of Studies Based on Year of Publication.

Year of Publication

Year	Number
2020	2
2021	8
2022	4
2023	8
2024	4
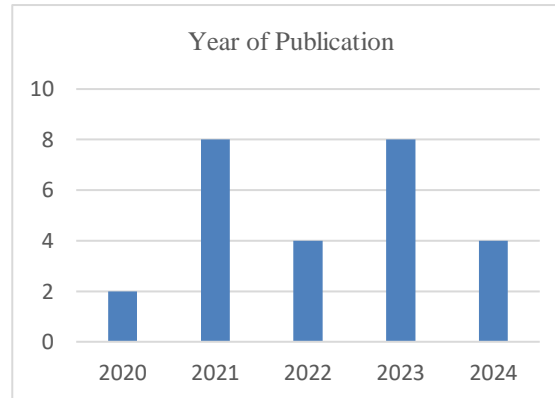
Figure 3: Number of Studies Based on Countries of Research

Countries of Research
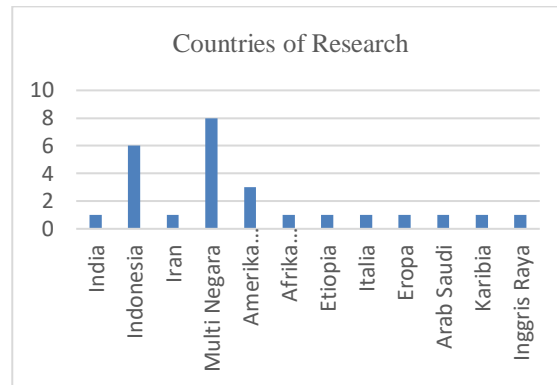
Figure 4: Number of Studies Based on Organizational Backgrounds
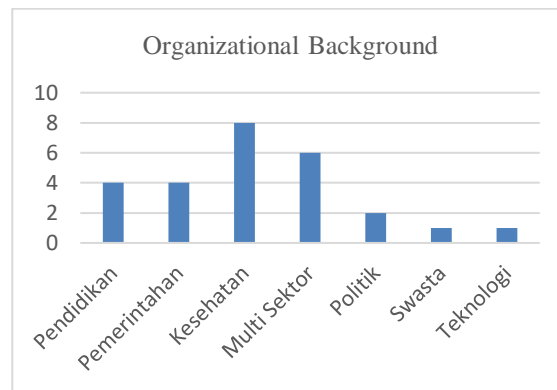

Organizational Background

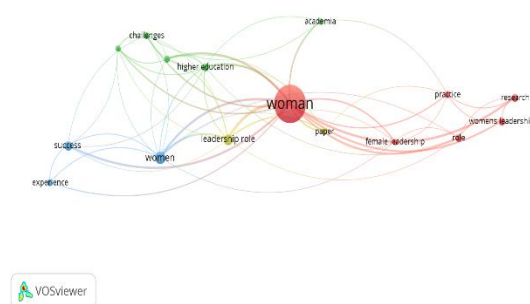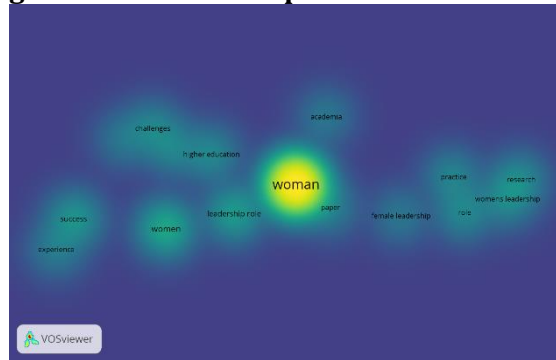**Figure 5: Thematic Map of women leadership**

Figure 6: Thematic Map of women leadership

Based on the VOSviewer thematic map visualization in Figures 5 and 6, it can be observed that there is a limited amount of research conducted on women's leadership from the perspective of barriers. It makes this research even more compelling as it can fill the existing research gap.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study found that the primary barriers to women's leadership across various sectors in the past five years are gender inequality, lack of organizational opportunities, and the burden of family responsibilities.

Gender inequality is a global issue referring to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender. Gender inequality in women's leadership has several negative consequences. When women are denied the opportunity to reach their full potential as leaders, organizations and societies lose valuable talent and potential. The lack of female representation in leadership positions can lead to suboptimal decision-making in organizations due to the absence of women's perspectives and experiences.

(McLaren et al., 2019) identified three categories of barriers to women's leadership in the public sector: gender bias, lack of institutional policy support, and concerns about family support for careers. Gender inequality in women's leadership represents a form of discrimination and a violation of rights, which can hinder development indicators (Mia Siscawati, Shelly Adelina, Ruth Eveline, 2020).

In education, (Van Spall et al., 2021) found that systemic sexism results in women's achievements being undervalued. Women receive less research funding, and their research is often subject to more critical reviews. (Cahyati et al., 2021) revealed organizational discrimination against women aspiring to top positions and the burden of family responsibilities.

In healthcare, (Harris et al., 2021) noted that female physicians feel a lack of support in achieving work-life balance and escaping gender bias. The sector continues to face challenges such as underrepresentation of women, limited opportunities for professional development through scholarships or sponsorships, and difficulties integrating work and family life (Sharma et al., 2021). Women often struggle with low self-confidence and family conflicts, which can lead to challenges in both their personal and professional lives (Majidipour et al., 2022).

(Mousa et al., 2021) identified five organizational interventions in healthcare to support women's leadership: organizational processes, awareness and engagement, mentoring and networking, leadership development, and support systems.

In multi-sector and multi-country studies, the concept of the "glass cliff" has been identified as a risk faced by women when entering leadership positions. The "glass cliff" describes situations where women are promoted to leadership roles during periods of organizational crisis (Rodríguez-

Fernández et al., 2021). While the number of women on boards has increased, they are often assigned responsibilities in challenging situations (Sánchez-Teba et al., 2021).

Research in South Africa's multi-sectors by (Amaro & Scheepers, 2023) showed that negative performance assessments of women result from unconscious institutional gender bias. Meanwhile, (Dahlum et al., 2022) found in political sectors across multiple countries that policies often prioritize economic performance over issues of justice and equality in representation, inclusion, and protection of women's rights.

In education, (Galizzi et al., 2024)highlighted that patriarchal culture significantly influences women's academic careers. Bureaucracy and limited resource allocation hinder women's leadership roles in universities (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023).

In countries with strong traditional gender stereotypes, women are underrepresented in the workforce, especially in managerial positions (Gödderz & Calanchini, 2023). (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023) noted that corporate leaders often lack awareness of the metaphors describing women's leadership barriers, reinforcing career obstacles for women.

The "glass ceiling" phenomenon remains evident, with women's performance becoming noticeable only when they are in the majority within an organization (Ciappei et al., 2023). The underrepresentation of women in leadership has significant negative consequences for organizations and society as a whole. However, (Ciappei et al., 2023) emphasized that women play a crucial role in enhancing organizational outcomes, including improved audit quality, increased transparency, better communication, and greater emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable environmental practices.

In politics, empowering women can improve governance quality, and good governance can, in turn, enhance women's empowerment (Hernández, 2023).

Despite some progress, organizational support for women's leadership remains insufficient. For instance, women in healthcare still lack opportunities for self-development training (Pincha Baduge et al., 2024).

In the private sector, (Lo Bue & Martínez-Zarzoso, 2024) found that key factors causing productivity gaps include significant business barriers faced by women-led enterprises, such as difficulty accessing financing, an unfavorable political environment, and limited access to electricity. A lack of family support can make women feel insecure about taking on leadership roles, causing them to doubt their abilities and hesitate to face new challenges. Women with insufficient family support may experience excessive stress and burnout (Almalki et al., 2024) making it difficult to focus on work and effectively fulfill their leadership responsibilities. Family support deficiencies also increase the risk of emotional and physical exhaustion, potentially forcing women to abandon their leadership aspirations. Balancing work and personal life becomes particularly challenging for women without family support (Almalki et al., 2024).

Table 1: Trends in Barriers to Women's Leadership Across Sectors (2020–2024)

Health	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequal		v	v		v
Lack of Oppotunity		v	v		v
Family Responsibility		v	v	v	v
Pendidikan	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequal				v	
Lack of Oppotunity		v		v	
Family Responsibility		v			

Pemerintah	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequality	v		v		
Lack of Oppotunity	v				v
Family Responsibility	v				
Politik	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequality					
Lack of Oppotunity			v	v	
Family Responsibility					
Swasta	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequality					
Lack of Oppotunity					v
Family Responsibility					
Teknologi	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequality					
Lack of Oppotunity				v	
Family Responsibility					
Multi sektor	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gender Inequality		v	v	v	
Lack of Oppotunity		v		v	
Family Responsibility		v			

Literature studies reveal trends in barriers to women's leadership across various countries over the past five years (see Table 1):

a. **In the healthcare sector:** Barriers have remained consistent over the past five years.
b. **In the education sector:** There has been a shift in barriers from a lack of organizational opportunities and family responsibilities to gender inequality and a lack of organizational opportunities.
c. **In the government sector:** There has been a shift in barriers from gender inequality, a lack of organizational opportunities, and family responsibilities to primarily a lack of organizational opportunities.
d. **In the political sector:** Research remains very limited, making it difficult to observe changes in trends.
e. **In the private sector:** Research is also very limited, making it challenging to identify trends in barriers.
f. **In the technology sector:** Research remains scarce, making it difficult to assess changes in barriers.
g. **In multi-sector studies:** There has been a shift in barriers from gender inequality, a lack of organizational opportunities, and family responsibilities to gender inequality and a lack of organizational opportunities.
h. **Changes in trends across countries:** It is difficult to analyze due to the limited literature available, making it challenging to compare trends across sectors over the years.

A series of efforts is still required to address the barriers to women's leadership:

a. **From the government side:** Strengthen policies on gender equality.
b. **From the organizational side:** Provide leadership opportunities for women, encourage women's participation in decision-making, and build women's organizational networks.

c. **From the family side:** Provide support to ensure women receive a good education, opportunities for personal development, and emotional support to take on leadership roles.

CONCLUSION

The research conducted across different countries and organizational sectors still shows barriers to women's leadership overall. The main barriers to women's leadership are gender inequality, lack of opportunities within organizations, and conflicts with family responsibilities. Over the past five years, no significant changes have been found in these barriers. This systematic literature review has several limitations, including limited access to available literature sources (as the researcher only used open-access sources), limited research on women's leadership in the political, technology, and private sectors, and a restricted distribution of research across countries. Further studies could be conducted to address these limitations.

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