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Global Trends In Women's Leadership Research Across the Business Sector

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ABSTRACT

This study maps the global development of women's leadership research in the business sector and synthesizes the key barriers, leadership styles, and success factors associated with women leaders. A systematic literature review following the PRISMA guidelines was conducted, combined with bibliometric analysis to map research trends and thematic structures. The findings indicated a significant increase in publications over the past decade, with research emphasizing structural barriers such as the glass ceiling and gender bias. The Glass Ceiling and Gender Bias concept was the most frequently applied lens. The synthesis highlights those factors shaping women's leadership in confronting the glass ceiling, including barriers to advancement, leadership style, facilitators of success, and strategies for breaking through structural barriers.

SARI PATI

Penelitian ini memetakan perkembangan global terkait penelitian kepemimpinan perempuan di sektor bisnis serta mengekspolarasi hambatan utama, gaya kepemimpinan, dan faktor keberhasilan yang terkait dengan para pemimpin perempuan. Tinjauan literatur sistematis dilakukan dengan mengikuti pedoman PRISMA lalu dikombinasikan dengan analisis bibliometrik untuk memetakan tren penelitian dan struktur tematik. Temuan dalam penelitian ini menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam jumlah publikasi selama dekade terakhir, dengan penelitian yang menekankan hambatan struktural seperti glass ceiling dan bias gender. Konsep glass ceiling dan bias gender merupakan kerangka analisis yang paling sering digunakan. Penelitian ini menyoroti faktor-faktor kepemimpinan perempuan dalam menghadapi glass ceiling, termasuk hambatan dalam kemajuan karier, gaya kepemimpinan, faktor pendorong kesuksesan, serta strategi untuk menembus hambatan struktural.

INTRODUCTION

The global gender equality gap in the workplace stands at 68.5%, meaning that 32% of global companies are still dominated by male participation, and it is estimated that it will take approximately 134 years to achieve full gender equality, with progress slowing each year (World Economic Forum, 2024). At the C-Suite level, the CEO position remains heavily dominated by men, with women CEOs accounting for only 6% (Marks, 2024). This phenomenon is also evident in Indonesia, where women hold only 1 in 4 leadership positions (26%) of the total leadership roles in companies (World Economic Forum, 2024)

The challenges women face in reaching top positions in companies are referred to as the glass ceiling. These barriers or challenges often arise from stereotypes of masculinity in leadership (Wiradanti et al., 2024). The glass ceiling is a structural and cultural barrier that limits women's careers (Syed & Murray, 2008). Despite these structural and cultural barriers, several women in Indonesia have successfully broken through these stereotypes and reached the pinnacle of their careers as corporate leaders. The success of Indonesian women in leading companies is reflected in the presence of several female CEOs in Indonesia. The inclusion of gender equality as one of the goals in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrates that this issue is a global concern, including for women in Indonesia.

The increasing number of women successfully assuming leadership positions has been accompanied by a growing body of research on women's leadership. The findings of Tanjung et al., (2025) indicate that the education sector is the most dominant research context, accounting for 43.3%, while the public sector and the industrial (business) sector contribute the least, at 16.7%. The limited scope of research on women's leadership in the industrial sector is also reflected in one of its subsectors, the healthcare industry. In this sector, research specifically addressing women's leadership remains extremely scarce. In fact, to date, no similar research has been conducted or published in the field of Prosthetics and Orthotics (Eshraghi, 2025). The limitations of this study make it all the more relevant for further examination, given the strategic role of the healthcare industry in national economic development. The healthcare industry is one of the drivers of the national economy and is targeted to contribute up to 8% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, in accordance with the directive of Indonesian President Prabowo (Dabu, 2025). Women in the healthcare industry account for nearly 50% of entry-level positions, yet only about 15% go on to become CEOs (DePasse et al., 2025). Rather than testing hypothesized relationships, this study adopts a mapping and synthesis approach with the exploratory nature of systematic literature reviews on emerging research fields (Kitchenham, 2004).

METHODS

This study using a Systematic Literature Review, a method first introduced by Kitchenham in 2004, to systematically examine and integrate findings from the scientific literature in order to answer specific research questions (Kitchenham, 2004). The literature search flow, in accordance with the literature selection procedure, follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Moher et al., 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review

Data in this study were collected in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. The search focused on women's leadership in business using Boolean queries in the title, abstract, and keyword fields on the Scopus homepage. The query was constructed by combining three main groups of key terms: (1) terms representing leadership concepts, particularly women's leadership, (2) terms describing organizational and workplace contexts, and (3) terms representing the dynamics of gender-based leadership barriers and achievements.

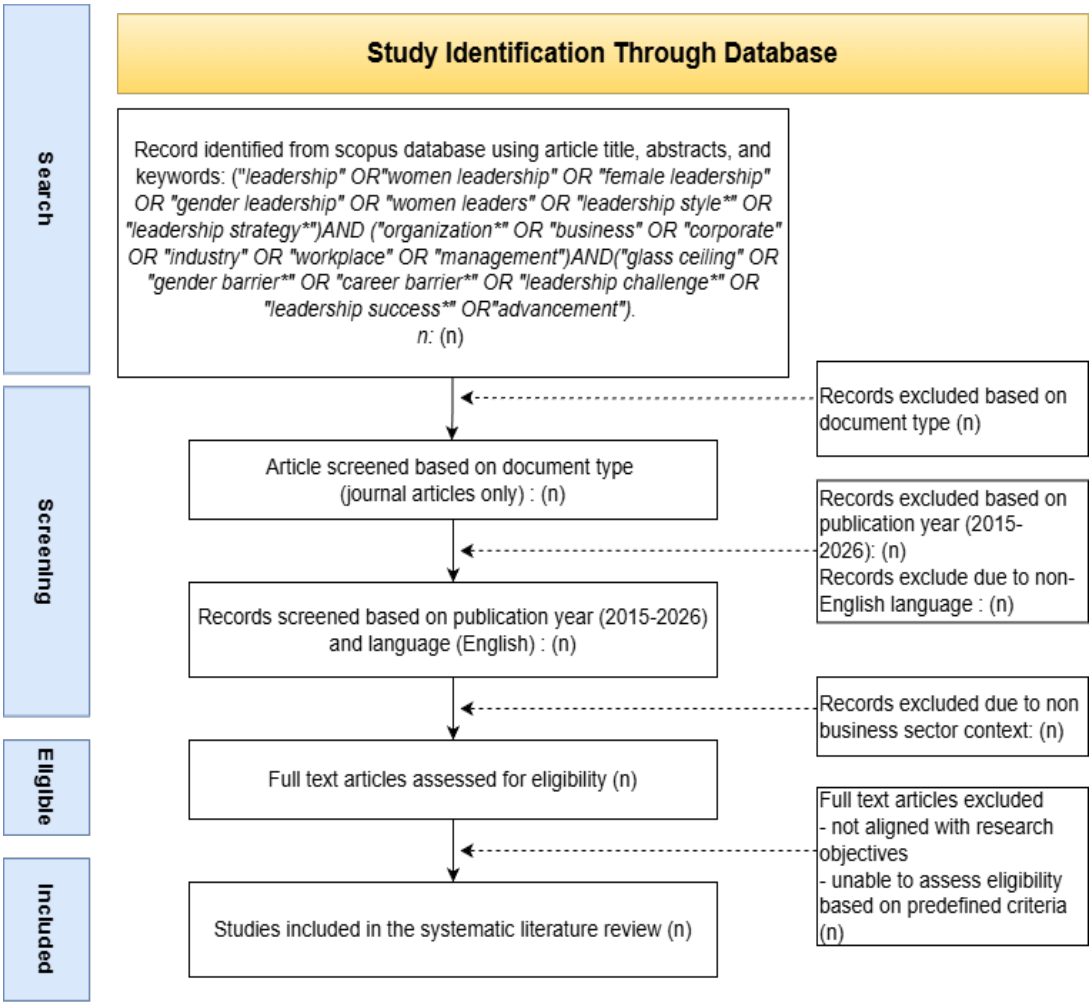


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Thus, only articles that simultaneously address aspects of leadership (specifically women's leadership), organizational/business contexts, and issues of leadership barriers or successes were identified in the search. The Boolean query used was: ("leadership" OR "women leadership" OR "female leadership" OR "gender leadership" OR "women leaders" OR "leadership style*" OR "leadership strategy*")AND ("organization*" OR "business" OR "corporate" OR "industry" OR "workplace" OR 'management')AND("glass ceiling" OR "gender barrier*" OR "career barrier*" OR "leadership challenge*" OR "leadership success*" OR "advancement"). The search using this Boolean query yielded 5,163 documents, which are records in the PRISMA identification phase using the Scopus database.

The search, conducted on the Scopus database on 6 February 2026, yielded 5,163 records at the identification stage. Screening then proceeded through four sequential, pre-defined stages. First, records were restricted to journal articles only, excluding books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and other non-article document types (n = 1,952 excluded; 3,211 retained). Second, records were restricted to publications between 2015 and 2026 to capture the development of research over the past decade (n = 843 excluded; 2,368 retained). Third, records not published in English were excluded to ensure consistency in full-text screening and coding (n = 80 excluded; 2,288 retained). Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria; disagreements were resolved through

discussion until consensus was reached. Full-text eligibility was then assessed against two criteria: (a) explicit alignment with the study's objective of examining women's leadership within a business-sector context, and sufficient methodological detail to allow the extraction of theoretical framework, leadership style, and success-indicator. This process yielded 53 records assessed for full-text eligibility, of which 41 were excluded for insufficient topical alignment or inadequate reporting detail, resulting in a final sample of 12 articles included in the systematic review (Figure 2).

Figure 3 illustrates a significant year-over-year increase in publications, particularly after 2023. Articles published in the Scopus database and identified as matching the query has followed an up-and-down pattern. After remaining stagnant in 2017, publications increased in 2018 but declined the following year (2019). This pattern repeated in 2020–2021, when publications stagnated. In 2022, published articles increased briefly but declined again the following year. After 2023, there was a significant surge, with 17 articles published in 2025. Although 2026 has only been underway for one month, three articles related to this query have already been published in the Scopus database.

Business and management were the most articles on the topic of women's leadership, accounting for 29.9% of all documents. This indicates a strong connection between women's leadership and business and management. The second-largest subject area was social sciences, accounting for

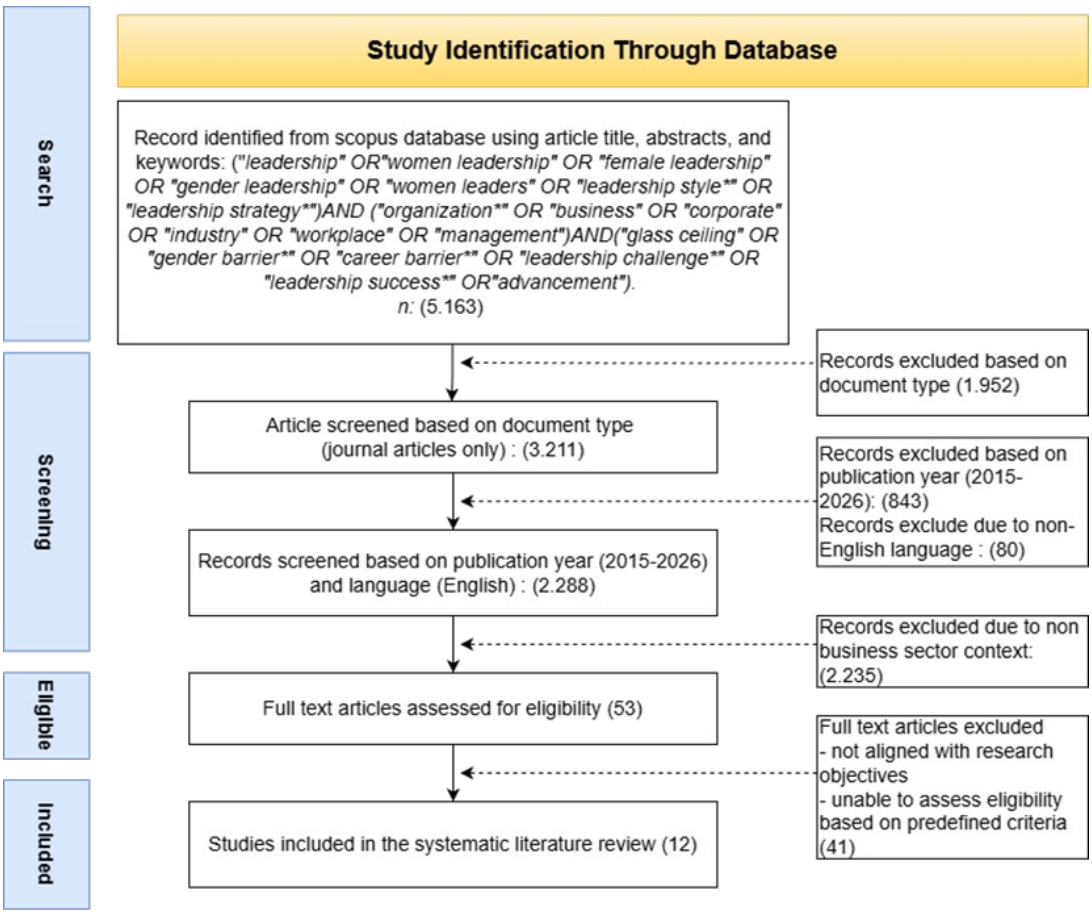


Figure 2. PRISMA protocol
*Search conducted on February 6, 2026

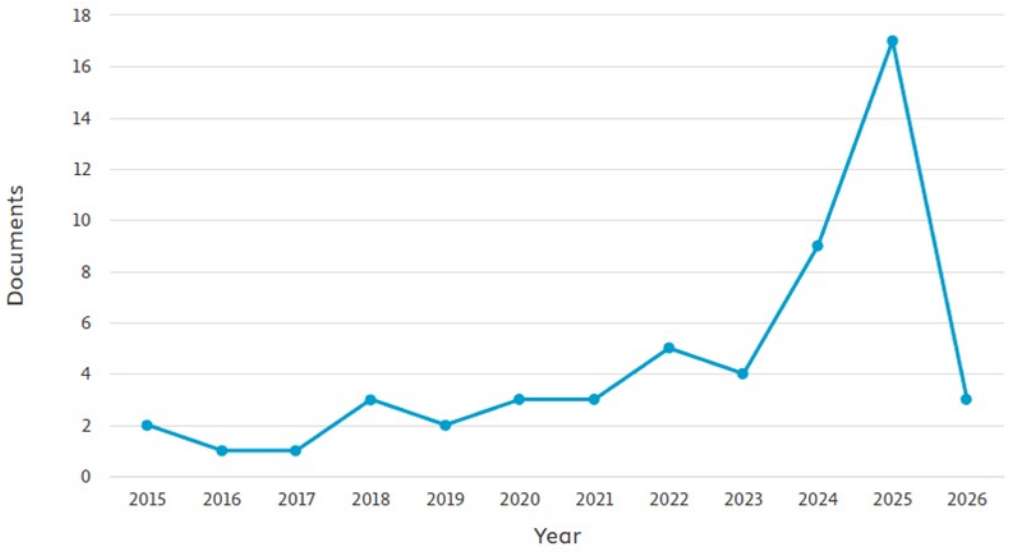


Figure 3. Publication trends 2015–2026
*Search conducted on February 6, 2026

25.3%. Other areas include computer science and engineering at 6.9%, decision science and economics at 5.7%, and medicine and multidisciplinary fields at 3.4% (3 publications). The arts and energy sectors had only 2 publications, representing approximately 2.3% of the total publications on the topic of women's leadership based on the queries. The distribution of research subject areas illustrated in Figure 4.

India contributed 7 articles on this topic, followed by the United Kingdom and the United States, which each contributed 6 articles. Indonesia and Malaysia on the third position in terms of publications on this topic, with 5 publications over the past 10 years. China had 4 publications, followed by Australia, Colombia, and Ecuador, each with 2 publications. Distribution of countries contributing to research on women's leadership is illustrated in Figure 5.

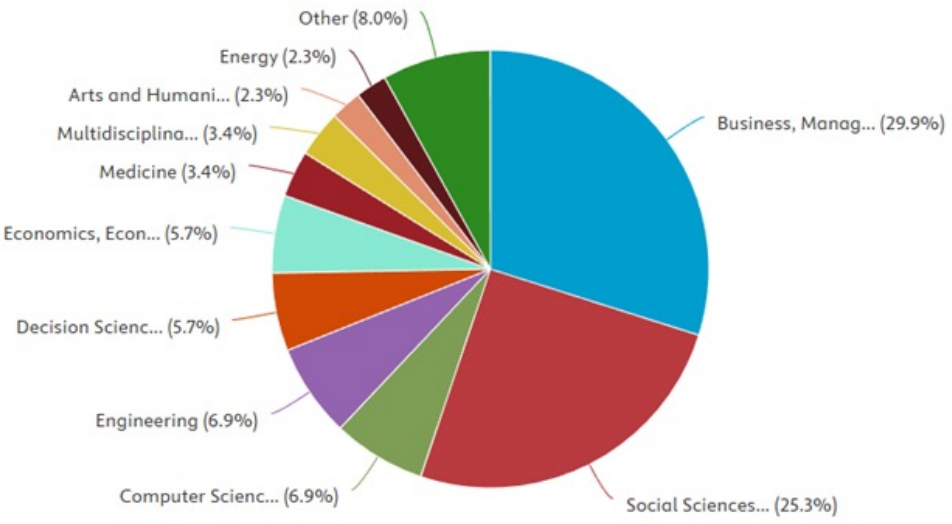


Figure 4 Subject area
*Search conducted on February 6, 2026

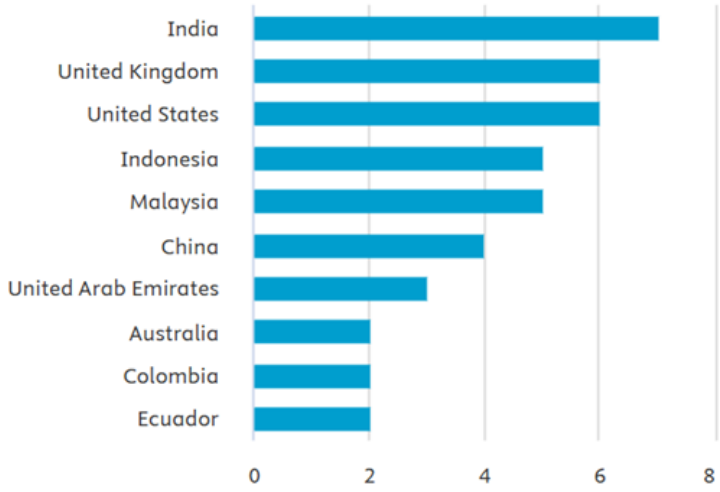


Figure 5. Countries contribute
*Search conducted on February 6, 2026

This study also using bibliometric analysis to map the development of research on women's leadership in the business sector. Bibliometric techniques were used to identify publication trends, influential authors and documents, collaborative networks, and emerging thematic structures. The data used in this analysis consists of screened data in accordance with the PRISMA protocol shown in Figure 5, which was then exported in comma-separated values (CSV) format to be processed using VOSViewer software version 1.6.20.

The results using VOSViewer software version 1.6.20 on February 6, 2026, identified four main clusters representing research themes. The bibliometric map related to women's leadership in the business sector is illustrated in Figure 6. The first cluster are "woman,", "study", "barrier," "glass ceiling", and "leadership".

The largest node is "woman," which occupies a central position. This indicates that the concept of women serves as both the primary focus and a connecting point for various other issues such as role, barrier, leadership, glass ceiling, and career. The thickness of the lines between nodes reflects the high level of conceptual interconnection among variables, while the colors indicate cluster groupings based on topic proximity.

The red cluster centers on the keyword "woman," which is related to "role," "sector," "analysis," "man," and "region." This cluster represents discourse regarding women's roles in various business sectors as well as the dynamics of gender relations within organizational contexts. Research focus within this cluster tends to address women's representation, contributions, and positions within business structures and sustainable development. The connection between "role" and "woman" indicates that the issue of roles remains a primary concern in studies of women's leadership.

The green cluster highlights the themes of leadership, leadership roles, and gender stereotypes. This cluster encompasses research focused on the characteristics of women's leadership, career development processes, and the impact of gender stereotypes on leadership effectiveness and legitimacy. Keyword "gender stereotypes" indicates that many studies examine the psychosocial challenges and adaptive strategies women employ in confronting structural biases within the business environment.

The yellow and orange clusters highlights the issues such as barriers, research, company, factors, leadership positions, female executives, difficulties, obstacles, and interviews. These clusters explicitly

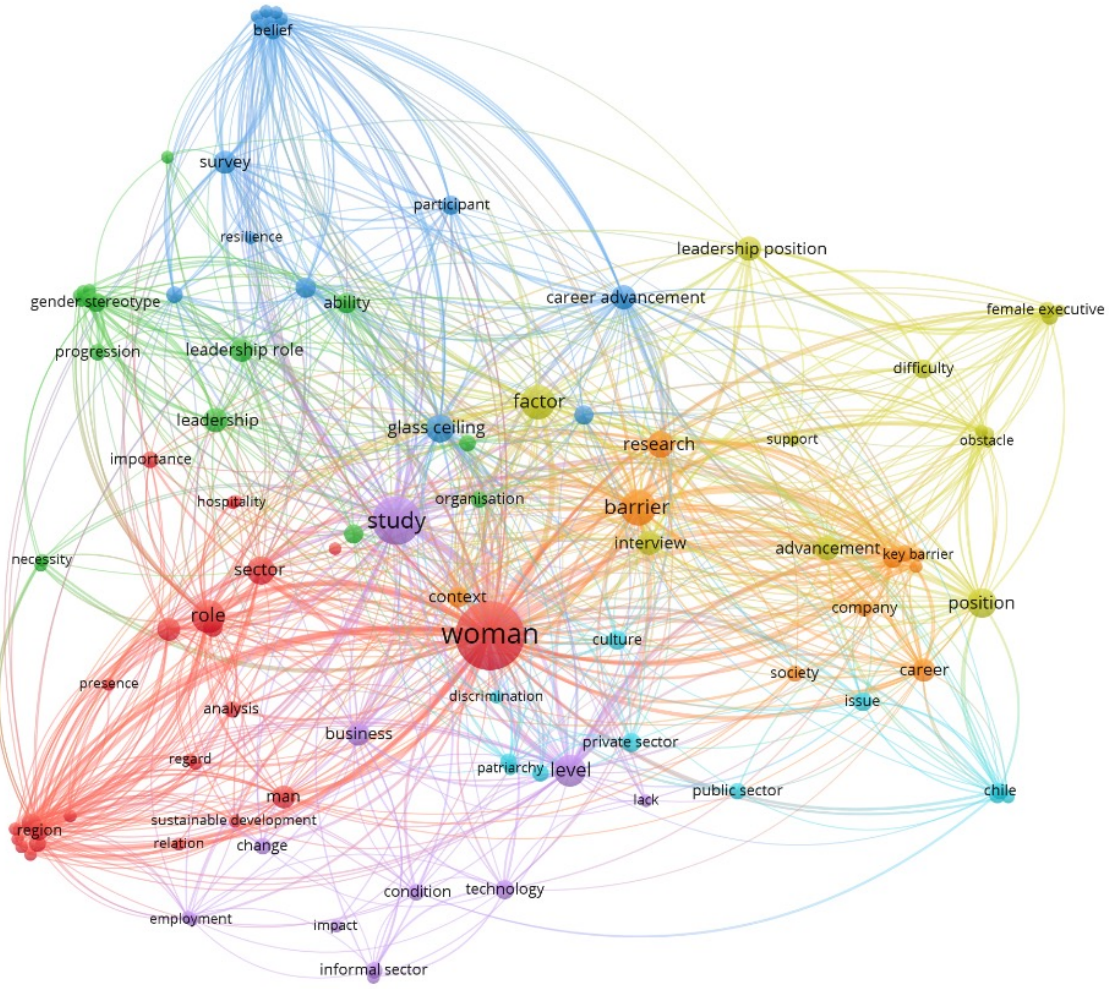


Figure 6. Bibliometric analysis
Source: Data processed using VOSViewer 1.6.20 (2026)

represent the themes of career barriers and the glass ceiling phenomenon that limits women's access to executive positions. The strong relationship between "barrier" and "position" indicates that research frequently examines inhibiting factors both at the organizational and systemic levels that influence the promotion and representation of women in top management.

The purple and blue clusters reveal contextual and methodological dimensions, such as glass ceiling, study, survey, participant, belief, discrimination, and patriarchy. These clusters indicate the research approaches used (e.g., surveys and interviews) as well as the sociocultural variables that influence women's leadership, including discrimination and the patriarchal system. The presence of terms such as culture, public sector, and private sector suggests that the research does not focus solely on private corporations but also compares the public sector context and the broader social environment.

Overall, this bibliometric map shows that the development of research on women's leadership in the business sector is multidimensional, encompassing aspects of role, leadership characteristics, structural barriers, career dynamics, and socio-cultural contexts. The relatively dense interconnections between clusters signify that research in this field is interdisciplinary and mutually complementary.

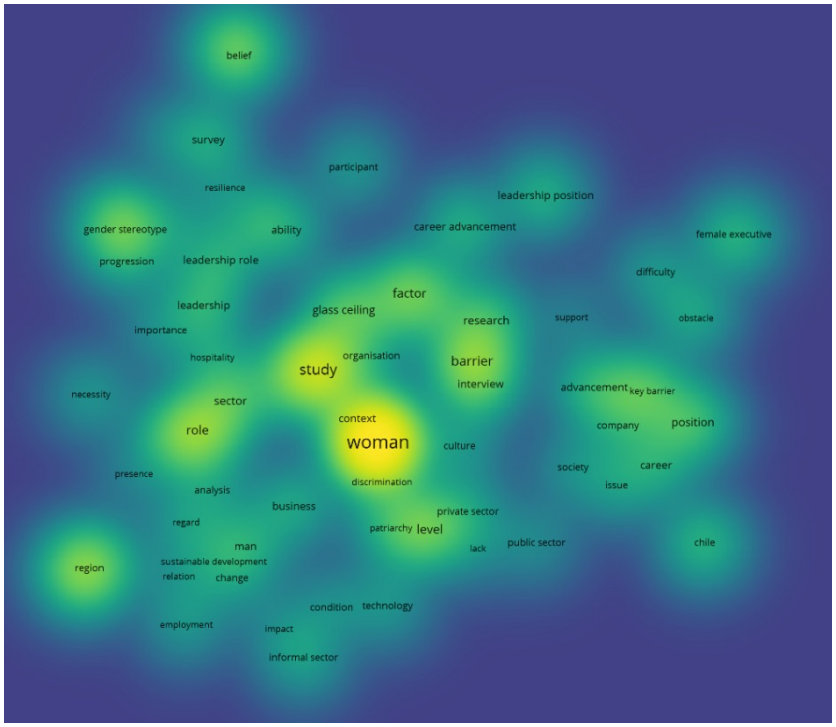


Figure 7. Density visualization
Source: Data processed using VOSViewer 1.6.20 (2026)

The largest keyword, "woman" appears at the center in the brightest color (yellow), indicating that it has the highest frequency of occurrence and the strongest connections to other keywords as a mention in Figure 7. Focus of the analyzed literature is indeed centered on the issue of women as subjects in business leadership. Surrounding this central node are keywords such as "study," "role," "barrier," "factor," "glass ceiling," and "context," which also exhibit high density. This indicates that research on women's leadership is frequently linked to studies of roles, determining factors, and structural barriers such as the glass ceiling phenomenon.

Overall, this bibliometric indicates that research on women's leadership in the business sector is advancing along two complementary main trajectories. The first trajectory emphasizes structural barriers and gender inequality within organizations, such as the glass ceiling and the glass cliff. The second direction highlights the contributions of women's leadership to organizational effectiveness, corporate performance, and the organization's ability to adapt to changes in the business environment, including innovation, digitalization, and sustainability. The close relationships between clusters indicate that the literature on women's leadership is becoming increasingly mature and integrated. Women's leadership is no longer understood solely as a gender representation issue, but also as a strategic factor influencing organizational dynamics and business success.

Women's Leadership Theory

Based on the results of a systematic literature review, there are six main theoretical lense or guiding concept used by researchers to understand women's leadership styles and their indicators of success are outlined in Table 1.

The combination of glass ceiling and gender bias emerged as the most frequently applied, appearing in seven of the twelve reviewed articles. It is important to note that "glass ceiling" is a descriptive concept, a metaphor denoting the invisible barriers

Table 1. Women's Leadership Theory

No	Theoritical lens/ guiding concept	Leadership Style	Success Indicators	Author	Number of Article
1	Glass Ceiling & Gender Bias (concept/ phenomenon: glass ceiling, stereotyping, second-generation bias)	Transformational, Democratic, Expertise-based, Feminine Leadership	Position attainment, career advancement, equality, decision-making, work life balance	Eshraghi & Safaeepour (2025); Naseviciute & Juceviciene (2024); Chigudu (2021); Coleman (2019); Dragišević & Mihić (2020); Cimirotić et al. (2017); Srivastava & Marwha (2015)	7
2	Social Role, Identity & Cognitive Theory (social role, social identity, self-efficacy)	Hybrid Agentic–Communal Leadership, Charismatic Leadership	Leadership emergence, gender self-efficacy, organization identification, leadership confidence	Irshad & Khan (2026); Coleman (2019); Dragišević & Mihić (2020)	3
3	Intersectional & Structural Feminist Theory (intersectionality, coloniality of gender, platform capitalism)	Constrained / Stagnated Leadership (feminized support roles)	Leadership mobility, decision-making, career progression	Gandidze (2025)	1
4	Trait & Gender-Integrative Leadership Theory (trait theory, androgynous leadership)	Gender-neutral / Androgynous Leadership	Communication skills, strategic thinking, adaptability, resilience, emotional intelligence	Ngelambong et al. (2025)	1
5	Innovation, Sustainability & Upper Echelons Theory (eco-feminism, innovation framework)	Sustainability-oriented, Market-oriented, Collaborative Leadership	Innovation capability, economic autonomy, business diversification, customer satisfaction	Pérez et al. (2025)	1
6	Career Success, Social Capital & Tokenism Framework	Strategic, Network-based, Visionary Leadership	Career persistence, top management mobility, integration into business power networks	Kuschel & Salvaj (2018)	1

that limit women's advancement, rather than a formal theory with defined causal propositions. The explanatory mechanisms underlying this phenomenon in the reviewed literature are more accurately attributed to established theoretical frameworks such as Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), which explains leadership-related prejudice as arising from incongruity between communal gender-role expectations and agentic leadership requirements, and Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which links gender-typed behavioral expectations to organizational outcomes. Within this lens, the leadership styles most frequently identified are transformational, democratic,

competence-based, and consensus-based feminine approaches, while success is measured through the attainment of strategic positions, career advancement, pay equity, influence in decision-making, and work-life balance.

Second, Social Role, Identity, and Cognitive Theory explains the role of social roles and gender identity in women's leadership. Studies in this category indicate that women tend to develop leadership styles that combine agentic traits (assertive and results-oriented) with communal traits (collaborative and empathetic), as well as charismatic leadership. Indicators of success are not only measured by formal positions but also by increased self-efficacy, leadership confidence, and organizational identification, which underscore the importance of psychological factors in the emergence of women leaders.

The Intersectional and Structural Feminist Theory approach broadens the analysis by considering the intersections between gender, social structures, and economic systems. Findings indicate that women are often confined to feminized support roles, by limiting their leadership mobility. Therefore, leadership success is measured by the level of inclusion in decision-making, career progression, and increased structural mobility within organizations.

Trait and Gender-Integrative Leadership Theory emphasizes that the effectiveness of women's leadership is no longer viewed through the masculine-feminine dichotomy but rather through a gender-neutral approach. This leadership style integrates communication skills, strategic thinking, adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence as the core competencies of modern leaders. This perspective reflects a paradigm shift toward competency-based leadership evaluation rather than one based solely on gender identity.

Innovation, Sustainability, and Upper Echelons Theory links women's leadership to organizational innovation and sustainability. Collaborative, market-oriented, and sustainable leadership styles are associated with increased innovation capabilities, economic autonomy, business diversification, and customer satisfaction. This indicates that women's contributions in strategic positions are increasingly recognized as a critical factor in long-term organizational performance.

Career Success and Social Capital framework emphasizes the importance of social networks and access to business power structures. Strategic, visionary, and network-based leadership styles are key to women's success in sustaining their careers and achieving mobility toward top management. This perspective demonstrates that the success of women's leadership is determined not only by individual competence but also by the ability to build social capital within the organizational ecosystem.

The Glass Ceiling and Gender Bias concept are the most dominant frameworks used, appearing in 7 articles or 58.3% of the total publications analyzed. This dominance indicates that the primary focus of research on women's leadership over the past decade has remained centered on issues of structural barriers, gender stereotypes, and biases that limit women's access to leadership positions. The frequency of theory/concept usage in the literature is illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 9 shows that transformational leadership ranks highest with a frequency of 7 (14.9%), followed by democratic leadership and strategic leadership, each with a frequency of 6 (12.8%). Furthermore, collaborative leadership appeared 5 times (10.6%), while expertise-based, visionary, market-oriented, and network-based leadership each had a frequency of 4 (8.5%). This distribution indicates that no single style is absolutely dominant, but there is a strong tendency toward transformational and participatory approaches.

Based on the frequency of the indicators female leadership success as illustrated in Figure 10,

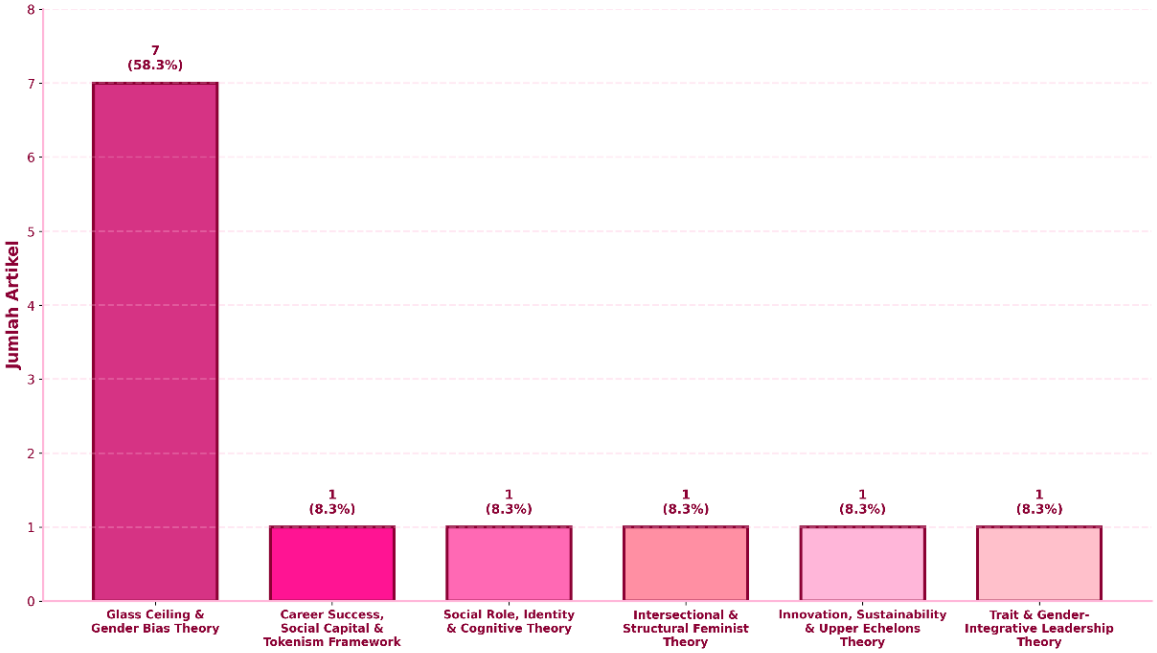


Figure 8. The frequency of theory/concept usage

"position attainment" and "career advancement," as well as "strategic thinking" and "adaptability," ranked highest, each with a frequency of 5 (21.7%). These findings suggest that research on women's leadership assesses success through two primary dimensions: structural career achievement (external success) and the development of individual leadership capacity (internal capability development). Thus, the success of women's leadership is not merely measured by the attainment of strategic positions but also by adaptive capabilities and strategic thinking in addressing the complexities of modern organizations. The indicators of business diversification and economic

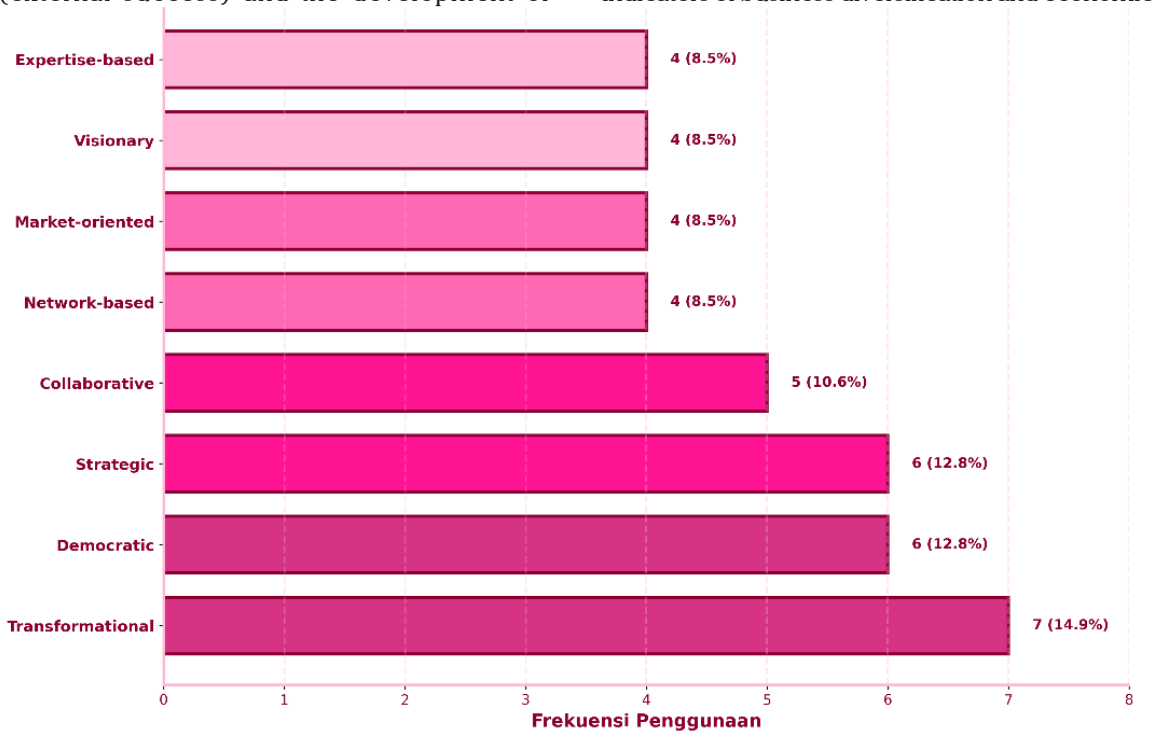


Figure 9. Frequency of leadership style among female leaders

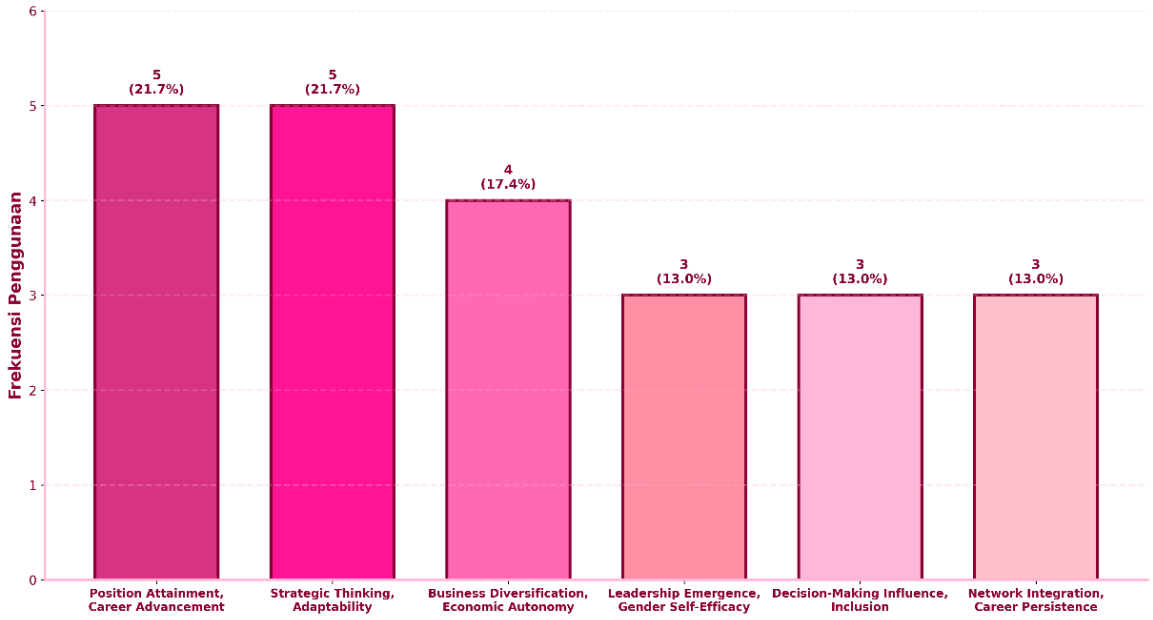


Figure 10. Frequency of indicators of success among female leaders

autonomy follow next with a frequency of 4 (17.4%), indicating a growing focus in research on the contribution of women's leadership to economic performance and organizational sustainability. Meanwhile, the indicators of leadership emergence and gender self-efficacy, decision-making influence and inclusion, as well as network integration and career persistence each have a frequency of 3 (13.0%).

Women in Leadership and the Glass Ceiling

Based on the systematic literature review, the glass ceiling is defined as a complex "black box" formed by individual, organizational, and social factors, creating an invisible barrier that prevents competent women from reaching executive or top level management positions (Irshad et al., 2026). These barriers do not take the form of a "single wall" but rather a series of interconnected, varied obstacles (Coleman, 2019).

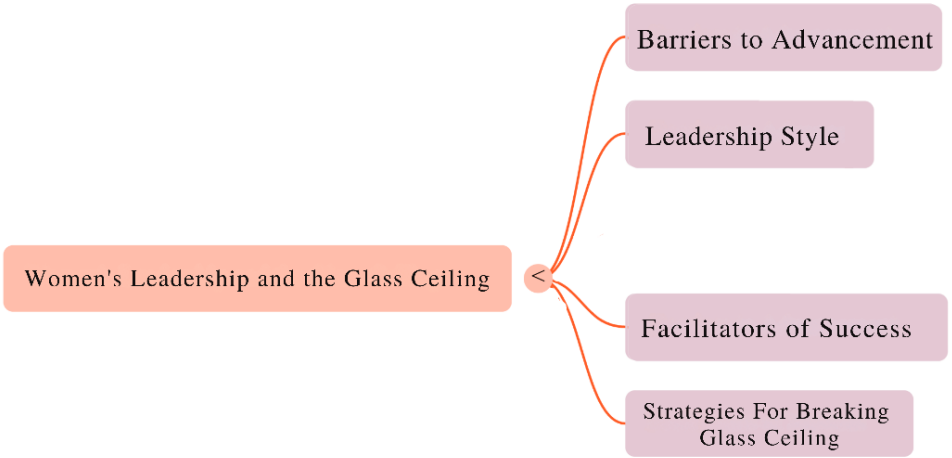


Figure 11. Women's leadership and the glass ceiling

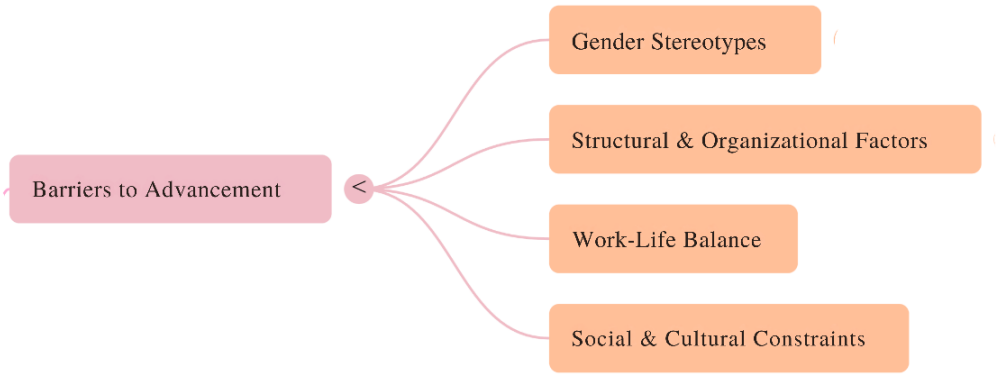


Figure 12. Barriers to advancement

Figure 11 illustrates women's leadership in confronting the glass ceiling, including factors such as barriers to advancement, leadership style, facilitators of success, and strategies for breaking through the glass ceiling.

Regarding barriers to advancement as illustrated in Figure 12, gender stereotypes represent the primary structural and psychological barriers to women's success in reaching the top, there by functioning as interrelated obstacles that reinforce the "glass ceiling" phenomenon (Irshad et al., 2026). Social expectations regarding gender roles influence public perceptions of an individual's suitability for leadership positions (Kuschel, 2018). The greatest barriers relate to traits associated with agency, such a decision-making ability and assertiveness, which are stereotypically attributed to men, while women are associated with traits such as warmth, care, and sensitivity (Iva Dragisevic & Mihic, 2020).

Barriers to Advancement in Rural Business Context

While the barriers described above are largely documented within urban, corporate settings, the reviewed literature suggests that structural disadvantage takes a distinct form in rural business environments. Land ownership, a key form of productive and economic capital remains predominantly held by men in many rural economies, which renders women's managerial and entrepreneurial contributions largely invisible within formal business and decision-making structures (Pérez et al., 2025).

Access to formal credit represents a further compounding constraint: rural women entrepreneurs are frequently perceived by financial institutions as high-risk borrowers due to a lack of collateral itself a consequence of restricted land and asset ownership alongside limited financial literacy and unstable income streams, which pushes many toward informal and less stable sources of finance (Vorster & Thaba, 2025). Beyond financial exclusion, deeply embedded cultural norms constrain rural women's mobility and public participation even where women possess equal or higher levels of education and competence than their male counterparts, community-level expectations that assign them primary responsibility for household and caregiving duties continue to discourage their entry into formal leadership positions, such as those on agricultural cooperative boards (Huot et al., 2023). Compared to urban corporate contexts, where barriers are more often mediated by organizational policy and formal promotion systems, rural business barriers therefore appear more deeply embedded in informal institutions customary land tenure, kinship-based authority structures, restricted physical mobility, and limited access to formal financial services suggesting that interventions effective in urban corporate settings, such as formal mentoring or sponsorship programs, may require substantial adaptation before they can meaningfully address rural women's advancement. While these two dimensions were not captured within the 12 articles constituting the reviewed sample, they are corroborated by closely related

studies outside the systematic review, which help contextualize the rural specific barriers observed.

Structural and organizational factors are generally rooted in a masculine work culture and institutionalized power structures that prioritize traditional attributes which are indirectly associated with men and exclude women from decision-making (Irshad et al., 2026). In some situations, women must work harder to achieve a level of professional legitimacy equivalent to that of their male colleagues (Coleman, 2019).

One of the biggest obstacles in top management positions are often viewed as requiring "unencumbered workers", that is individuals who have no domestic responsibilities and can be fully available to the company at all times (Coleman, 2019). There is also the phenomenon of the "motherhood penalty" (Kuschel, 2018). In this context, work-life balance is one of the causes of career interruptions for women. In Chile, 32% of women quit their jobs due to difficulties in integrating work demands with family responsibilities (Kuschel, 2018). In Zimbabwe, social expectations often view women's professional work as a secondary role compared to their moral responsibilities as wives and mothers (Gandidze, 2025).

The next obstacle relates to social and cultural constraints. Ideologies that have developed since the colonial era reinforce stereotypes that place women in feminized roles. The absence of HR management and career pathways places women in vulnerable, undervalued, and exploited positions (Srivastava, 2015). Deeply rooted gender barriers in rural environments often place women in secondary roles, with land ownership and decision-making power primarily held by men, rendering women's managerial contributions "invisible" (Pérez et al., 2025). Furthermore, the lack of female role models in the media and the workplace reinforces the cultural myth that top leadership positions are dominated by men (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026).

Figure 13 illustrates aspects of women's leadership styles. The aspects associated with leadership styles are communication skills, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability. Each of these aspects is interconnected to shape the leadership style adopted by women leaders.

Communication skills are identified in various sources as the most valued fundamental characteristics of effective leadership (Ngelambong et al., 2025). Communication skills encompass the ability to speak, listen, and write. These skills serve as the primary foundation for building relationships, managing crises, and providing clear direction within an organization. Additionally, communication skills help leaders navigate various cultural and structural barriers within the organization (Ngelambong et al., 2025).

Strategic thinking is one of the soft skills essential for women seeking to break through the glass ceiling (Ngelambong et al., 2025). This ability to think strategically can be used to analyze market trends, identify new opportunities, and make sound decisions (Irshad et al., 2026). For women, this ability serves as a crucial tool for building professional legitimacy and strengthening their positions within organizational structures (Kuschel, 2018).

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions both one's own and those of others thereby fostering a positive work culture and effectively resolving interpersonal conflicts (Irshad et al., 2026). Overall, emotional intelligence is a critical competency that supports the development of leadership and strengthens group cohesion within an organization. However, because emotional intelligence often associated with communal characteristics considered "feminine," women often have to navigate work environments influenced by gender bias. Therefore, women leaders need to balance the use of emotional intelligence with the establishment of professional authority in order to

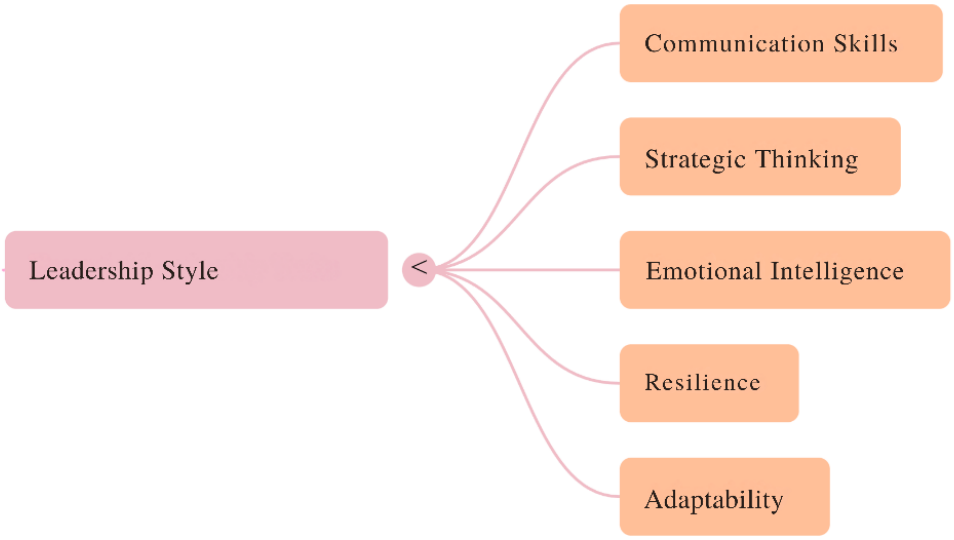


Figure 13. Leadership style

break through the glass ceiling and attain higher leadership positions (Chigudu, 2021).

Resilient leaders are able to cope with external uncertainties, including market fluctuations, demanding work environments, and various unforeseen crises. In addition, resilience also plays a crucial role in helping women navigate the gender bias that still frequently arises in professional settings (Kuschel, 2018).

In the context of leadership, adaptability is often associated with the ability to innovate, creativity, and the capacity to manage uncertainty that arises within an organizational environment (Ngelambong et al., 2025). Adaptability enables leaders to adjust strategies, work patterns, and leadership approaches in response to changes in both external and internal organizational conditions. Therefore, adaptability is a critical competency for leaders in navigating rapid technological advancements, market shifts, and organizational transformations (Ngelambong et al., 2025).

Figure 14 illustrates the factors facilitating the success of women leaders, including networking and social capital, formal and informal mentoring, sponsorship and championing, organizational reform policies, and technological enablement. In addition to mentoring, participation in networks whether gender mixed or women-only provides both emotional support and instrumental social capital (Cimirotić et al., 2017). Networks serve as "safe spaces" (warm baths) for receiving expressive support, as well as strategic forums for the exchange of industry information that can enhance career opportunities (Coleman, 2019). Engagement in these networks enables women to build crucial professional relationships and access resources that are often hidden from individuals without such connections.

Networking and social capital as key mechanisms in women's career mobility. Through professional networks, women can gain instrumental support, such as access to strategic information, career opportunities, and recommendations for promotion (Chigudu, 2021). Networking can also provide emotional support from colleagues (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). Thus, networking not only serves as a means of information exchange but also as a crucial strategy for expanding women's opportunities to attain leadership positions (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026).

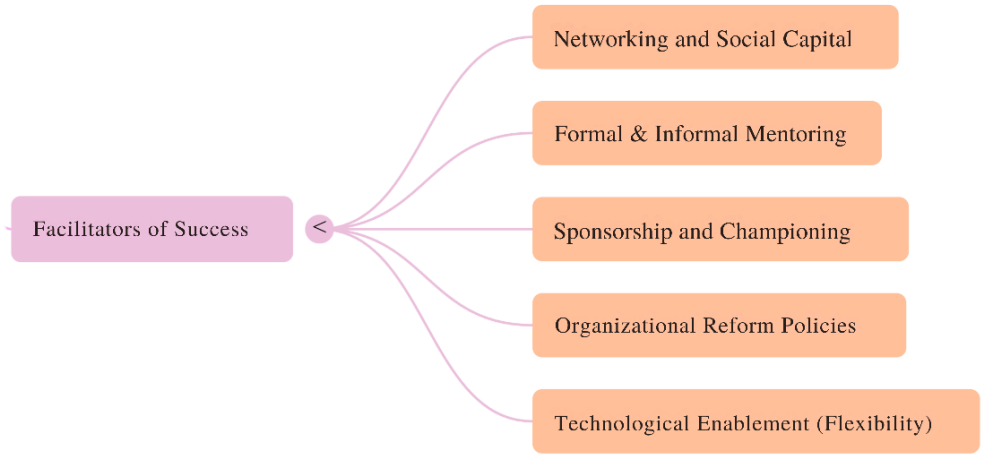


Figure 14. Facilitators of Success

Women can leverage digital platforms such as LinkedIn, online professional communities, and informal communication groups like WhatsApp to share information and engage in professional collaboration (Pérez et al., 2025). At the end, with access to professional networks, women can enhance their self-efficacy or self-confidence in fulfilling leadership roles (Irshad et al., 2026).

Formal and informal mentors can provide support in the form of strategic guidance regarding career development, as well as psychosocial support that includes emotional validation, professional reflection, and self-confidence building (Coleman, 2019). Formal mentoring programs are typically designed by organizations or professional institutions as part of leadership development strategies (Cimirotić et al., 2017). These programs provide a more structured space for women to receive career guidance, enhance leadership skills, and develop interpersonal competencies such as strategic communication and the ability to navigate organizational political dynamics (Cimirotić et al., 2017). Peer mentoring allows women to share experiences, provide emotional support, and discuss similar career challenges (Cimirotić et al., 2017)

Sponsorship is an advanced form of social capital that plays a crucial role in supporting women's career advancement toward leadership positions (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). Unlike mentoring, which generally focuses on providing advice and psychosocial support, sponsorship involves active advocacy by individuals who hold power and influence within an organization to promote and create strategic opportunities for the individuals they support (Coleman, 2019). Sponsorship plays a vital role in overcoming structural barriers such as the glass ceiling phenomenon and male-dominated organizational cultures (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). By providing explicit support for women's career advancement, sponsors can help reduce gender bias and break down stereotypes that often hinder women from reaching leadership positions (Coleman, 2019).

One of the key aspects of organizational reform policies is the implementation of a transparent and bias free recruitment and promotion system (Irshad et al., 2026). Informal promotion processes or those based on personal connections often favor dominant groups, particularly men, thereby hindering women's career advancement (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). Therefore, organizations are encouraged to implement performance evaluation systems based on merit and measurable work outcomes (Kuschel, 2018). Organizational policies supporting the integration of work and personal

life (work-life integration) are equally important (Cimirotić et al., 2017). Policies such as parental leave, return-to-work programs following maternity leave, and the provision of on-site childcare facilities have proven to help women maintain their professional careers without having to sacrifice family responsibilities (Kuschel, 2018).

Technological enablement facilitates the implementation of flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, remote work, and more adaptable work schedules (Coleman, 2019). These flexibility policies help organizations shift from attendance-based evaluation systems to results-based performance assessments, thereby enabling women to continue participating in leadership roles despite time constraints due to family responsibilities (Cimirotić et al., 2017). Technology also plays a crucial role in expanding professional networks and building social capital for women (Pérez et al., 2025). Access to digital knowledge resources enables women to independently enhance their professional capabilities, strengthen technical expertise, and boost their credibility in competitive work environments (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026).

Figure 15 illustrates the strategies women use to break through the glass ceiling. These strategies typically involve awareness raising networks, gender-neutral leadership styles, identity-based interventions, legislative quotas, and personal agency and hard work. Breaking through the glass ceiling does not occur in a linear fashion but is a dynamic and interactive process (Irshad et al., 2026). In other words, women's success in reaching top leadership positions depends on the synergy between internal factors such as competence, perseverance, and psychological resilience and organizational structural support, as well as public policies that promote gender equality. Without adequate support at these three levels, structural and cultural barriers may continue to hindering women's advancement within organizational hierarchies (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026)

Women's ability to build collaborative networks (awareness-raising networks) enables them to exchange information and experiences in confronting a biased culture, as well as to recognize operational achievements (Chigudu, 2021). Awareness to raising networks can also mitigate the internalization of stereotypes, helping women recognize that the

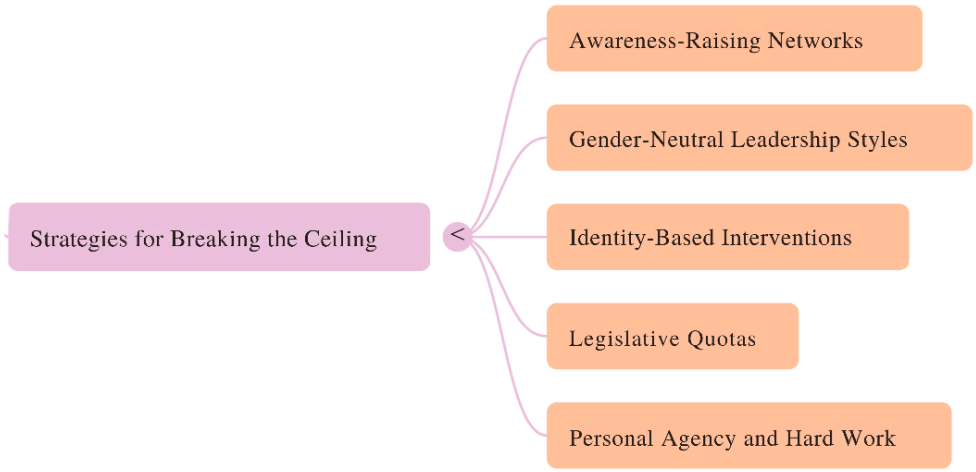


Figure 15. Strategies for breaking the ceiling

barriers they have faced are not personal in nature, thereby enhancing gender self-efficacy (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). Women's proactive initiative in building networks fosters strong internal confidence to define their professional value (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026).

A gender-neutral leadership style is positioned as a powerful strategy to break through the glass ceiling. Female leaders are expected to demonstrate masculine agentic attributes such as decisiveness, resilience, and assertiveness alongside feminine communal traits like empathy, care, and interpersonal sensitivity (Ngelambong et al., 2025). This approach also helps minimize the criticism often directed at women in leadership positions who are perceived as "too soft" or "too harsh" (Chigudu, 2021).

The literature emphasizes that there are three key principles organizations must adopt to support the development of women's leadership identity (identity based intervention). First, organizations must explicitly identify and address gender bias, including implicit bias (second generation bias) (Coleman, 2019). Second, it is important to create a safe space (psychological safety) that allows women to develop their leadership styles without the pressure of the double bind phenomenon (Naseviciute & Juceviciene, 2026). Third, the identity development process must be linked to clear leadership goals, so that individuals have a concrete orientation and direction in their career journey (Coleman, 2019).

Policies on women's representation (legislative quotas) as catalysts for organizational cultural change, driving a shift from passive support toward the active utilization of women's talent (Kuschel, 2018). Several countries have implemented these policies. In Zimbabwe, the national constitution mandates an 18% quota for women in democratic governance (Chigudu, 2021). The Chilean government has set a 40% target for women's participation on the boards of public companies as a form of leading by example, although women's representation in top-level positions remains limited (Kuschel, 2018). The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has set a 30% target for women's involvement in decision making positions (Chigudu, 2021). In Serbia, the implementation of quotas in the public sector is recommended as a solution to address the decline in women's representation at higher managerial levels (Iva Dragisevic & Mihic, 2020).

The literature indicates a perception that women need to outperform their male counterparts to gain equal recognition (Coleman, 2019). Success is often associated with a strong work ethic, such as full dedication, discipline, and consistent performance. In certain sectors, hard work is manifested through long working hours and high availability, reflecting the model of the unencumbered worker (Eshraghi, 2025). Additionally, hard work also encompasses meticulousness and sustained effort to achieve optimal performance, even in competitive and aggressive work environments (Coleman, 2019).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

The findings of this study provide several important managerial implications for organizations aiming to enhance women's leadership and overall organizational performance. Organizations are also encouraged to invest in leadership development programs that focus on key competencies identified in the study, such as strategic thinking, adaptability, communication skills, and emotional intelligence as these capabilities are strongly associated with leadership success. Furthermore, since networking, mentoring, and sponsorship are proven facilitators of women's career progression, firms should actively design formal mentoring schemes and internal sponsorship programs to accelerate leadership pipelines.

From a strategic resource allocation perspective, companies should allocate budgets toward diversity and inclusion initiatives, leadership training, and digital platforms that support flexible working

arrangements, as technological enablement has been shown to enhance women's participation in leadership roles. In addition, managers should consider adopting gender neutral and collaborative leadership models that integrate both agentic and communal traits, as these approaches are linked to improved innovation, organizational adaptability, and long-term business sustainability. Policies supporting work life integration, such as flexible work systems and parental support programs, are also critical investments to reduce career interruptions among women. Finally, at a strategic level, organizations should recognize women's leadership not merely as a diversity issue but as a driver of competitive advantage, particularly in fostering innovation, market responsiveness, and sustainable growth, thereby informing decisions related to talent management, organizational design, and long-term business strategy.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on this study, several concrete research gaps emerge. Sectorally, the business and healthcare sectors remain markedly underexplored relative to the education sector, future studies could specifically examine women's leadership in underexamined healthcare subsectors, such as prosthetics and orthotics, where no prior empirical study has been identified to date (Eshraghi, 2025). Geographically, research remains concentrated in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with limited representation from Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa beyond isolated single-country studies (Zimbabwe and Chile), comparative cross-regional studies would help clarify how institutional and cultural context shapes the glass ceiling phenomenon differently across settings. Methodologically, the reviewed literature is dominated by qualitative and interview-based designs, future research by quantitative designs could help establish the directionality and relative strength of the relationships between facilitators (mentoring and sponsorship) and leadership advancement outcomes identified descriptively in this review.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the review relied exclusively on the Scopus database; while Scopus offers broad multidisciplinary coverage, future studies may benefit from triangulating with Web of Science, Google Scholar, or Dimensions to ensure more comprehensive coverage of the field. Second, the final sample of 12 full-text articles, while derived through a rigorous PRISMA-guided process, represents a relatively narrow evidence base findings regarding theoretical and thematic dominance particularly the frequency counts underlying Table 1 and Figures 8–10 should therefore be interpreted as indicative of current publication patterns rather than fully generalizable conclusions. Third, the exclusion of non-English publications (n = 80) may have introduced language bias, potentially underrepresenting research conducted in non-Anglophone contexts, including parts of Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Fourth, because the 2026 publication window covers only the first month of the year, the apparent decline shown in Figure 3 for 2026 should not be interpreted as a genuine reversal of the growth trend. Finally, the classification of business sector relevance during screening involved a degree of interpretive judgment although two reviewers independently screened records, some subjectivity in eligibility determination cannot be fully ruled out.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to map the development of women's leadership research in the business sector and to synthesize the barriers, leadership styles, and success factors of women leaders. The results confirm that research on women's leadership has significantly increased over the past decade, particularly after 2023, indicating growing academic and practical interest in this field . The bibliometric and systematic review further reveal that women's leadership is a multidimensional construct shaped by interconnected themes, including structural barriers (glass ceiling), leadership competencies, socio-cultural influences, and organizational dynamics. The dominance of Glass Ceiling and Gender Bias

highlights that structural inequality and gender stereotypes remain the primary challenges, while the emergence of transformational, democratic, and collaborative leadership styles reflects a shift toward more inclusive and adaptive leadership paradigms. Moreover, this study identifies that leadership success is measured not only by career advancement and position attainment but also by internal capabilities such as strategic thinking and adaptability. The analysis also confirms that barriers to women's advancement are complex and systemic, encompassing organizational culture, work-life balance constraints, and socio-cultural expectations, while facilitators such as networking, mentoring, sponsorship, organizational policies, and technological enablement play a crucial role in supporting women's career progression. Furthermore, the results emphasize that breaking the glass ceiling requires a dynamic interplay between individual agency, organizational support, and policy interventions.

In terms of future prospects, this study suggests that research on women's leadership should move beyond examining barriers toward exploring its strategic contribution to organizational performance, innovation, and sustainability. The integration of gender neutral and competency based leadership frameworks presents opportunities for developing more inclusive leadership models. Additionally, future studies can expand empirical research in underexplored sectors, particularly in specific industries within the business and healthcare domains, and investigate the impact of digital transformation on women's leadership trajectories. Practically, organizations are encouraged to implement inclusive policies, strengthen leadership development programs, and leverage technology to create more equitable career opportunities. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive foundation for advancing both academic inquiry and practical applications in promoting women's leadership in the business sector.

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