

FROM BARRIERS TO BOARDROOMS: ENHANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS IN THE CORPORATE ERA

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Abstract

Women's participation in leadership has become a central theme in today's corporate conversations—shaped by global DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) movements, hybrid work cultures, ESG reporting norms, and greater societal awareness of gender equality. Yet, despite progress, women continue to face structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that limit their leadership advancement. This paper examines the contemporary challenges women leaders face—including unconscious bias, the glass ceiling, work–life imbalance, pay inequalities, and the “glass cliff.” It integrates real corporate examples from companies such as PepsiCo, Meta, IBM, Tata Group, Biocon, and Infosys to highlight the realities of women's leadership journeys today. The analysis also situates the discussion within emerging global trends such as DEI 2.0, gender audits, hybrid leadership, the rise of women in tech startups, and evolving board diversity mandates. The paper concludes with actionable strategies for organizations to build truly gender-inclusive cultures through policy reforms, mentorship architectures, bias-free systems, and leadership development programs.

Keywords: Women leaders, DEI 2.0, leadership diversity, glass ceiling, corporate inequality, hybrid work, gender inclusion

Introduction

In today's rapidly shifting business landscape, women's leadership is no longer viewed solely as a moral or social imperative—it has become a strategic business priority. Research by McKinsey (2023) shows that companies with strong female representation in executive teams outperform peers by up to 39% in profitability. Yet, despite the well-documented benefits, women remain underrepresented in top roles. For example:

- Only 21% of global C-suite executives are women.
- In India, women hold just 18% of leadership positions (LinkedIn Opportunity Index 2024).
- In tech leadership, women represent less than 10% globally.

These gaps persist despite rising educational qualifications, leadership capability, and strong corporate initiatives. Factors such as biased evaluation systems, caregiving burdens, stereotypical expectations, and limited access to strategic roles continue to restrict women's upward mobility.

In this context, the subject of women's leadership becomes not only relevant but highly trending, shaped by broader forces such as ESG mandates, DEI accountability, hybrid work philosophies, and public scrutiny of corporate boards.

Gender Stereotypes and Bias in Modern Workplaces

Gender stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of leadership, even in progressive global companies. For instance:

- **Mary Barra (CEO, General Motors)** faced early skepticism about leading a “male-dominated” industry like automotive manufacturing.
- **Indra Nooyi (former CEO, PepsiCo)** publicly described repeated questioning of her “ability to handle” complex strategic issues compared to male counterparts.
- **Sheryl Sandberg (former COO, Meta)** highlighted how women leaders are labeled “bossy” while men demonstrating similar behaviors are praised as “assertive.”

These examples reflect the persistent double standards women face. Leadership traits such as assertiveness or decisiveness are often perceived positively in men but negatively in women, reinforcing the double-bind dilemma.

Contemporary Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership

1. Gender Bias and Stereotypes

Bias infiltrates recruitment, promotion, performance evaluation, and leadership perceptions. For instance:

- A 2023 Harvard study found that women in tech receive more personality-based feedback (“be nicer,” “work on tone”) rather than skill-based evaluations.
- Women leaders at Amazon and Google have reported being overlooked for high-visibility projects, which slows leadership progression.

Bias-reduction programs at companies like Accenture and Deloitte demonstrate that structural rewiring is possible when organizations commit to measurable behavioral change.

2. The Glass Ceiling in Top Leadership Roles

Despite progress, the glass ceiling continues to restrict women's advancement.

Example:

At Fortune 500 companies, only 10% of CEOs are women as of 2024. Although the number is increasing (with leaders like Jane Fraser at Citibank and Karen Lynch at CVS Health), representation remains minimal.

India Inc examples:

- Nirma's top leadership had no women in key executive roles for decades.
- At Tata Sons, board diversification improved only after SEBI mandated at least one female director.
- Infosys, encouraged by industry guidelines, strengthened its women leadership pipelines through the "Infosys Leadership Institute."

However, the presence of women in middle management does not always translate to senior leadership, highlighting structural bottlenecks.

3. Work–Life Balance and Caregiving Burdens

The pandemic highlighted the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities placed on women:

- According to Deloitte's 2024 Women @ Work report, 48% of women considered leaving their jobs due to burnout and caregiving pressures.
- At the peak of COVID-19, one in four women in corporate America contemplated exiting the workforce.

Companies like Unilever, Wipro, and IBM responded with hybrid work models, extended parental leave, and "returnship" programs. Yet, challenges persist, especially in traditional and manufacturing sectors where flexible work is less feasible.

4. Lack of Female Mentors and Role Models

Women leaders often navigate career progression with fewer role models compared to male peers.

- Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw (Biocon) highlights that most boardrooms she entered in the 1990s had "zero women."
- Roshni Nadar (HCL Technologies) has spoken about the isolation women experience at the top in male-dominated sectors.

The absence of supportive mentorship systems reduces women's access to sponsorship, strategic opportunities, and informal networks.

5. Pay and Promotion Disparities

Global audits continue to reveal persistent pay gaps:

- At Google, women engineers reported widespread wage disparities until employee activism initiated equity review reforms.
- Salesforce invested \$10 million to correct pay gaps after internal audits exposed inequity.
- In India, women leaders earn 18–30% less than men in comparable roles (Monster Salary Index, 2023).

Transparent compensation frameworks and ESG guidelines are helping organizations hold leadership accountable.

6. The Glass Cliff Phenomenon

Women are more likely to be appointed during crises or organizational downturns:

- Marissa Mayer took over Yahoo during a period of steep decline.
- Gail Kelly became the CEO of Westpac during financial turbulence.
- During corporate distress, several Indian companies appoint women as “change candidates,” only to replace them later once stability returns.

Glass-cliff appointments set women up for failure and reinforce stereotypes when outcomes do not meet unrealistic expectations.

Trending Organizational Strategies to Reduce Gender Disparity

1. DEI 2.0 – Accountability-Driven Diversity

Companies such as Microsoft, PwC, and Nestlé now link leadership bonuses to diversity outcomes. This shift ensures:

- quantifiable metrics
- transparent reporting
- manager-level accountability

This is a major global trend reshaping talent systems.

2. Hybrid Work as a Catalyst for Women’s Leadership

Organizations leveraging hybrid ecosystems—like Zoom, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), and Infosys—have reported higher retention of women post-pandemic. Flexible work has become a top trending enabler for women’s leadership.

3. Structured Mentorship and Sponsorship

Programs like:

- Lean In Circles (global)
- Unilever’s Women Leadership Academy
- Goldman Sachs’ “10,000 Women” initiative
- Deloitte’s “WILL” (Women in Leadership Learning)

provide mentorship and skilling support that directly increase leadership readiness.

4. On-Site Childcare and Parental Support

Examples include:

- Infosys Kid's Care centers
- Accenture’s extended parental leave
- Google’s on-campus childcare

These initiatives reduce the motherhood penalty and support continued leadership paths.

5. Bias-Mitigation and Inclusive Leadership Training

Programs at SAP, McKinsey, and JP Morgan integrate scenario-based training using AI simulations to help leaders identify unconscious bias in real-time.

This is a rapidly growing trend shaping decisions across managerial layers.

6. Leadership Development Tailored for Women

Tailored programs—like IBM’s “Women in Leadership”, Meta’s “Women@”, and HP’s “Women in Technology” accelerator—enhance negotiation, strategic thinking, digital leadership, and executive presence.

7. Gender Pay Audits and Transparent Compensation

Companies like PwC, Salesforce, Ikea, and Adobe now conduct annual pay equity audits, signaling a rising global trend in wage transparency mandates.

Conclusion

Women’s leadership has become one of the most prominent and trending issues in corporate governance, leadership development, and DEI initiatives. Yet, despite growing awareness, systemic barriers like stereotypes, unequal caregiving burdens, pay gaps, and glass-ceiling constraints continue to hinder women’s progression.

By investing in inclusive policies, leadership development frameworks, flexible work models, and accountability-driven DEI practices, organizations can build cultures where women not only enter leadership—but thrive in it.

As corporations worldwide embrace ESG accountability, hybrid work, and DEI 2.0, the future of women's leadership looks promising. Empowering women is no longer just a social responsibility—it is a strategic imperative for competitiveness, innovation, and long-term organizational resilience.

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