Women in Leadership: Breaking Barriers in Business

Nanyonjo Sauda

Science Education Kampala International University Uganda

Email nanyonjosauda@kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Women have long faced systemic challenges in ascending to leadership positions in business. Despite historical and cultural barriers, women leaders have demonstrated exceptional transformational leadership styles that emphasize collaboration, emotional intelligence, and resilience. This paper examines the historical context of women in leadership, the challenges they face, and the traits that make them effective leaders. It also examines the role of mentorship, sponsorship, intersectionality, and organizational culture in promoting female leadership. Case studies of successful women leaders highlight the impact of gender diversity on business performance, while strategies and government initiatives are discussed to ensure a more inclusive and equitable business environment. As society continues to evolve, fostering gender diversity in leadership is not just a matter of equity but a strategic advantage for organizations worldwide.
Keywords: Women in Leadership, Gender Diversity, Glass Ceiling, Emotional Intelligence, Organizational Culture, Mentorship, Sponsorship.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women in leadership have been more transformational than men, which once surprised many traditional thinkers. As society evolves, it recognizes that women leaders embody essential qualities needed for rapid societal and environmental changes. For instance, their ability to inspire and motivate contrasts with men who often command authority but appear aloof, creating a disconnect with their followers. This lack of connection can hinder progress, making it crucial to enable more women into leadership roles. The increasing presence of women in supervisory positions necessitates an acknowledgment of the significant differences in leadership styles. If women's diverse approaches are overlooked in today's business world, it may lead to negative outcomes, such as business closures and stalled careers. When women's distinct leadership styles are utilized alongside existing ones, they create a unique blend that often enhances success in business and government. Therefore, it is vital to address barriers preventing women from leadership roles. By examining solutions, society can start dismantling obstacles, allowing women to fully contribute to societal growth and their personal development [1, 2].

Historical Perspectives on Women in Leadership

Leadership is crucial for successful business practices, and many young professionals aspire to these roles. However, women aiming for leadership face persistent sexist attitudes, resulting in numerous challenges. Some women have defied norms to become influential corporate leaders, significantly shifting modern perceptions of women in business. Despite these advancements, historical limitations on women's roles are still evident, reminding us of the ongoing obstacles they encounter. Notably, stereotypes portraying women as unfit for leadership persist due to cultural attitudes rooted in history. The treatment of women in leadership roles has varied by historical context and culture, often marginalizing their participation. Women's leadership potential has been frequently scrutinized, with some even using religious texts to justify their exclusion. In Western culture, the Bible has been employed to support this notion, especially

under colonialist influences, further marginalizing women from power. Despite these challenges, women worldwide have broken through numerous barriers, taking on leadership roles in diverse fields, from military commanders to heads of state, revealing that they are often capable leaders except in cases of extreme power dynamics [3, 4].

Challenges Faced by Women in Business Leadership

The discussion surrounding the lack of equality in business leadership by gender has gained significant media attention and public interest in recent years. Awareness of the gender imbalance in leadership roles has increased, prompting debates on the necessity and effectiveness of interventions aimed at balancing power between men and women. Inspiring stories of successful women who occupy only a fraction of leadership positions compared to men dominate media discussions. Numerous women-led initiatives, awareness campaigns, and conferences are emerging in major cities globally, addressing the challenges faced by women in elite professions and management while raising awareness of unconscious biases and discrimination. There is an expectation that greater transparency will motivate leaders and policymakers to dismantle the invisible barriers preventing women from reaching leadership roles. Most scholars acknowledge the mounting evidence of discriminatory practices, glass ceilings, wage gaps, and other forms of gender bias. Women worldwide share common challenges in proving their skills and leadership abilities, as demonstrated by research conducted in New York City and Portugal. Experiences from women of various ethnic backgrounds in a New York investment bank, alongside those in elite professions and family-run corporations in Portugal, reveal a consistent struggle against patriarchal structures, ingrained gender roles, and institutional sexism within corporate environments [5, 6].

Key Leadership Traits and Skills for Women

Throughout history, leadership has often emphasized power and success tied to the male psyche. Traits like aggressiveness and competitiveness have defined men in leadership roles, reflecting the expectations placed on them in political and business environments. Conversely, women, with their gentler and more cooperative nature, have often been sidelined as leaders, traditionally seen in supporting roles. However, research highlights emotional intelligence as a crucial leadership skill. This trait encompasses the ability to accurately perceive and manage one's own and others' emotions. Women generally possess greater emotional intelligence, having been socialized as caregivers, allowing them to navigate emotional landscapes effectively. Additionally, resilience characterizes female leaders, helping them adapt to rapid changes in the business world and manage stress. Collaborative skills also stand out in successful women leaders, as they are often encouraged to work together from a young age, unlike many of their male counterparts who are pushed towards competition. While women may receive training in assertiveness within the workplace, they often lack the tools to assert their value without seeming confrontational. Emphasizing collaboration over competition enables women to build strong relationships and foster growth, countering the prevailing narratives of internal rivalry [7, 8].

Mentorship And Sponsorship for Women Leaders

A significant challenge for women in business is finding mentors who provide time and guidance, but sponsorship is even more critical as it opens leadership doors that mentorship may not. While mentorship offers career advice for new roles, sponsorship actively promotes women into senior positions. Women often struggle to find sponsors, particularly since they need advocates from the C-Suite, which is limited by their underrepresentation in leadership. This issue highlights the importance of sponsorship to enhance women's visibility and break systemic barriers. For instance, among the 24 women in Forbes' most powerful women in tech, 12 benefited from strong mentorship relationships with industry leaders. Many women emphasize the value of mentorship in building connections that yield constructive feedback and encouragement. However, finding a mentor willing to engage formally proves difficult. Some have found informal advocates in leadership roles. Régine Brunel-Nugen from Patron underscores the necessity of a solid support network for achieving leadership goals, citing research on sponsorship effects in Kenyan universities. Cultivating mentorship and sponsorship relationships is vital for career progression. Smaller companies recognize the need for mentoring programs to cultivate a culture of leaders dedicated to mentoring the next generation of professional women [9, 10].

Intersectionality in Women's Leadership

You've heard of the glass ceiling that women leaders face. How about when they are also women of color? Rather than break through a glass ceiling, these women face a concrete basement. Pioneering research on how Black women navigate obstacles in the education system points to a critical blindspot. A case study found that 'low self-esteem amongst fellow Black women is the biggest impediment to successful leadership'. Africa, the UK, US—the struggles seem to resonate across oceans and borders. Countering this are the stronger, louder, and progressively successful efforts of women making changes in leadership

roles. Ultimately, the exploration into the organic struggles of being not just a woman, not just a leader, but a woman who is a leader makes the case for the adoption of intersectional frameworks by organizations for appreciable gains and strides in the breaking of hindering barriers. Discussions on leadership roles for women may look twice at such a statement—"Challenges face women of color leading schools when they try to push structural change"—preferring to not bring color into the equation or blindly thinking the same barriers for white and black women alike. There is a rejection of acknowledging Black and minority ethnic (BME) women's complex perils and innovations in leadership. This therefore calls for the adoption of intersectionality frameworks in the building of inclusive developmental policies at organizational levels. Intersectionality recognizes the diverse and complex ways women are situated within society, suggesting that categories like gender, race, class, and sexuality cannot be isolated from one another [11, 12].

The Role of Organizational Culture in Promoting Women Leaders

Organizations can significantly influence women's leadership advancement by affecting the organizational culture. Gender diversity is more likely to be achieved in cultures that are inclusive of differences, encourage agility and innovation, and have leadership teams committed to diversity. These cultures are often characterized by an environment that's supportive of individual flexibility and open to accommodating a variety of career pathways. In healthcare and academia, such cultural norms have been found to enable talented females to achieve positions of leadership despite the challenge of juggling work and family commitments. Alternatively, the lack of formalized flexibility and strong informality in accepting personal circumstances as a reason for work hours or career development focus has meant a focus on Masculine, full-time jobs and commitment-intensive environments. Instead, cultures can be created that support a working environment for women to develop their careers, such as degendering performance and promotion processes and expectations. Consequently, the openness of organizations towards diversity is considered an advantage for the development of skills or abilities in the organization. This is demonstrated in cultures where comprehensive gender diversity strategies are adopted, policies are strongly supported, and organizations are shown to have a strong commitment to gender diversity. Conversely, cases where policies and practices had underinvested resources, were formalist in nature and limited in flexibility, or directed solely at institutional rather than individual change, have not had the desired outcomes. Therefore, the issue of underrepresentation of women in organizational leadership needs to be managed in the development of the organization, one of which is the pattern or policy related to the pattern of progress [13, 14].

Case Studies of Successful Women Leaders

Many women have ascended to top executive roles in the U.S. public and private sectors. Case studies of these leaders illuminate unique paths to leadership, highlighting shared achievements and obstacles. The American women interviewed span various fields including business, public health, media, environmental protection, and politics, and collectively reflect a desire to survive professionally while advocating for improved quality of life and being vocal feminist role models. Their leadership style often embodies transformational and communitarian elements, emphasizing a commitment to reversing negative trends for working women. Women politicians in Michigan provided insights into the political dynamics of budget discussions, revealing common themes of triumph and adversity amid bureaucratic challenges. Documenting these narratives is crucial, especially in the 1990s, a decade witnessing progress toward gender equality in the workforce, despite a lag in promotions to executive roles. Research indicates that gender significantly hinders women's advancement in leadership and policymaking within various bureaucracies. Notable female executives share their experiences in overcoming these challenges, stressing the need for supportive systems and policy reforms to facilitate the rise of future generations of women into leadership positions [15, 16].

The Impact of Gender Diversity on Organizational Performance

Earlier this year, an article titled, "Women Prove Better Corporate leaders-but don't Even Notice When They're in charge." In making their case, researchers discovered that women leaders seem to be more adept at dealing with market risks. They base their argument on a study comparing the debt market performance of public companies run by female CEOs against those run by males in a significant emerging market; namely, default risk spread wherein the lower default risks equate with a lower spread percentage over United States Treasury yields. Theirs is a compelling case, and the study described in the present commentary provides a different light on how women can best lead not only on market performance but organizational performance in general. Although the financial performance of a company holds a strong influence on market risks, its future performance is not dependent on it. As explored in various studies, gender diversity has significant effects on an organization's decision-making and

innovation. These further noted studies have supported these claimed effects, showing that they can positively influence a company to perform well in market competition. More specifically, it was found that when a company can perform high in such matters, it can grow and expand, thus gaining a comparative advantage. So, in a competitive market, the sustainable competitive advantage will go to those who leverage knowledge, relationships, and technology to make better products or services. But the question of how a company may gain such knowledge, relationships, and technology, is less obvious. Rather than looking at the cultural context of the market, it is also possible to consider that a company may gain such advantages by "opening a more inclusive pipeline that encourages the flow of diverse ideas from which the most valuable among them can be leveraged… the vantage point bequeathed by gender or racial diversity be one such source of valuable ideas." In this light, gender diversity is best considered a strategic priority rather than an issue of compliance with equal opportunities [17, 18].

Strategies For Advancing Women in Leadership Roles

Advancing women in leadership is critical, as they remain underrepresented in top roles globally, holding only 24 percent of senior positions. Organizations must develop strategies to enhance women's leadership potential and presence. Here are ten actionable strategies to empower female leaders: 1. Develop and Publicize Plans with Measurable Goals - Organizations must create and share plans aimed at increasing female leadership, which positively impacts public perception. 2. Develop and Amplify Emerging Female Leaders - Address the issue of visibility by dedicating monthly leadership meetings to recognize female leaders deserving of promotion or high-visibility roles. 3. Implement Cross-Training Opportunities - Ensure that women engage in high-visibility assignments and projects essential for promotion, thus fostering diverse relationships and enhancing career advancement and retention [19, 20].

Government Policies and Initiatives Supporting Women in Business Leadership

Attention on women leaders highlights their role in combating poverty, violence, and inequality and fostering sustainable development. However, support for these leaders remains under-discussed. Government sponsorship and partnerships with stakeholders like the private sector, academia, and NGOs are essential for establishing a strong support system for women leaders aiming to create change. Addressing systemic change in women's leadership globally is crucial. The UN has long prioritized gender equality and women's empowerment, with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) playing a vital role. Women's political and public policy involvement is fundamental to sustainable development and peace, directly linked to human rights. Many countries are adopting policies for affirmative action, such as quotas, alongside political and fiscal initiatives like awareness campaigns, scholarships, and gender awareness in public service. The New Zealand Government's Pay Equity Taskforce exemplifies potential initiatives. However, progress has been inconsistent, with many women still excluded from leadership roles in government and the private sector. Recognizing and ensuring women's rights and leadership remains a significant challenge [21, 22].

The Future of Women in Leadership

The future Utopia or dystopia in business leadership for women could be painted in a variety of ways, however, readers of this book are well pleased Major insights are shared by the busy leaders of large corporations, smaller for-profit ventures, and profitable non-profit entities, increasing the visibility of women with influence in their fields. Recent histories are chronicling the successful, standard-bearing women at General Motors, Wall Street financial enterprises, Microsoft, within The National Geographic Society, and across America's political landscape. Readers are asking where are business leadership game-changers. Over time, they are coming. In short, one trend is the present/future "who's who" of women entrepreneurs and executives. A second trend is a convergence of societal view-sheds about "leadership," "entrepreneurship," "management," "ownership," and "work," toward more egalitarian gender concepts. The late 20th and 21st centuries are witnessing a movement toward (albeit incomplete) social equality of both genders. In support of such sweeping forecasts is the increasing number of young, visionary women and men entrepreneurs, business leaders, and policymakers who can be observed daily in high schools, higher education, professional methodologies, the multitudes of young women who are growing up with confident, immediate access to the world wide web, a proliferation of books, publications, presentations, conferences, and workshops, by professional businessmen and women who extol the vast financial advantages in promoting women to increasing responsibility and leadership in the global economy, and by an increasing band of journalists, authors, academics, and policymakers who demand an equal mix of local, national, and world concerns in business strategies that environmentally, and socially. This includes profitably reducing waste and pollution, stopping boom-and-bust economies, emphasizing perpetual competition, resulting in the long-term well-being and equal treatment of all people everywhere, democratizing economics and politics, bringing about kinetic balance among regional religious cultural

global interests, and nourishing one another according to the principles of trust, justice, respect, and progress. Enhancing the expectations of good things to come are the extensive and growing collaborations, trade, communication, and understanding that already flourish sector-to-sector, national-to-national, and global-to-global through the crucial mechanisms of the web, satellite, and wireless technologies. On the negative side, trends include the possible valid-tory mutual checkout society under constant and pervasive surveillance by the media cartels, a few owners of obliterate everything in vapid commercialism, uncontrolled passion, rapacious materialism, and consummate power. Women in either business or political leadership roles could suffer a backlash from the more archaic potentials of either gender because neither sex increases their sphere of influence based perhaps as much on their unique strengths as on the numerous commonalities and opportunities in this future [23, 24, 25].

CONCLUSION

The role of women in leadership is increasingly recognized as essential for business success and societal advancement. While historical and institutional barriers persist, progress is being made through mentorship, sponsorship, and cultural shifts in organizations. Women leaders bring unique strengths, including emotional intelligence, resilience, and collaboration, which contribute positively to business and governance. Intersectionality must be acknowledged to address the compounded challenges faced by women of diverse backgrounds. As organizations and policymakers continue to promote gender diversity through supportive policies and inclusive cultures, the future of women in leadership looks promising. Sustainable progress requires collective efforts from businesses, governments, and society to dismantle barriers and create an environment where women can thrive as leaders in all sectors.

REFERENCES

1. Bahe S, Ruiz R, Tejeda A, Sill S. Women in leadership: How a woman's background affects her leadership style. Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice. 2014;6(1):1.
2. Laing G, Duffy E, Anderson N, Antoine-Moussiaux N, Aragrande M, Luiz Beber C, Berezowski J, Boriani E, Canali M, Pedro Carmo L, Chantziaras I. Advancing one health: updated core competencies. CABI One Health. 2023 Jan 3(2023):ohcs20230002.
3. Chaves M, Roso J, Holleman A. The National Survey of Religious Leaders: Background, methods, and lessons learned in the research process. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 2022 Sep;61(3-4):737-49.
4. Hanyane BR, Ahiante J. The effect of misogyny on women's leadership in South Africa. Administratio Publica. 2022 May 1;30(2):130-47.
5. Tulshyan R, Burey JA. Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome. Harvard Business Review. 2021 Feb 11;11(2):1-7.
6. Lawson MA, Martin AE, Huda I, Matz SC. Hiring women into senior leadership positions is associated with a reduction in gender stereotypes in organizational language. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 2022 Mar 1;119(9):e2026443119. pnas.org
7. Korabik K, Ayman R. Gender and leadership in the corporate world: A multiperspective model. Women and leadership: Transforming visions and diverse voices. 2007 May 10:106-24.
8. Haber P. Iron sharpens iron: Exploring the experiences of female college student leaders. Advancing Women in Leadership Journal. 2011;31:86-101.
9. Chow R. Don't just mentor women and people of color. Sponsor them. Harvard Business Review. 2021 Jun 30;30:1-9.
10. Thelma CC, Ngulube L. Women in leadership: Examining barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions. Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports. 2024;18(6):273-90. researchgate.net
11. Gause SA. White privilege, Black resilience: Women of color leading the academy. Leadership. 2021 Feb;17(1):74-80.
12. Chance NL. Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. Journal of Humanistic Psychology. 2022 Jan;62(1):44-78.
13. Ababneh OM. The impact of organizational culture archetypes on quality performance and total quality management: the role of employee engagement and individual values. International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management. 2021 May 12;38(6):1387-408. researchgate.net
14. Tran QH. Organisational culture, leadership behaviour and job satisfaction in the Vietnam context. International Journal of Organizational Analysis. 2021 Jan 25;29(1):136-54.

15. Suriyanti S. The effect of leadership style, work motivation and organizational culture on employee performance mediated by job satisfaction. International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding. 2020;7(8):642-557.
16. Smith SG, Sinkford JC. Gender equality in the 21st century: Overcoming barriers to women's leadership in global health. Journal of Dental Education. 2022 Sep;86(9):1144-73.
17. Javeed SA, Teh BH, Ong TS, Chong LL, Abd Rahim MF, Latief R. How does green innovation strategy influence corporate financing? Corporate social responsibility and gender diversity play a moderating role. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2022 Jul 18;19(14):8724. mdpi.com
18. Cumming D, Leung TY. Board diversity and corporate innovation: Regional demographics and industry context. Corporate Governance: An International Review. 2021 May;29(3):277-96. [HTML]
19. Stevens GA, Beal T, Mbuya MN, Luo H, Neufeld LM, Addo OY, Adu-Afarwuah S, Alayón S, Bhutta Z, Brown KH, Jefferds ME. Micronutrient deficiencies among preschool-aged children and women of reproductive age worldwide: a pooled analysis of individual-level data from population-representative surveys. The Lancet Global Health. 2022 Nov 1;10(11):e1590-9. thelancet.com
20. Thomssen C, Balic M, Harbeck N, Gnant M. St. Gallen/Vienna 2021: a brief summary of the consensus discussion on customizing therapies for women with early breast cancer. Breast Care. 2021 May 3;16(2):135-43.
21. de Silva de Alwis R. Why women's leadership is the cause of our time. UCLA J. Int'l L. Foreign Aff.. 2013;18:87.
22. Sharafizad J. Women business owners' adoption of information and communication technology. Journal of Systems and Information Technology. 2016 Nov 14;18(4):331-45.
23. Lamont M. Addressing recognition gaps: Destigmatization and the reduction of inequality. American Sociological Review. 2018 Jun;83(3):419-44.
24. Chenoweth E. Can nonviolent resistance survive COVID-19?. InRights at Stake and the COVID-19 Pandemic 2023 Feb 28 (pp. 134-146). Routledge.
25. McKenna MA. Women in power. New England Journal of Public Policy. 2007;22(1):4.

Page | 123