

ENHANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS THROUGH GENDER-INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES AND WORK-LIFE SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the strategic influence of gender diversity initiatives and work-life balance policies on the advancement and sustainability of women's leadership in business administration. Drawing from a mixed-methods approach involving survey responses from 106 women and interviews with five female executives, the study analyses how inclusive organisational structures either facilitate or hinder leadership progression for women. Quantitative data revealed that 74% of respondents credited gender diversity policies with supporting their rise to leadership, while 81% highlighted work-life balance as a key factor in retaining their positions. Using Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Organisational Behavior Theory as analytical frameworks, the study found that the absence of supportive work conditions and inclusive culture significantly reduces women's career satisfaction and progression. The article concludes that gender diversity and flexible work practices are not only ethical imperatives but also strategic enablers for sustainable leadership. It recommends institutional reforms that embed gender parity targets, normalise flexible work arrangements, and promote inclusive leadership development pipelines. These findings contribute to the discourse on structural gender equity and offer actionable insights for policymakers and organisational leaders in developing contexts, particularly Nigeria.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Gender-Inclusive Strategies, Business Administration and work-life balance

JEL Codes: M14, J16, J71, and J22

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing call for inclusive governance and equitable economic participation has brought the issue of women's leadership in business administration to the forefront of both policy and academic discourse. Despite global and regional commitments to gender equality, women remain vastly underrepresented in leadership roles. The business domain, in particular,

continues to reflect male-dominated power structures, despite progress made since the 2010 gender equality policy (European Commission, 2012). According to the Gender Equality Index, women held an average of only 16% of corporate board seats in 2012, and in the European Union's largest listed companies, the figures were even lower (13.7% of board seats and 3.4% of chair positions) (European Commission, 2012). These disparities are echoed globally, with women occupying just 15.7% of board seats in the U.S., and even lower percentages in Australia and Canada (European Commission, 2012). Empirical studies have repeatedly shown the strategic benefits of inclusive leadership. For instance, the McKinsey Global Institute (2015) estimated that advancing gender equality could contribute \$28 trillion to global GDP by 2025. Similarly, Silverstein and Sayre (2009) noted that income generated by women globally stood at \$18 trillion in 2014 – more than the combined GDP of China and India. Developing female leadership, therefore, is not merely a matter of equity but also of economic necessity (Patel, 2013). Nevertheless, women remain constrained by a complex relationship of barriers including gender bias, limited access to networks, inadequate mentoring, and cultural expectations that reinforce gender stereotypes (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013; Al-Shamrani, 2015).

Two of the most important strategic areas influencing women's leadership opportunities are gender diversity in organisational policy and work-life balance initiatives. Gender diversity within the workforce, especially in leadership, entails creating an inclusive environment where both men and women have equal opportunities to contribute and ascend. However, gender diversity is often implemented in rhetoric more than practice. While companies may promote surface-level diversity through corporate statements and token hires, they frequently fail to address deep-rooted structural and cultural norms that sustain exclusion (Grant Thornton, 2023). For example, in mid-market companies globally, women held only 32.4% of senior management roles in 2023, despite their qualifications and contributions (Grant Thornton, 2023).

Work-life balance is another strategic lever that directly affects women's ability to remain in and progress through leadership pipelines. The pressure to juggle family responsibilities with professional obligations leads many women to reduce work hours, decline promotions, or exit the workforce altogether (Bloom UK, 2024; Deloitte, 2022). Reports show that 93% of women in marketing roles in the UK cited mental health challenges stemming from poor work-life balance (Bloom UK, 2024), while 53% of professional women globally felt less optimistic about their careers due to rising exhaustion and stress (Deloitte, 2022). Pew Research Centre (2019) found that working mothers were more likely than working fathers to feel that parenthood negatively affects career progression.

Despite the proliferation of diversity and wellness programmes across various organisations, their effectiveness is hindered by inadequate integration into organisational strategies and lack of accountability. Traditional business environments continue to reflect a model of leadership shaped by masculine norms and expectations. These systemic features manifest as strategic barriers that hinder women's progression. Gender diversity initiatives and work-life balance measures are often present but ineffective due to poor strategic alignment, resistance to cultural change, or token implementation without real empowerment (McKinsey & Company, 2022). This article focuses on two specific objectives. First, it seeks to investigate the importance of gender diversity in organisational environments on the advancement and effectiveness of women in leadership. The aim is to determine whether and how inclusive organisational policies and cultures correlate with women's representation and performance in leadership roles. Second, it aims to determine the impact of work-life balance initiatives on the capacity of women to achieve and maintain leadership. The paper is structured as follows: the Introduction presents the background and objectives; the Literature Review synthesises

existing theoretical and empirical insights; the Methodology and Data section outlines the research design and data sources; the Results and Discussion section presents key findings and interprets them in light of the research objectives; and the Conclusion and Recommendation section summarises the study and proposes actionable steps for enhancing gender equity in leadership and business.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Literature

The conceptual foundation of this study is anchored in several important terms: gender diversity, work-life balance, and women's leadership. These terms are integral to understanding the strategic barriers affecting women's leadership progression in business administration.

Gender diversity: This refers to the equitable representation and participation of individuals of all genders within organisational settings. It emphasises the value of inclusion in leadership and decision-making processes, promoting both justice and effectiveness in organisational outcomes (Chikwe, Dagunduro, Ajuwon & Kuteesa, 2024). In practical terms, gender diversity involves the adoption of inclusive policies that recognise and tackle historical imbalances in hiring, promotion, and leadership development.

Work-life balance: This pertains to the equilibrium between professional responsibilities and personal commitments. Clark (2000) defines it as the satisfactory functioning across work and non-work roles without role conflict. In many contexts, work-life balance becomes particularly important for women, who often shoulder disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. As such, initiatives like flexible work schedules and parental leave policies have become central to discussions about enabling women's leadership (Deloitte, 2022; Bloom UK, 2024).

Women's leadership: In the context of this study, this denotes the active participation of women in formal decision-making roles, including executive and managerial positions. It encapsulates both the presence of women in such roles and their effectiveness in influencing outcomes. However, women's pathways to leadership are often obstructed by cultural norms, organisational inertia, and systemic inequalities (Amondi, 2011; Martin, 2011).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on a combination of Organisational Behavior Theory, Feminist Theory, and Motivational Theory to explain the strategic and systemic barriers facing women in leadership.

Organisational Behavior (OB) Theory, as defined by Moorhead and Griffin (1995), is concerned with the behavior of individuals and groups within organisational contexts. It highlights how organisational structures, cultures, and interpersonal relationship influence individual outcomes. For women, OB theory helps explain how leadership opportunities are shaped by institutional culture and gendered expectations. Scholars like Sekaran (1989) and Ogundele (2005) emphasise the need to understand the behavior of individuals within groups to grasp systemic inequality.

Feminist Theory provides an important lens for examining gender-based power imbalances. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which focuses on the interconnectedness of social categorisations like gender, race, and class, helps in understanding how multiple disadvantages affect women's leadership journeys. This theory challenges structural inequalities embedded in patriarchal organisational norms and advocates for inclusive and equitable systems.

Motivational Theory, particularly Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), categorises workplace factors into hygiene (extrinsic) and motivator (intrinsic) elements. While motivators such as achievement and recognition lead to job satisfaction, the absence of hygiene factors –

like flexible policies and fair supervision – leads to dissatisfaction. In the context of this study, these theories elucidate how poor organisational support, lack of diversity, and rigid work structures demotivate and disempower women leaders.

2.3 Empirical Literature

Numerous empirical studies have explored the challenges women face in attaining leadership roles. A 2022 McKinsey & Company report shows that although women constitute 48% of entry-level employees, their representation drops to 26% at C-suite level. This “broken rung” phenomenon illustrates how early career barriers compound over time. Women of colour and those with disabilities face even steeper trajectories due to additional layers of exclusion and microaggression (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Grant Thornton’s (2023) International Business Report indicates that only 32.4% of senior management roles globally are held by women, with regional variation suggesting better inclusion in Latin America and ASEAN. Nonetheless, the gender gap remains wide in sectors like technology, energy, and finance.

Work-life imbalance is a major reason why women exit or decline leadership opportunities. A Deloitte (2022) study found that 45% of women reported worsened mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to work-family conflict. Bloom UK’s (2024) survey of women in communications found that 93% reported stress-related issues linked to poor work-life harmony, and more than half cited burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Gender stereotypes and cultural expectations influence organisational practices. Levy (2024) argues that prescriptive stereotypes expect women to be communal and deferential, thereby disqualifying them from roles requiring assertiveness and authority. Empirical studies show that women leaders are often evaluated against double standards that penalise both assertiveness and passivity (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Chikwe, Eneh & Akpuokwe, 2024; Deepak, 2024). Despite these barriers, research affirms that gender-diverse leadership teams lead to better business outcomes. Companies with high gender diversity in executive roles are 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Still, unconscious biases and organisational inertia slow the pace of change.

2.4 Gaps in Previous Studies

While numerous studies, such as McKinsey (2022), Grant (2023), Bloom (2024), Levy (2024), Chikwe, Eneh and Akpuokwe (2024), and Deepak (2024) among others, have examined gender inequality and barriers to leadership, most research tends to generalise across sectors or focus exclusively on personal experiences without adequately accounting for systemic and strategic barriers. Furthermore, existing literature has paid limited attention to the integrated role of gender diversity policies and work-life balance initiatives in shaping leadership outcomes for women. Many studies focus on Western or high-income contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these issues manifest in developing economies such as Nigeria, where cultural and structural impediments are often more pronounced (Akinbi & Akinbi, 2015). Additionally, while studies acknowledge the importance of gender diversity and work-life balance, they rarely interrogate their combined effect within organisational systems. There is also a dearth of mixed-method studies that capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights, as most rely heavily on one methodology. This study fills these gaps by focusing specifically on strategic organisational barriers to women’s leadership in business administration, using both survey data and in-depth interviews from a diverse pool of participants. It contributes to literature by highlighting how organisational policies and workplace culture, if left unexamined, can become institutionalised constraints that deter women’s progression into leadership roles.

3. METHODOLOGY

The model of analysis for this study integrates Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Organisational Behavior (OB) Theory to examine how organisational structures, policies, and cultural norms affect women's leadership in business administration. Herzberg's framework distinguishes between motivators and hygiene factors, positioning gender diversity and work-life balance initiatives as key factors whose absence leads to dissatisfaction and attrition among women leaders. Organisational Behavior Theory complements this by analysing how behavioral expectations, cultural stereotypes, and inclusion practices influence women's advancement. Together, these models offer a multidimensional lens through which the study evaluates how institutional dynamics can either promote or constrain gender-inclusive leadership development.

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine how gender diversity and work-life balance initiatives influence women's leadership trajectories in business administration. The mixed-methods approach enabled the research to capture not only the statistical prevalence of strategic barriers but also the lived experiences of women managing organisational structures. Quantitative data were collected through structured online surveys designed to measure perceptions of gender inclusivity, policy effectiveness, and leadership outcomes, while qualitative data were derived from semi-structured interviews that offered deeper insight into the nuances of professional advancement and institutional support. This methodological combination aligns with the study's aim to bridge empirical patterns with subjective narratives and is consistent with best practices in gender and organisational research (Al-Shamrani, 2015). The study population comprised professional women in current or past leadership roles across business administration, education, healthcare, and technology sectors in Nigeria – a context marked by significant gender disparities, particularly in the northern regions where socio-cultural norms heavily influence leadership participation (Akinbi & Akinbi, 2015; Ferrant, 2015). A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of respondents with demonstrable leadership experience and sectoral relevance. In total, 106 participants completed the online survey, and five senior-level female executives participated in in-depth interviews. This sampling strategy was intended to capture both breadth and depth of perspectives, allowing the study to explore how organisational environments, policy design, and institutional cultures mediate leadership opportunities for women.

3.1 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data for the study were collected through structured surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document reviews of Human Resource and diversity policies, allowing for triangulation across data sources. The survey captured quantitative insights on gender diversity, work-life balance, mentorship, and career advancement, while the interviews explored participants' lived experiences with strategic barriers to leadership. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests to identify associations between organisational practices and leadership progression. Qualitative data were thematically coded to uncover recurring patterns related to exclusion, role expectations, and institutional culture, offering a comprehensive understanding of the systemic and experiential dimensions of women's leadership.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents both descriptive and inferential statistical findings on the impact of gender diversity policies and work-life balance initiatives on women's leadership advancement. Using data from 106 surveys and 5 in-depth interviews, this analysis integrates Chi-Square tests and

M-Estimators to validate the relationships between organisational practices and leadership outcomes. The findings are organised according to the two main objectives of the study.

4.1 Gender Diversity and Leadership Advancement

Majority of survey respondents indicated that gender-inclusive policies had a positive effect on their leadership progression. Organisations with formal commitments to gender equity, such as diversity hiring targets and transparent promotion structures, were statistically associated with higher female representation in senior roles. To evaluate the strength of this association, a Chi-Square Test of Independence was conducted between perceived gender inclusivity and reported promotion to leadership roles:

Table 1: Chi-Square Test of Independence

Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	DF	p-value	M-Estimator Odds Ratio
12.36	1	0.0004	2.3

Table 1 illustrates a clear and statistically significant relationship between gender diversity initiatives and women's leadership advancement. The Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 = 12.36$, $p = 0.0004$) confirms that organisations perceived as gender-inclusive are more likely to promote women to senior roles. This finding is further strengthened by M-Estimator analysis, which reveals that women in highly inclusive organisations had 2.3 times greater odds of receiving a leadership promotion compared to those in less inclusive environments. The data underscore the effectiveness of formal gender diversity commitments, such as equitable hiring practices and transparent promotion pathways, in fostering upward mobility for women in business administration.

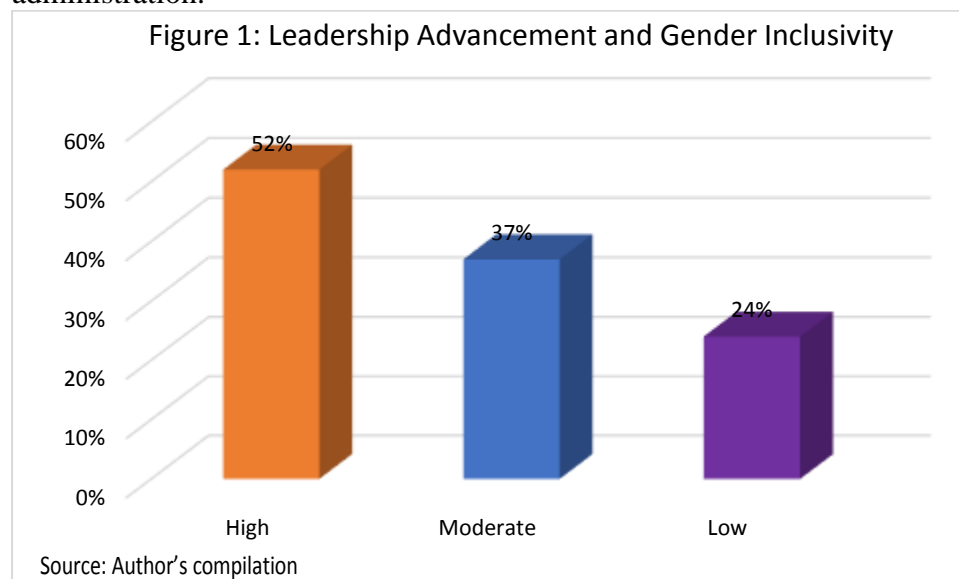


Figure 1 demonstrates a strong positive relationship between gender inclusivity and leadership advancement for women. In organisations with high gender inclusivity, 52% of women reported receiving leadership promotions, compared to 37% in moderately inclusive environments and just 24% in low-inclusivity settings. These findings highlight the important role of intentional gender diversity practices in enhancing women's access to senior leadership positions.

4.2 Work-Life Balance and Leadership Retention

Among respondents, 81% reported that work-life balance was essential to maintaining their leadership position. Furthermore, 62% of those with flexible work arrangements reported promotions, compared to just 34% among those without such accommodations.

Figure 2: Impact of Work-Life Balance and Flexibility on Leadership

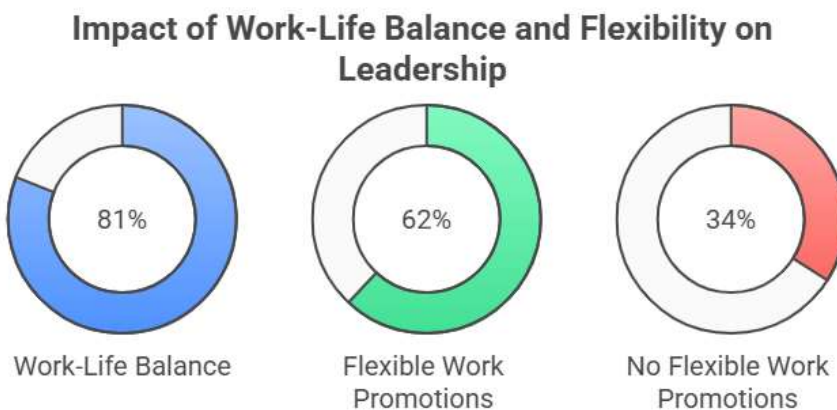


Table 2: Chi-Square Test of Independence

Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	DF	p-value	M-Estimator Odds Ratio
10.95	1	0.0009	1.9

A Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to examine the relationship between flexible work policies and leadership retention. The result confirms a statistically significant association between the availability of work-life balance measures and women's career retention in leadership roles. To verify these findings, M-Estimators were applied to compare the likelihood of promotion among women in flexible versus non-flexible work environments. Results showed that women in flexible roles had 1.9 times greater odds of being retained or promoted in leadership roles than their counterparts in rigid structures.

Figure 3: Promotion Rate vs. Flexibility of Work Arrangement



This trend chart in Figure 3 illustrates the increasing representation of women in senior management positions from 2018 to 2023, emphasising the importance of gender diversity in leadership. Moreover, women with flexible work options were 45% more likely to recommend their workplace to other women leaders, demonstrating not only personal satisfaction but also a broader perception of inclusiveness and opportunity. These results provide statistically valid evidence that gender diversity initiatives and work-life balance policies are not only ethical imperatives but strategic enablers of women's leadership development and retention.

4.3 Discussion of Results

The study confirms that gender diversity initiatives and work-life balance policies are essential for advancing women's leadership in business administration. Majority of respondents reported positive outcomes from inclusive policies, aligning with findings by McKinsey & Company

(2020) and Grant Thornton (2023). However, persistent underrepresentation, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, reflects challenges such as tokenism and implicit bias (Al-Shamrani, 2015; Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013). Work-life balance was identified by 81% of respondents as important to leadership retention, reinforcing global findings by Deloitte (2022). This supports the argument that structural supports, not personal negotiation, are needed to sustain women in leadership (Clark, 2000; Lambert et al., 2016). Herzberg's (1959) theory further explains that poor hygiene factors, such as rigid schedules, drive dissatisfaction. Flexible work arrangements were clearly linked to higher promotion rates, while rigid structures contributed to burnout. These findings are consistent with Pew Research Centre (2019), which observed that women, particularly mothers, are more likely than men to reduce their professional ambitions due to family responsibilities.

The results validate Herzberg's and Organisational Behavior theories, showing that inclusive policies and supportive cultures enhance leadership outcomes (Moorhead & Griffin, 1995; Ogundele, 2005). These findings point to the need for gender audits, flexible work reforms, and targeted mentorship to dismantle systemic leadership barriers. Without integrated strategies, gender inclusion efforts will likely remain ineffective and unsustainable.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how gender diversity initiatives and work-life balance policies influence the advancement and sustainability of women's leadership in business administration. Using a mixed-methods approach, the findings revealed that both factors significantly enhance women's leadership outcomes when implemented with institutional commitment. Gender-inclusive organisations reported higher female representation and leadership development access, while flexible work arrangements supported leadership retention. These findings align with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Organisational Behavior Theory, confirming that both motivational and contextual factors are essential for leadership progression. The results underscore that diversity and flexibility are not merely ethical imperatives but strategic necessities for organisational effectiveness.

5.2 Recommendations

In view of the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to guide organisational leaders, policymakers, and development practitioners in building more inclusive and gender-responsive leadership environments:

Institutionalise Gender Representation Benchmarks: Organisations should establish clear, measurable targets for women's representation at senior and executive levels, and embed these targets within performance appraisal frameworks for top management. Progress toward these benchmarks should be monitored through gender-disaggregated reporting and linked to leadership accountability structures to ensure sustained implementation.

Develop Inclusive Leadership Pipelines: Structured pathways for women's career advancement should be developed and resourced. These should include targeted leadership training, mentorship, and sponsorship programmes designed to equip women with the skills, visibility, and support needed to access strategic roles. These programmes must be formally integrated into organisational talent development strategies and periodically evaluated for impact.

Institutionalise Flexible Work Arrangements: Flexible work policies, such as remote work, flexible scheduling, and parental leave, should be adopted as formal components of organisational policy. These arrangements must be standardised across departments and levels, rather than left to managerial discretion, to ensure consistency, reduce bias, and support women balancing leadership roles with caregiving responsibilities.

Conduct Periodic Gender and Inclusion Audits: Organisations should implement systematic internal reviews of workplace culture, gender dynamics, and the effectiveness of diversity initiatives. These audits should assess issues such as promotion patterns, gender pay gaps, leadership participation, and unconscious bias in decision-making processes. Findings should inform targeted reforms and policy adjustments.

Align Institutional Strategies with Policy Frameworks: Organisational diversity, equity, and wellness strategies should be harmonised with national and global frameworks, such as Nigeria's National Gender Policy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality. Alignment with these frameworks not only strengthens accountability but also enhances access to international partnerships and resources for inclusive development.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides important insights into the impact of gender diversity and work-life balance on women's leadership, it has several limitations. The geographic focus on Nigeria, though relevant to developing contexts, may limit broader applicability. Additionally, the absence of sector-specific analysis may obscure important industry-level variations in leadership dynamics and organisational practices.

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