Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Overview: This paper delves into the pervasive challenges hindering women's progression into leadership roles. The study was conducted in Lusaka district, the capital city of Zambia from which the participants were selected for the study from 6 different organizations, 3 private and 3 government institutions.

Body of Knowledge: Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and empirical evidence, it identifies key barriers impeding women's ascent to leadership positions across various sectors. The analysis encompasses societal, organizational, and individual factors contributing to the gender gap in leadership. Societal norms, biases, and cultural expectations often perpetuate gender stereotypes, creating systemic hurdles for women aspiring to leadership roles. Organizational structures and practices, including lack of mentorship opportunities, gender bias in hiring and promotion, and workplace discrimination, further exacerbate these barriers.

Methods: The total target population was 601. The sample size involved a total of 61 respondents, which was 10% of the target population. A mixed method approach was used in this study in

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combination with the descriptive survey design. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data. Qualitative and Quantitative techniques of data analysis was used, and data was presented on the analytical tools such as tables, figures and charts.

Results: The study findings indicated that deep-seated societal attitudes often favor men in leadership roles. Implicit biases, both conscious and unconscious, can lead to discriminatory practices in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations. Similarly, the study found that women often encounter unequal opportunities for advancement, including limited access to high-profile projects, stretch assignments, and sponsorship from senior leaders. Without equal access to career-enhancing opportunities, women may struggle to develop the skills and experiences necessary for leadership roles.

Recommendation: Raising awareness and concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including policymakers, organizations, and individuals through implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, promoting equitable hiring practices, and fostering supportive workplace cultures are crucial steps toward dismantling systemic barriers to women's leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women in leadership roles have long been a topic of discussion and analysis, reflecting both progress and persistent challenges in achieving gender equality in various spheres of society. One notable aspect is the increasing recognition of the value that women bring to leadership positions, including their unique perspectives, collaborative approaches, and empathetic leadership styles. Research indicates that gender diversity in leadership is associated with better organizational performance and decision-making outcomes. Companies with more women in leadership positions tend to demonstrate higher financial returns, enhanced innovation, and improved corporate governance. According Chanda [1] in the 1920s and 1930s, women started exerting pressure on the League of Nations and later on the United Nation and the principle of equality was recognized in the United Nations Charter of 1945. Two of the fundamental rights of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 are the right to vote and stand for elections without distinction as to sex, race or status. It was this realization that women still lacked real equality that brought about the second wave of feminism that was to change the focus of the fight towards equality. Despite several advancements in place, women continue to face significant barriers to accessing and advancing into leadership roles. Scholars of feminism and gender equality have long argued that women 's ability to make an impact in male-dominated institutions will be limited until they are represented in numbers large enough to have a collective voice. The justification for this, Jackman [2] argues that the numerically many or dominants 'will control the group and its culture, while the numerically few or tokens 'will only be reduced to symbolic representatives of their social category. Structural inequalities, such as gender bias, discrimination, and entrenched stereotypes, often impede women's career progression and limit their representation in top leadership positions. The phenomenon known as the "glass ceiling" illustrates the invisible barriers that prevent women from ascending to the highest echelons of power within organizations.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the resilience and vulnerabilities of women in leadership roles. While some female leaders have been praised for their effective crisis management and empathetic leadership during the pandemic, others have faced heightened scrutiny and gender-based criticism in the public sphere. The pandemic has underscored the importance of supporting women in leadership positions and addressing the systemic barriers that continue to hinder their advancement. In contemporary society, the discourse surrounding women in leadership roles is both critical and complex. While strides have been made towards gender equality in various spheres, women still face formidable barriers to advancement in leadership positions. This study aimed to delve into the multifaceted challenges that hinder women's progression into leadership roles, examining both systemic and individual barriers that impede their ascent. According to Chanda & Chitondo [3], motivation refers to the reasons or driving forces behind a person's actions, desires, and behaviors. It involves the psychological processes that initiate, direct, and sustain behavior toward achieving particular goals or fulfilling certain needs. Motivation can stem from internal factors, such as personal

beliefs, values, and aspirations, as well as external factors, such as social norms, rewards, and pressures. Historically, leadership has been predominantly associated with masculine traits and qualities, perpetuating the notion that men are inherently better suited for leadership roles. This deeply ingrained stereotype creates a pervasive bias against women, leading to their underrepresentation in leadership positions across industries and sectors. Moreover, societal expectations regarding gender roles often pressure women to prioritize familial responsibilities over career advancement, further constraining their opportunities for leadership [4]. Institutional barriers within organizations also pose significant challenges for women aspiring to leadership roles. Structural inequalities, such as gender pay gaps and limited access to mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, create barriers to entry and progression. Additionally, entrenched biases in hiring and promotion processes can disadvantage women, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation in leadership positions.

Cultural attitudes and norms play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. Culture comes from a Latin word 'cultura' which means to cherish or to practice. Culture therefore in the broadcast sense refers to all human activities, which human beings pass on from one generation to another. Culture is defined as a collaboration of shared meanings or common beliefs among an organization's members [5]. Its founders have a significant influence in the development of the initial values and principles that tailor the fabric of the group, something that may not necessarily be apparent to newcomers to the organization and sometimes taken for granted by its seasoned members. Deeply rooted stereotypes and unconscious biases contribute to the marginalization of women in leadership, as they are often perceived as less competent or authoritative than their male counterparts. These cultural barriers not only undermine women's confidence and ambition but also inhibit their ability to assert themselves in leadership roles.

Moreover, empowering women through mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development programs can help cultivate a pipeline of female talent and equip women with the skills and resources needed to thrive in leadership roles. Creating supportive networks and alliances that amplify women's voices and advocate for their advancement can also contribute to breaking down systemic barriers

and fostering greater gender parity in leadership positions. As Chanda & Zohaib [6] put it in their study on "harnessing information communication technology in civic education teaching and learning: A comprehensive review", many countries around the globe have realized the need to educate citizens especially, the young people in order to secure the future of society. This requires the imparting of necessary skills and knowledge that would shape, nurture and inculcate values that could help propel the agenda of nations to bring about development. In essence, recognizing and addressing the barriers to women's advancement in leadership requires concerted efforts at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The statement problem regarding "women in leadership: examining barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions" encompasses the critical examination of the challenges and obstacles hindering women's progress in attaining leadership roles. This inquiry delves into the multifaceted nature of gender disparity within organizational hierarchies, identifying systemic, societal, and institutional barriers that impede women's career advancement. Chanda [5] noted that the low representation of women in decision making positions is a worldwide concern. The fact that women all over the world have been excluded from representation must be taken as the starting point, not the abstract principles of representation. The problem lies in the misunderstanding that women want to be led as opposed to lead and therefore shun political positions. Factors such as implicit biases, stereotypical perceptions, limited access to mentorship and networking opportunities, as well as work-life balance issues, contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles [7]. Understanding these barriers is crucial for devising effective strategies and policies aimed at fostering gender inclusivity and creating environments conducive to women's leadership development and success. Thus, it was for this motive that the study was conducted to assess various barriers that hinder women's progression into leadership roles within organizations.

1.2 Main Research Question

What are the various barriers that hinder women's progression into leadership roles within organizations?

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Catalogue the various barriers that hinder women's progression into leadership roles within organizations.
- Examine how implicit biases and stereotypes within organizational structures contribute to barriers for women seeking leadership roles.

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to comprehensively explore the challenges and obstacles that impede women's progress in attaining leadership roles. By conducting a thorough examination, the study aimed to identify the systemic, organizational, and societal barriers that hinder women's career advancement.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study on women in leadership: examining barriers to women's advancement in a leadership position" delves into a crucial area of inquiry with far-reaching implications. By investigating the obstacles that hinder women's progression into leadership roles, this study offers insights into systemic inequalities and societal biases that persist in contemporary workplaces. Understanding these barriers is essential for fostering inclusivity, diversity, and gender equity within organizations. Moreover, addressing these challenges can lead to more effective leadership structures, improved organizational performance, and enhanced innovation. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and serves as a catalyst for promoting meaningful change in professional environments worldwide.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Implicit Bias and Stereotypes in Leadership

Implicit bias and stereotypes are pervasive phenomena that can significantly impact leadership dynamics within organizations. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence our understanding, actions, and decisions [8]. These biases often operate below the level of conscious awareness, making them challenging to recognize and address. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are generalized beliefs about certain groups or individuals, which can influence how leaders perceive and interact with others. In the context of leadership, implicit biases and stereotypes can manifest in various ways. For instance, leaders may unintentionally favor individuals who conform to traditional gender, racial, or cultural norms, while unconsciously overlooking the contributions of those who deviate from these norms. This can result in disparities in opportunities, recognition, and advancement within the organization. Moreover, implicit biases and stereotypes can affect leadership behaviors and decision-making processes. Leaders may inadvertently rely on stereotypes when assessing the capabilities or suitability of team members for certain roles or assignments. This can lead to missed opportunities for talent development and hinder the organization's ability to leverage the diverse skills and perspectives of its workforce. Furthermore, implicit biases and stereotypes can contribute to a lack of inclusivity and belonging within the organizational culture. When leaders are influenced by unconscious biases, they may inadvertently create barriers that prevent certain groups from fully participating or feeling valued within the workplace [9]. This can result in decreased morale, engagement, and retention among employees, ultimately undermining organizational performance and effectiveness. Addressing implicit bias and stereotypes in leadership requires proactive efforts to raise awareness, foster inclusivity, and promote equitable practices. Leaders can undergo training and development programs to become more conscious of their biases and learn strategies to mitigate their impact on decision-making. Additionally, organizations can implement policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels, ensuring that leadership opportunities are accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds.

2.2 Organizational Culture and Its Impact on Women's Advancement

Organizational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the professional landscape for women, particularly in their advancement to leadership positions. A supportive and inclusive culture can create an environment where women feel empowered to excel and thrive, while a toxic or male-dominated culture can act as a barrier to their progress. One significant impact of

organizational culture on women's advancement in leadership is the presence of gender biases and stereotypes [10]. In cultures where traditional gender roles are reinforced, women may face subtle or overt discrimination, such as being overlooked for promotions or being assigned less challenging tasks. These biases can hinder their career advancement and perpetuate the glass ceiling phenomenon. Moreover, organizational cultures that prioritize long hours and a "workaholic" mentality can disproportionately affect women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. This can create a barrier to their advancement as they may struggle to balance work and family commitments, leading to feelings of guilt or being undervalued. Conversely, a culture that values work-life balance and flexibility can benefit women by enabling them to manage their professional and personal responsibilities more effectively. Policies such as flexible working hours, telecommuting options, and parental leave can support women in advancing their careers without sacrificing their personal lives. Leadership styles within an organization also influence women's advancement. Cultures that value collaborative and inclusive leadership tend to be more supportive of women leaders, as these styles align with qualities often associated with female leadership. On the other hand, cultures that emphasize hierarchical and authoritarian leadership may create barriers for women who prefer a more participatory approach. Additionally, Schachter [11] says that the presence of female role models and mentors within an organization can significantly impact women's advancement in leadership. Cultures that actively promote mentorship and sponsorship programs for women provide valuable support networks and opportunities for skill development, helping to break down barriers and empower aspiring female leaders.

2.3 Government Policies and Legislative Initiatives Supporting Gender Equality in Leadership

Through concerted efforts, various nations have implemented measures to address the disparities and promote inclusivity. These initiatives encompass a spectrum of strategies aimed at breaking down systemic barriers and promoting equal opportunities for all genders. One significant aspect of government policies supporting gender equality in leadership is the implementation of quota systems or targets. Many countries have introduced quotas

mandating a minimum representation of women in leadership roles, such as corporate boards or political bodies [1]. These quotas serve as a catalyst for change, compelling organizations to diversify their leadership and provide women with greater access to decision-making positions. Additionally, legislative measures often focus on eliminating discriminatory practices in hiring, promotion, and compensation. Laws prohibiting gender-based discrimination in the workplace and enforcing equal pay for equal work contribute to creating a level playing field for all individuals, irrespective of gender identity. By enforcing these regulations, governments ensure that meritocracy prevails and that individuals are evaluated based on their abilities rather than gender stereotypes. Furthermore, government policies often include initiatives to support women's participation in education and professional development. Programs offering scholarships, mentorship opportunities, and career advancement training help empower women to pursue leadership roles and overcome systemic barriers. By investing in women's education and skill development, governments lay the foundation for a more diverse and inclusive leadership landscape [12]. Moreover, legislative efforts extend beyond the corporate sphere to encompass political representation. Measures such as electoral quotas or party mandates for gender-balanced candidate lists aim to increase women's participation in elected positions. These initiatives are vital for ensuring that legislative bodies reflect the diversity of society and that women's voices are heard in the decision-making process. In addition to proactive measures, governments also play a role in raising awareness and changing societal attitudes towards gender equality. Public campaigns, educational programs, and advocacy efforts led by government agencies help challenge stereotypes, promote gender-sensitive policies, and foster a culture of inclusivity. By addressing deep-rooted biases and promoting cultural change, governments pave the way for a more equitable and diverse leadership landscape.

2.4 Gender Empowerment in Leadership Roles

Gender empowerment in leadership roles is a multifaceted concept crucial for fostering inclusivity and diversity within organizations and societies. At its core, it entails creating an environment where individuals of all genders have equal opportunities, access to resources,

and representation in leadership positions. Mills & Newman [7] narrated that one key aspect of gender empowerment in leadership is dismantling systemic barriers that hinder the advancement of women and marginalized genders. This requires addressing implicit biases, discriminatory practices, and structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based disparities in leadership roles. Furthermore, promoting gender empowerment involves implementing policies and initiatives aimed at fostering gender diversity and inclusion in leadership. This includes measures such as mentorship programs, leadership development initiatives, and gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion practices. Effective communication and advocacy are also essential components of gender empowerment in leadership. By raising awareness about the importance of gender equality and challenging stereotypes and norms that perpetuate gender bias, leaders can help create a more inclusive and equitable organizational culture. Moreover, empowering individuals to challenge gender norms and stereotypes within their spheres of influence is critical for driving meaningful change. Leaders can play a pivotal role in modeling inclusive behaviors, promoting gender-balanced teams, and amplifying the voices of underrepresented genders in decision-making processes. Ultimately, achieving gender empowerment in leadership requires a concerted effort from individuals, organizations, and policymakers alike [13]. By prioritizing gender equality, fostering inclusive leadership practices, and challenging systemic barriers, we can create a more equitable and just society where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive in leadership roles, regardless of gender.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

At its core, the framework encompasses concepts like the glass ceiling, which denotes invisible barriers hindering women's progress to higher leadership roles, and the labyrinth metaphor, which portrays the complex and challenging paths women navigate in their career advancement due to societal and organizational factors. Additionally, social identity theory sheds light on how gender stereotypes and biases influence perceptions and behaviors towards women leaders, while intersectionality theory emphasizes the intersection of gender with other identity factors like race, ethnicity, and class in shaping women's experiences in leadership. Chitondo & Chanda [14] explains that ethnic

diversity is the existence of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds or identities. Diversity is about what makes each of us unique and includes our backgrounds, personality, life experiences and beliefs, all of the things that make us who we are. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to comprehensively understand the multifaceted nature of barriers to women's leadership advancement and propose strategies for promoting gender equality in leadership roles.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

A mixed method approach was used in this study in combination with the descriptive survey design. Borg and Gall (1989), states that descriptive study regulates and reports the way things are and generally involves assessing attitudes, opinions towards individuals, organizations and procedures. In this regard, descriptive design was used to explore the challenges and obstacles that impede women's progress in attaining leadership roles within various sectors.

3.2 Research Site

This study was conducted in Lusaka district, the capital city of Zambia from which the participants were selected for the study from 6 different organizations, 3 private institutions and 3 government institutions.

3.3 Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population comprised of diverse organizations including women currently occupying leadership positions, women aspiring to leadership roles within the community, human resource officers (HR) from selected organizations, and organizational leaders. The total target population was 601. The sample size involved a total of 61 respondents, which was 10% of the target population. The sample included 6 HR officers, one coming from each organization. 12 women currently occupying leadership positions, 2 coming from each organization. 18 organizational leaders, 3 coming from each organization and 25 women aspiring for leadership roles from the community. The study used both purposive sampling on HR officers, organizational leaders, and 12 women currently occupying leadership positions. On the

other hand, simple random sampling was used on the women aspiring for leadership roles from the community.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study used descriptive analysis to analyze the data. Qualitative data for this study was analyzed thematically and this process involved the following steps; transcribing of data, cleaning up the data by identifying important aspects that will be necessary in answering the research questions. On the other hand, the quantitative data was analyzed using the analytical tools such as SPSS, tables, figures and charts.

3.5. Ethical Issues

With regard to ethical consideration, permission was sought before the interviews and before giving questionnaires to respondents as one of the ethical demands of any research. Informed consent was sought from the respondents before collecting information from them and guaranteed them with security of the information they provided. Furthermore, the main objective of gathering such information was made clear to the respondents. In this research, the study was fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

4.1 Various Barriers that Hinder Women's Progression into Leadership Roles

Data collected from the study revealed that implicit bias presents a significant obstacle to women's progression into leadership roles, manifesting in various forms across professional settings. These biases, often subconscious, stem from societal stereotypes and ingrained cultural attitudes, shaping perceptions and decision-making processes. Leadership plays a pivotal and irreplaceable role in driving sustainable development. The success or failure of sustainable initiatives often hinges on the vision, commitment, and effective decision-making of leaders across various sectors [15]. In the context of leadership, implicit biases can impede women's advancement in several ways. Firstly, hiring and promotion decisions may be influenced by implicit biases, favoring male candidates over equally qualified female counterparts. Despite qualifications and capabilities, women may be overlooked or undervalued due to preconceived notions about gender roles and leadership abilities. This perpetuates a cycle where men are disproportionately represented in leadership positions, further reinforcing biased perceptions. Secondly, workplace dynamics and interactions can be tainted by implicit biases, affecting how women are perceived and treated by their colleagues and superiors. Stereotypes portraying women as less assertive or competent may lead to their ideas being dismissed or overshadowed, hindering their ability to assert themselves as leaders. Additionally, women may face micro aggressions and discriminatory behavior based on implicit biases, creating a hostile or unwelcoming work environment.

Africa has a complex history of conflicts that spans across centuries and is shaped by a variety of factors, including colonialism, ethnic and tribal tensions, economic disparities, and political instability [16]. As such, implicit biases can influence performance evaluations, leading to disparities in feedback and advancement opportunities for women. Subtle biases may lead evaluators to attribute success or failure differently based on gender, perpetuating the perception of women as less capable leaders. This biased feedback can impact career growth and progression, limiting women's access to leadership roles and opportunities for development. Addressing implicit bias in leadership requires a multifaceted approach, including awareness-raising, education, and structural reforms. Organizations must prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives, fostering a culture that values diverse perspectives and challenges stereotypes. Implementing unconscious bias training programs can help individuals recognize and mitigate their biases, promoting fairer decision-making processes. Furthermore, transparent and equitable recruitment and promotion practices are essential for combating implicit bias in leadership. Implementing blind recruitment processes and diverse hiring panels can mitigate the influence of biases, ensuring that candidates are evaluated solely based on their qualifications and merits. Additionally, establishing mentorship and sponsorship programs for women can provide support and opportunities for advancement, helping to overcome barriers created by implicit biases.

Organizational leaders noted that the lack of representation of women in leadership roles remains a significant hindrance to their progression in various sectors. Despite advancements in gender equality, women continue to face systemic barriers that impede their access to leadership positions. One key aspect is the scarcity of female role models in leadership positions [1]. Without visible examples of women successfully occupying high-ranking roles, aspiring female leaders may struggle to envision themselves in similar positions. This lack of representation can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce the notion that leadership is primarily a male domain, discouraging women from pursuing leadership roles. Furthermore, the absence of women in leadership can lead to biased decision-making processes within organizations. Research suggests that diverse teams, including gender diversity, are more innovative and effective in problem-solving. However, when women are underrepresented in leadership positions, their perspectives and experiences may be overlooked, resulting in decisions that fail to consider the needs and interests of diverse stakeholders.

Additionally, the lack of representation can contribute to a hostile or unwelcoming work environment for women. Without female leaders advocating for gender-inclusive policies and practices, organizations may inadvertently perpetuate cultures that favor male employees and marginalize women. This can manifest in various forms of discrimination, including unequal pay, limited career advancement opportunities, and a lack of support for work-life balance [17]. Moreover, the absence of women in leadership roles can have broader societal implications. When women are underrepresented in positions of power and influence, it perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces patriarchal structures. This not only affects individual women's opportunities for advancement but also hinders progress toward gender equality more broadly. Addressing the lack of representation of women in leadership roles requires concerted efforts at both the organizational and societal levels. Organizations must prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives, including targeted recruitment and mentorship programs aimed at supporting women's career advancement. Additionally, there needs to be greater recognition of the value that women bring to leadership roles and a commitment to dismantling the systemic barriers that hinder their

progression [18]. Only through collective action can we create a more equitable and inclusive society where women have equal opportunities to thrive in leadership positions.

Women leaders pointed out that achieving work-life balance is often portrayed as an individual's responsibility, but for women aspiring to leadership roles, it can become a significant hindrance. Firstly, societal expectations and gender norms often place a heavier burden on women to balance professional success with caregiving responsibilities. This can lead to a "double shift" where women are expected to excel in their careers while also managing household and childcare duties, leaving little time or energy for career advancement. Chanda et al [19] in their study on "effects of poverty on early marriages: a case of Mansa district in Luapula province, Zambia", the study argued that women should be given equal opportunities with men before the law as they were also able to do what men can do. Furthermore, workplace cultures and policies often lack sufficient support for work-life balance, particularly in industries or organizations where long hours and constant availability are valued. This disproportionately affects women, as they may be more likely to prioritize family commitments or flexible work arrangements, which can be viewed as incompatible with leadership positions.

Additionally, the lack of representation of women in leadership roles perpetuates a cycle where the existing male-dominated leadership structures fail to adequately address the needs of women employees. This can result in a lack of policies such as paid parental leave, flexible working hours, or on-site childcare facilities, further exacerbating the challenge of balancing work and personal life for women [20]. Moreover, unconscious bias and stereotypes about women's commitment to their careers versus family life can impact promotion decisions. Women may be overlooked for leadership roles or passed over for opportunities due to assumptions about their willingness or ability to prioritize their careers over family responsibilities. Addressing the hindrance of work-life balance for women's progression into leadership roles requires a multifaceted approach. Organizations must actively work to create inclusive cultures that value and support work-life balance for all employees, regardless of gender. This can involve implementing policies such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and family-friendly benefits. Additionally, promoting diversity

and inclusion in leadership positions is crucial for challenging existing norms and biases. Alqahtani [21] says that by having more women in leadership roles, organizations can better understand and address the unique challenges faced by women employees, ultimately creating a more supportive environment for work-life balance and career progression. Ultimately, achieving true work-life balance requires systemic changes at both the societal and organizational levels, as well as a cultural shift towards valuing caregiving responsibilities and recognizing the contributions of women in leadership roles. Only then can women have equal opportunities to advance in their careers without sacrificing their personal lives.

Stereotype threat poses a significant barrier to women's progression into leadership roles, hindering their advancement in various spheres. This phenomenon occurs when individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes associated with their social group, such as the belief that women are less competent or less suited for leadership positions than men. In the context of women aspiring to leadership roles, stereotype threat can manifest in several ways. Firstly, it can undermine women's confidence in their abilities, leading them to doubt their competence and potential for success in leadership positions. This self-doubt can erode their motivation to pursue leadership opportunities and may cause them to self-select out of consideration for such roles. Moreover, stereotype threat can influence the perceptions and expectations of others, including colleagues, superiors, and hiring managers [22]. When women are perceived through the lens of gender stereotypes, they may be subjected to biased evaluations and held to higher standards than their male counterparts. This bias can result in fewer opportunities for women to demonstrate their leadership capabilities and receive recognition for their achievements, further perpetuating the stereotype that women are less capable leaders.

Women aspiring for leadership roles observed that stereotype threat can create a hostile or unwelcoming environment for women in leadership positions, characterized by micro aggressions, discrimination, and implicit biases. These factors can contribute to feelings of isolation, alienation, and imposter syndrome among women leaders, making it challenging for them to thrive and advance in their careers [23]. Addressing stereotype threat requires concerted efforts at both the individual and institutional

levels. Providing mentorship, support networks, and leadership development programs tailored specifically for women can help build their confidence and resilience in the face of stereotype threat. Furthermore, promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives within organizations can help mitigate bias and create a more supportive and equitable workplace culture for women aspiring to leadership roles. Stereotype threat poses a significant obstacle to women's progression into leadership positions by undermining their confidence, influencing perceptions and expectations, and creating hostile work environments. Overcoming stereotype threat requires proactive measures to empower women, challenge biased attitudes and behaviors, and create inclusive organizational cultures that value and support gender diversity in leadership.

HR officers interviewed noted that unequal opportunities pose a significant barrier to women's progression into leadership roles, perpetuating a cycle of gender disparity in organizational hierarchies. At its core, this issue stems from systemic biases ingrained within societal structures and workplace cultures. One key aspect of unequal opportunities lies in the limited access to leadership development programs and mentorship opportunities for women [24]. These programs often serve as crucial pathways to acquiring the skills, networks, and visibility necessary for advancement. However, when women are overlooked or excluded from such initiatives, their chances of ascending to leadership positions diminish. Additionally, gender bias in recruitment and promotion processes reinforces existing inequalities. Studies have shown that women are less likely to be considered for leadership roles compared to their male counterparts, even when possessing equal qualifications and capabilities. This bias can manifest in various forms, including subconscious preferences for male leadership styles or assumptions about women's commitment to career advancement due to family responsibilities. Furthermore, workplace cultures that perpetuate stereotypes and norms around gender roles can create hostile environments for aspiring female leaders. Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, such as micro aggressions or exclusion from decision-making processes, can erode women's confidence and sense of belonging within their organizations, impeding their professional growth. Moreover, the absence of policies supporting work-life balance and childcare further

disadvantages women in leadership pursuits. Without adequate support structures in place, women often face greater challenges in balancing their professional aspirations with caregiving responsibilities, leading to higher rates of attrition or stalled career progression [25].

Addressing unequal opportunities requires multifaceted strategies that tackle both systemic biases and organizational practices. Implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as unconscious bias training and gender-balanced recruitment panels, can help mitigate biases in decision-making processes. Providing mentorship programs specifically tailored to women and offering flexible work arrangements can also enhance women's access to career advancement opportunities while accommodating their personal responsibilities. Moreover, fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect within the workplace is essential for creating an environment where women feel empowered to pursue leadership roles without fear of discrimination or backlash [26]. By dismantling barriers to women's progression and promoting equitable opportunities for all, organizations can harness the full potential of their talent pool and drive meaningful progress towards gender parity in leadership.

Organizational leaders said that pay inequity remains a significant barrier impeding women's progression into leadership roles across various sectors and industries. At its core, pay inequity reflects systemic biases and discriminatory practices that undervalue women's contributions in the workforce. This disparity is often perpetuated by factors such as gender stereotypes, unconscious biases, and historical norms that have favored male-dominated leadership structures. One key aspect of pay inequity is the persistent gender wage gap, where women, on average, earn less than their male counterparts for performing the same or similar work. This wage gap not only affects women's financial security but also undermines their professional advancement opportunities [27]. When women are systematically underpaid, it limits their ability to accumulate wealth, invest in further education or training, and pursue career development opportunities necessary for climbing the corporate ladder. Moreover, pay inequity contributes to a broader cycle of gender inequality within organizations. Lower salaries for women can perpetuate disparities in promotions, bonuses, and access to leadership positions. As a result, women are often underrepresented in

executive and boardroom roles, further exacerbating the lack of diverse perspectives and leadership styles at the top levels of organizations.

Additionally, the respondents further observed that pay disparities can have long-term consequences on women's economic independence and retirement security. Women typically live longer than men and may face financial challenges later in life, particularly if they have been consistently paid less and have had limited opportunities for career advancement. Addressing pay inequity requires a multifaceted approach that involves both organizational and societal changes [28]. Employers must commit to conducting regular pay audits, eliminating bias in recruitment and promotion processes, and implementing transparent salary structures. Furthermore, policies advocating for pay transparency and accountability can empower women to negotiate fair compensation and challenge discriminatory practices. Beyond organizational measures, societal attitudes and cultural norms surrounding gender and work must also evolve. This entails challenging stereotypes about women's capabilities and value in the workplace, promoting equal access to education and training, and fostering a culture of inclusion and diversity within organizations. Pay inequity acts as a significant barrier to women's progression into leadership roles by perpetuating gender disparities in compensation, career advancement, and economic security. Addressing this issue requires concerted efforts from both organizations and society as a whole to dismantle systemic biases and create more equitable opportunities for women to thrive in leadership positions.

4.2. Implicit Biases and Stereotypes Within Organizational Structures Contribute to Barriers for Women Seeking Leadership Roles

The study on implicit biases and stereotypes within organizational structures found that organizational cultures often harbor implicit biases regarding gender roles and leadership qualities. Stereotypes portray men as assertive, decisive, and competent leaders, while women are seen as nurturing, collaborative, and less assertive. When these stereotypes influence hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation processes, women may be overlooked for

leadership positions [29]. Gendered expectations, deeply ingrained within organizational structures, serve as implicit biases that significantly hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. These expectations often manifest through subtle yet pervasive stereotypes, creating formidable barriers for women striving to break the glass ceiling. Firstly, within organizational hierarchies, traditional gender norms prescribe specific roles and behaviors deemed appropriate for men and women. Leadership positions are historically associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness. Consequently, women aspiring to leadership roles may encounter resistance or skepticism when deviating from these norms, facing criticism for being too aggressive or ambitious.

Moreover, cultural factors encompass a broad spectrum of elements that shape societies, communities, and individuals. These factors include traditions, customs, beliefs, values, languages, norms, rituals, arts, and social institutions that are shared by a particular group of people [30,31]. The prevalence of gendered stereotypes perpetuates the perception of women as caregivers rather than leaders. Societal expectations dictate that women prioritize family responsibilities over career advancement, reinforcing the notion that they are less committed or capable of assuming leadership positions. As a result, women often face scrutiny regarding their ability to balance work and family obligations, further impeding their professional growth [32]. Furthermore, gendered biases influence hiring and promotion decisions within organizations. Studies have shown that unconscious biases favoring men over women persist in recruitment processes, with hiring managers often gravitating towards candidates who fit traditional gender norms. Similarly, women may be overlooked for promotions due to perceived lack of leadership potential or cultural fit, perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in senior management roles. Additionally, organizational cultures shaped by male-dominated leadership perpetuate gender inequalities. Male-centric environments may inadvertently marginalize women, excluding them from informal networks and decision-making processes essential for career advancement. As a result, women may face isolation and limited opportunities for mentorship or sponsorship, hindering their ability to progress within the organization.

Organizational leaders suggested that addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach encompassing organizational policies, cultural shifts, and individual interventions. Organizations must challenge gendered expectations and stereotypes by implementing diversity initiatives, training programs, and inclusive leadership practices. Tripp [33] says that by fostering inclusive environments that value diverse perspectives and talents, organizations can dismantle systemic barriers and create pathways for women to thrive in leadership roles. Additionally, raising awareness of implicit biases and providing tools for bias mitigation can empower individuals to challenge discriminatory practices and promote gender equality within their organizations. Gendered expectations embedded within organizational structures perpetuate implicit biases and stereotypes that hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. By recognizing and addressing these barriers, organizations can foster inclusive environments where women have equal opportunities to contribute and lead, ultimately benefiting the entire workforce and enhancing organizational performance.

Table 1. Sowing how implicit biases and stereotypes within organizational structures contribute to barriers for women seeking leadership roles

Responses	Percentage
Gendered Expectations	15%
Double Standards	30%
Lack of Role Models	20%
Lack of Role Models	15%
Micro aggressions and Exclusionary Behaviors	10%
Structural Barriers	10%
Total	**100**

Women aspiring for leadership roles explained that women in leadership roles may face higher standards of competence and likability compared to their male counterparts. They are often judged more harshly for their actions, appearance, and communication style. This creates a double bind where women must navigate between being perceived as competent but not too aggressive, or likable but not too passive, making it difficult for them to meet expectations [34]. Double standards within organizational structures are deeply ingrained, often manifesting as implicit biases and stereotypes that pose significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. These biases and stereotypes create a pervasive environment where women are scrutinized more harshly and held to different standards compared to their male counterparts. In many organizations, there exists a subtle but pervasive belief that leadership qualities are inherently male traits, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and toughness. Women who exhibit these traits may be labeled as aggressive or unlikeable, while men displaying the same behaviors are praised for their leadership skills. This double standard perpetuates the notion that women must navigate a narrow and restrictive path to leadership, conforming to traditional gender norms while also demonstrating exceptional competence.

Moreover, women often face heightened scrutiny of their competence and qualifications, with their achievements attributed to factors like luck or affirmative action rather than merit. This undermines their credibility and erodes confidence, making it more challenging for them to advance into leadership positions. Additionally, the lack of representation of women in senior roles reinforces the stereotype that women are less capable leaders, further perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation [1]. Organizational structures also play a significant role in perpetuating these double standards. Male-dominated leadership teams may inadvertently perpetuate biases through hiring and promotion practices that favor candidates who resemble them in terms of gender, race, or background. This perpetuates a cycle of homogeneity at the top, making it even more difficult for women to break through the glass ceiling. Chanda [35] related this scenario to the study on "academic performance of learners at co- and single sex schools: a case of selected secondary schools in Kasama district of Northern province, Zambia" which narrated that during the twentieth century in Zambia, women began integrating into the all-

male colleges, at the same time, the all-female schools remained segregated. Relatively recently, co-education schools have begun to take charge and the number of single-sex schools has dropped dramatically. In the same vein, most of the public schools in Zambia have become co-education as women have continued to integrate into them. Furthermore, workplace cultures that prioritize long hours and a competitive, cutthroat mentality can be particularly detrimental to women, who often face disproportionate responsibilities outside of work, such as caregiving and household duties. This creates a barrier to advancement for women who may not be able to conform to these expectations due to family obligations [36]. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that involves challenging implicit biases and stereotypes, promoting diversity and inclusion at all levels of the organization, implementing policies that support work-life balance, and actively seeking out and nurturing talent from underrepresented groups. By dismantling double standards and fostering an environment where all individuals have equal opportunities to succeed, organizations can unlock the full potential of their workforce and thrive in an increasingly diverse and competitive world.

Women leaders explained that limited visibility of women in leadership positions within an organization can reinforce the stereotype that leadership is a male domain. Without visible role models, women may struggle to envision themselves in leadership roles and may face skepticism from others about their ability to lead effectively. The lack of visible role models and implicit biases within organizational structures pose significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles [37]. These barriers are deeply entrenched in societal perceptions and organizational dynamics, perpetuating a cycle that obstructs women's progress in leadership positions. One critical aspect is the absence of visible female role models within organizations. When women don't see others like them occupying leadership positions, it becomes challenging to envision themselves in similar roles. This lack of representation can lead to a sense of isolation and a belief that leadership positions are not attainable for women. Without tangible examples to emulate, aspiring female leaders may struggle to navigate the complexities of climbing the corporate ladder.

Moreover, implicit biases embedded within organizational structures can create systemic

hurdles for women. These biases often manifest in hiring and promotion processes, where decision-makers may unconsciously favor male candidates or perceive leadership qualities through a gendered lens. Such biases perpetuate stereotypes about women's capabilities and suitability for leadership roles, undermining their opportunities for advancement. Organizational cultures can also reinforce gender stereotypes, further exacerbating the challenges faced by women seeking leadership positions. Gendered expectations and norms may dictate how women are perceived and treated in the workplace, influencing their access to resources, mentorship, and opportunities for growth [38]. These entrenched stereotypes can hinder women's confidence and limit their ability to assert themselves as leaders. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that involves challenging existing norms, promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives, and actively cultivating an environment that fosters the development of female leaders. Organizations must implement policies and practices that mitigate implicit biases, such as blind recruitment processes and diversity training programs. Additionally, creating mentorship and sponsorship programs specifically tailored to women can provide much-needed support and guidance on their leadership journey. By dismantling the barriers posed by the lack of role models and implicit biases, organizations can foster an inclusive culture where women are empowered to pursue and excel in leadership roles. This not only benefits individual women but also contributes to the overall success and resilience of the organization by harnessing the diverse perspectives and talents of its workforce.

The findings therefore recorded that implicit biases can lead to assumptions about women's priorities and commitment to their careers, especially if they are mothers. There's a pervasive belief that women are less dedicated to their work once they have children, which can result in women being passed over for high-profile assignments or promotions. Stereotypical assumptions, often ingrained as implicit biases within organizational structures, present significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. These biases are deeply rooted societal perceptions that influence how individuals perceive and evaluate women's capabilities in professional settings [39]. Within organizational contexts, these biases manifest in various ways, impeding women's progression and opportunities for leadership. Firstly,

stereotypes perpetuate the notion that women are inherently less competent or qualified for leadership positions compared to their male counterparts. These biases may lead to women being overlooked for promotion or leadership opportunities, despite possessing the requisite skills and experience. As a result, women face an uphill battle in proving their worth and competence, often having to work harder to gain recognition and advancement.

Moreover, study findings noted that stereotypical assumptions about gender roles and capabilities can shape organizational cultures, reinforcing traditional gender norms and expectations. This can create a hostile environment for women seeking leadership roles, where they may encounter resistance, skepticism, or outright discrimination. The prevalence of masculine leadership archetypes further marginalizes women, as traits associated with effective leadership are often aligned with stereotypically male characteristics [40]. Organizational structures, such as hiring processes and promotion criteria, may also be influenced by implicit biases, inadvertently favoring male candidates over their female counterparts. For example, job requirements that prioritize assertiveness or aggression may disproportionately advantage men, while undervaluing qualities such as collaboration or empathy that are often associated with women's leadership styles. Additionally, lack of diversity in decision-making positions perpetuates these biases, as homogeneous leadership teams are less likely to challenge existing norms and biases. These barriers not only hinder individual women's career advancement but also contribute to broader gender disparities within organizations and society at large [1]. Addressing implicit biases and stereotypes requires a multifaceted approach, including education and awareness-raising initiatives, diversity and inclusion training, and structural reforms within organizations to promote gender equity. By challenging stereotypical assumptions and creating more inclusive organizational cultures, we can create environments where women are empowered to pursue and succeed in leadership roles.

HR officers narrated that women in male-dominated workplaces often experience micro aggressions, such as being interrupted or having their ideas dismissed, which can undermine their confidence and credibility. Additionally, exclusionary behaviors like being left out of informal networks or social gatherings can limit

women's access to career opportunities and advancement. Micro aggressions and exclusionary behaviors within organizational structures perpetuate barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. These implicit biases and stereotypes are deeply ingrained in workplace cultures, often manifesting subtly yet significantly. Micro aggressions are subtle, often unintentional actions or comments that communicate derogatory or negative messages to marginalized groups, including women [41]. These can range from dismissive gestures to subtle acts of discrimination, creating a hostile environment that undermines women's confidence and opportunities for advancement.

Women leaders pointed out that exclusionary behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious, serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations within organizations. Women may face exclusion from decision-making processes, be overlooked for leadership positions, or encounter resistance when attempting to assert their authority. These behaviors are often rooted in stereotypes about women's capabilities, leadership styles, and suitability for certain roles, perpetuating the notion that leadership is inherently masculine. Within organizational structures, these biases and stereotypes contribute to systemic barriers that impede women's progress in leadership roles. Hiring and promotion practices may be influenced by gender biases, leading to the underrepresentation of women in senior positions. Additionally, women may encounter greater scrutiny and resistance when attempting to challenge the status quo or introduce innovative ideas, further limiting their opportunities for advancement [42]. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that involves both individual and organizational change. Education and awareness-raising efforts are crucial to help employees recognize and address their own biases and behaviors. Organizations must also implement policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels, including the recruitment and retention of women in leadership roles. Creating a culture of inclusivity and respect is essential for breaking down the barriers that prevent women from reaching leadership positions. This involves fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are valued, and all employees feel empowered to contribute and succeed.

By challenging implicit biases and stereotypes within organizational structures, we can create more equitable and supportive workplaces where women have equal opportunities to thrive as leaders. Organizational structures and policies may inadvertently perpetuate gender disparities. For example, lack of flexible work arrangements, inadequate parental leave policies, and limited opportunities for mentorship or sponsorship can disproportionately affect women's career trajectories, making it harder for them to advance into leadership positions. Structural barriers within organizational structures can often serve as implicit biases and reinforce stereotypes, creating formidable obstacles for women aspiring to leadership roles. These barriers are entrenched in the very fabric of organizational frameworks, impacting everything from hiring and promotion practices to workplace culture and resource allocation. As noted by Mpolomoka [43], education changes people's behavior and that it is important for people to attain right type of education so that they can perform required tasks. When people are empowered with the right knowledge and skills, they can contribute to improving their livelihoods and that of other members of the community. However, at the heart of these structural barriers lies a deeply ingrained bias that associates leadership qualities with traditionally masculine traits. This bias perpetuates the stereotype that effective leadership requires assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness-traits commonly associated with men-while undervaluing qualities such as empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity, which are often associated with women. Consequently, women may find themselves overlooked or discounted for leadership positions, despite possessing the requisite skills and expertise.

Moreover, organizational structures often lack flexibility and accommodation for the diverse needs and responsibilities that women may navigate, particularly concerning caregiving roles and work-life balance. Inflexible working hours, limited parental leave policies, and inadequate support for childcare can disproportionately disadvantage women, making it challenging for them to advance into leadership roles without sacrificing personal or family commitments. Additionally, the scarcity of female representation in leadership positions within organizations perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and marginalization. The absence of visible role models and mentors can hinder women's aspirations and perpetuate the perception that leadership is an inherently male domain, further reinforcing stereotypes and biases. As Chitondo & Chanda [5] narrates, the impact of French

colonialism in Africa on political structures in the region has been profound and has left lasting legacies that continue to shape the political landscape. French colonial rule in Africa occurred from the 19th century until the mid-20th century, and its effects are evident in various aspects of political, social, and economic life. Some key impacts were administrative division. Furthermore, organizational decision-making processes may inadvertently favor male candidates due to the prevalence of homogeneous leadership teams and networks. Informal channels of communication and mentorship often exclude women, limiting their access to key opportunities for advancement and professional development.

Addressing these structural barriers requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses policy reform, cultural shifts, and proactive interventions. Organizations must implement inclusive hiring and promotion practices that prioritize diversity and equity, actively challenging biases in recruitment and talent development processes. Flexible work arrangements and supportive policies that accommodate the diverse needs of employees can foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture [42]. Moreover, promoting gender diversity at all levels of leadership is crucial for breaking down entrenched stereotypes and biases. Organizations must invest in initiatives aimed at cultivating a pipeline of female talent, providing mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership development programs tailored to the unique challenges women face in their professional journeys. By dismantling structural barriers and challenging implicit biases and stereotypes within organizational structures, we can create environments where women are empowered to pursue and thrive in leadership roles, driving greater innovation, productivity, and success for organizations as a whole [44-46].

5. CONCLUSION

Examining barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions reveals multifaceted challenges rooted in systemic biases and societal norms. Despite progress, gender disparities persist, limiting women's representation in leadership roles across various sectors. Cultural perceptions often stereotype leadership as masculine, posing a significant barrier for women aspiring to high-level positions. Moreover, implicit biases in hiring and promotion processes disadvantage women, leading to

underrepresentation in leadership pipelines. Organizational structures and workplace cultures frequently lack inclusivity, hindering women's career progression. Limited access to mentorship and sponsorship further impedes women's advancement, depriving them of crucial support networks and opportunities for skill development. Additionally, the pervasive issue of the gender pay gap underscores systemic inequalities, with women often earning less than their male counterparts in leadership roles. Family responsibilities and societal expectations compound challenges for women in leadership, as balancing career aspirations with caregiving duties remains a prevalent struggle. The absence of supportive policies, such as flexible work arrangements and affordable childcare, exacerbates this dilemma, forcing many women to navigate a delicate juggling act between professional aspirations and family obligations. Discrimination and gender-based harassment present formidable barriers to women's leadership advancement, perpetuating toxic work environments and fostering a culture of exclusion. The lack of representation in decision-making bodies further marginalizes women's voices, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation and reinforcing existing power dynamics. Addressing these barriers requires concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including policymakers, organizations, and individuals. Implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, promoting equitable hiring practices, and fostering supportive workplace cultures are crucial steps toward dismantling systemic barriers to women's leadership. Additionally, advocating for policy reforms that support work-life balance and combat gender-based discrimination is essential for creating environments where women can thrive and ascend to leadership positions based on merit and talent rather than gender.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The organizations must regularly review organizational policies and practices to identify and eliminate systemic barriers to women's advancement, this includes examining recruitment processes, promotion criteria, and organizational culture.
- Organizations should promote education and awareness campaigns to highlight the

existing barriers faced by women in leadership roles. This includes workshops, seminars, and educational programs aimed at both men and women to foster understanding and support.

- The organizations must incorporate diversity and inclusion initiatives into organizational strategies, this involves setting diversity goals, holding leadership accountable for progress, and fostering a culture of inclusion where all voices are heard and valued.

- Organizations should encourage a culture that values work-life balance for all employees by creating an environment where employees can prioritize their personal and professional responsibilities equally fosters inclusivity and retention.

- Organizations should develop leadership development programs specifically tailored to women. These programs can focus on building confidence, negotiation skills, and leadership competencies necessary for advancement.

- Organizations should implement flexible work policies to accommodate the diverse needs of employees, including working mothers. Flexible hours, remote work options, and parental leave policies can help retain talented women in the workforce.

- Organizations should establish mentorship and sponsorship programs to support women in their career progression. These programs can provide guidance, advice, and networking opportunities crucial for leadership development.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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